
LAND USE: How do you urbanize the suburbs?

(10/09/2009)

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Americans living in cities produce two-thirds less greenhouse gases than those living in suburbs. So what do you do with the more than 100 million people residing in suburbia?

The solution is to urbanize the suburbs, urban planning experts said at a conference at the Urban Land Institute yesterday. The factors that lead to lower greenhouse gas emissions from city dwellers lie primarily in public transit and denser dwellings that consume less energy.

"A zero-energy house that you still have to drive to, that's about 28 percent of your energy that you still [use], that's not zero," said Ellen Dunham-Jones, a professor of architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Isolated communities have been creating urbanized pockets for two decades, Dunham-Jones said. That's because dense communities are considered to bring significant quality-of-life advantages.

For example, more walking leads to better health, and a central community leads to a better social life. Benefits such as health can even translate into economic growth, Dunham-Jones said. But, for the most part, urbanization of the suburbs has been "on just a very ad hoc basis," she said.

'Demographic bubbles' on the move

Two "demographic bubbles" may be paving the way for a shift. The aging baby boomers and the coming-of-age Generation Y both show more interest in living in urban environments than those who preceded them demographically.

Seventy-five percent of baby boomers say they do not want to live in age-restricted communities, and 77 percent of Generation Y "idealistic 22-year-olds," by Dunham-Jones' account, say they want to live in an urban core. Seventy percent of the younger generation say they would maintain the preference even when they have families, she said.

"There will be an enormous market for more urban lifestyles, more urban places, within suburbia," Dunham-Jones said.

The suburbs sprang up with the establishment of highways in the middle of the last century -- a move that was originally done for security reasons, not for development, said Dunham-Jones, who published a book last year called "Retrofitting Suburbia."

While they have been considered the haven of families for the past half-century, that is no longer the case, she said. Two-thirds of suburban households have not had children in them since 2000, she said.

"This model of the city as the dense core with suburbs that cascade down to lower and lower density -- it's already over," she added.

New laws and cooperation needed to fit the pieces together

In June, the Department of Transportation, U.S. EPA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development formed the Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities -- the first time that the agencies have come together on a federal level to work on community development issues.

Planners, developers, and academics who spoke yesterday said that planning transportation and land use in a community at the same time is essential, because they are so integrally linked. Historically, however, that has not usually been done.

"We are in a new era of cooperation among all the different disciplines," said Michael Lander, president of Minneapolis-based developer Lander Group. Even so, panelists said, many city and higher-level officials aren't aware of the benefits of centralized development.

For example, mixed-use development -- which has commercial and residential buildings near each other, a model that is championed by advocates of centralized communities -- is illegal in most parts of the United States and requires special permission to be done, Dunham-Jones said.

"If you leave that visioning to the private sector, they'll build what makes money in the short term, not what you want you want to [get] in the long term," said Marilee Utter, president of Denver-based development firm Citiventure Associates, urging government to take the lead.