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Stepping up to Stop the Sprawl

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Some politicians, many highway engineers, would have you believe there's only one solution to the traffic nightmare that's now starting to seize the Nashville region: more roads. Others would suggest public transit's the only answer. Both are wrong.

A new savvy slice of the engineering community is breaking with the old theology that salvation lies in pouring still more concrete on top of congestion. Honest transit advocates will agree they can't cure congestion and can only provide alternatives.

The real question involves land: how to grow so that people don't need to drive so far and so often, and have a transit choice when they want it. Smart land use means getting housing closer to employment centers. Redeveloping tired city and suburban areas, where businesses have sagged but all the infrastructure for a healthy community -- schools, fire stations, water and sewer service -- is already in place. Cultivating town centers.

Saving natural habitats and farmlands. Whether in town or in new development areas, creating communities of higher quality, more choice.

Unguided, the growth machine will simply give you more of what it knows how to produce: more commercial strips, big boxes, scattershot home sites strung out along highways. Single-entry, look-alike, cul-de-sac subdivisions that virtually guarantee pockets of congestion. An asphalt-bedecked, flood-prone world. Lots of wasted, empty land. But a shortage of community centers and shared space.

So how do we get to a more convenient, community-friendly, reduced-traffic way of life?

We'd say by better planning. But not so much by the governmental planning departments as by local residents themselves getting involved in the process.

It's time to break up today's ritual dance of development. Here is how it usually goes:

The local government zones land -- often in massive chunks -- for future development. The developer checks out the zoning, buys the land from a local farmer or other landholder. To assure himself an open ear in the city hall or county courthouse, he often feels obliged to make campaign contributions.

Next, the developer submits his application. If the application fits the zoning rules, planning commissions feel obliged to approve. Elected officials do the same. After all, the rules are being observed, growth's considered a good thing, and they often know the developer personally anyway. There can be a wrinkle if the application doesn't fit zoning guidelines. Then variances have a way of appearing, suddenly, almost magically, and have a good shot at approval.

Small wonder that the public often feels shut out and gets cynical.

There has to be a better way. It's simply to democratize development.

And it can and has happened in the United States. Portland, Ore., boldly opened its public process to residents to join in making the hard decisions about how the region would add 1 million people in a decade.

Questionnaires went to more than 500,000 households, asking residents about real choices -- whether, for

example, they wanted more development on transit lines and development that would encourage growth centers - and if, in return, they would accept smaller residential lot sizes and reduced commercial parking space.

Solid public majorities emerged on all those questions. In one case, folks on the west side of the Portland region actually chose a major transit improvement instead of new freeway access.

Chattanooga has broken the mold, too. From the early '80s onward, the city's leaders and foundations were smart enough to invite broad citizen participation and provided a place for it to happen -- originally in an old store around a pot-bellied stove. [The Chattanooga Venture](#) process and its successors have created a national standard for rejuvenating a city center and thinking strategically, ahead of the curve.

It was accomplished with citizen power. It wasn't a mayor or official planner or sleek developer who proposed Chattanooga's now-acclaimed [Tennessee Aquarium](#) -- it was an older resident who liked to fish in the Tennessee River. The Chattanooga culture now expects participation.

David Crockett, president of the Chattanooga City Council, suggests any town should apply the shoe test at any important community meeting. Glance under the table, he says. Check for sneakers among the wingtips, flats and heels, maybe some platform loafers and Birkenstock sandals. The big danger is just inviting folks who already agree with each other. You need to assemble the adversaries to get somewhere today.

Or take a look at a fresh initiative in Los Angeles, where the Unified School District is poised to spend about \$1.8 billion on 51 new schools, mostly in overcrowded neighborhoods. The way government agencies normally work, that money probably would be spent without regard to the billions other departments will be investing in parks and libraries. The really radical departure here is that citizens are being brought into the process -- seriously and early.

A New Schools/Better Neighborhoods nonprofit group has been formed to engage them in surveying their own areas. Its questions: How do we locate new schools so they don't end up at desolate site or force demolition of existing neighborhoods? How do we make sure future schools, parks, recreation facilities, libraries and publicly supported health clinics are developed with an eye to collaboration and joint use, and better service to our children and our neighborhoods?

It's true that Portland and Chattanooga and Los Angeles are exceptions, not the rule. We Americans have been going through years of deep public cynicism about government -- suspicion that the game is rigged, that all the decisions are cooked up in the back room, controlled by special interest. Over the past generation, we presumed the intent was bad and distrusted the motives of all government officials.

It's a model we in the media fed, always setting up opposites, living off the conflicts.

The politics of the Nashville region has in fact been less contentious than we find in many regions. One senses a gentle, laid-back Southern deference, an expectation that strong county political leaders, or the powerful classes in the Belle Meades and Brentwoods, would make the right decisions.

And why not? The regional economy has boomed. The quality of life has been good for many. People haven't sensed the need for much strong citizen activism evident in many American communities.

Nowhere has the dependence on strong individual leadership been more evident than in Davidson, the region's largest county. Everyone seems to believe Davidson County moves forward when it has a strong mayor and drifts in the interludes.

Bill Purcell doesn't exude the same kind of dynamism Phil Bredesen did, but his campaign themes suggested a listener, bridge-builder, consensus-maker.

The same signs of change -- less expectation that one leader can make all the right moves -- are showing up in some of the surrounding counties. Rutherford County Executive Nancy Allen points with pride, for example, to the way residents are contributing to a strategic plan for transportation and being consulted on the growth choices for the next 20 years.

And the fervent citizen opposition to State Route 840 in Williamson County suggests a breed of activism the region's leaders have rarely faced before.

Democratized development has to start with listening to many voices. It's moving from the back rooms to the front porches of our communities. It doesn't agree "father knows best," but it's equally impatient with endless squabbles and litigation. Instead, it looks for common ground.

It's the team-building intelligence that characterized champion corporations in the turbulent '90s. It's not easier than the old formula, but it is smarter.

As [National Civic League](#) president Chris Gates describes the transition: "Where old leaders were closed and secretive, new leaders are open and share information. Where old leaders sought power to decide things, new leaders enable others to decide for themselves."

Just imagine using that new kind of leadership model to address the perils -- in traffic, poor land uses, abuse of the natural environment -- that darken Middle Tennessee's otherwise bright prospects for the early 21st century.

But is it possible, you'll ask, to draw residents into decisions on roadways and rail lines, on how dense the buildings can be in an area? Can they help decide architectural guidelines or environmental permitting? Aren't all these subjects so complex they need to be left to the "experts"?

The answer: no. First, the community's stakeholders -- residents, business, public sector people -- may have a lot of common-sense ideas that the developers and engineers never thought of or dismissed as impractical. And second, high technology is riding to the rescue, giving our communities clear-cut images and choices for change that can be shown on ordinary desktop computers.

How do residents, business owners, all the community's stakeholders become planners? Our companion story today examines how.