

Kansas City Star

Guest commentary: Light rail will move KC forward

By CHRISTOPHER B. LEINBERGER

Guest columnist



Zona Rosa is one walkable urban development in Kansas City. Supporters say light rail could increase such development.

FRED BLOCHER

After coming to Kansas City for decades, I have seen its growth spread over the former prairie much faster than your population growth.

Your land consumption is growing eight to 10 times faster than your population. With the most freeway lane miles per capita in the country, you have spread out so that the metro area is 20 percent larger than the state of Connecticut. You have taken the late-20th-century national trend of sprawl to an extreme.

But the times they are a-changing.

Throughout the country, young "millennial" adults and empty-nester baby boomers are demanding another choice — higher-density walkable urban places to live, work and play.

The turnaround going on in Kansas City is remarkable, as major projects such as the **Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts**, **H&R Block's** headquarters, the **Sprint Center** arena and the **Power & Light District** have sparked many smaller residential and office projects. While not yet at critical mass, downtown certainly will become a "24/7" place in the next upturn.

But walkable urban development is not confined to downtown.

The Crossroads, the **Crown Center** area and your beloved **Country Club Plaza** are all examples of growing walkable urban places. **Zona Rosa**, Lenexa's **City Center** and Leawood's **Park Place** now are bringing walkable urban development to the suburbs.

The pent-up demand for walkable urban development will determine where the majority of growth will go in the region over the next generation. If Kansas City follows the lead of bellwether metros such as Washington, D.C., and Denver, there will be eight to 12 regionally important walkable urban places. Today, Kansas City has four or five. Where will the other four to seven be?

Why does this matter? For one thing, the market wants it.

Ever wonder why so many of your young adults move to Chicago? If you do not build what the rising generation wants, it will leave or not be attracted to Kansas City in the first place. Losing your young adults is not only a family affair. It will hurt the economy if people in their most entrepreneurial time of life go elsewhere to start new businesses.

Walkable urban places are more energy efficient and emit far less greenhouse gases. A soon-to-be released **Brookings Institution** study will show the intuitively obvious findings that households, relying on their cars for all trips outside their home, use four times as much energy and emit four times the carbon dioxide as walkable urban households.

What can Kansas City do to give the market what it wants?

Build a regional rail-based transit system for a start. That is why Denver and Washington are the national models of future metropolitan development. Rail transit stations are where 90 percent of these two metro areas' walkable urban places locate. Building a complete transit system, complemented by allowing higher density, mixed-use places to be built within walking distance of the stations, will be the most important economic development initiative for your region in the early 21st century. If you do not, you will be condemned to be stuck in the 20th.

The market is demanding choice — the option of either a drivable suburban way of life, which you have in overabundance, or a walkable urban lifestyle, of which you have a significant deficiency. The walkable urban choices will be high density, like what is evolving in downtown, or it will be lower density, such as the Crossroads. It will be in the central cities, and it will be provided in the suburbs.

These trends are coming together at a perfect time for Kansas City economy. Sign up for the 21st-century knowledge-based economy. Start by voting for light rail in November.

Christopher B. Leinberger is a land-use strategist, a professor at the University of Michigan, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, a real estate developer and the author of *The Option of Urbanism* . He will be the keynote speaker at the Kansas City Area Development Corporation's annual meeting next Friday, November 7th .