



Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson **Taming the Sprawl**

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Just a century ago, St. Louis was busting its buttons with pride, riding the cutting edge of growth into a new century -- not unlike Nashville and the region around it today. That metropolis on the Mississippi was already an industrial and cultural colossus preparing for the world to come calling when it hosted its 1904 Exposition and Olympics.

Sadly, St. Louis's edge grew dull not far into the new century. Reinvestment -- so vital to the momentum -- failed to materialize. Great historic buildings that filled its downtown were bulldozed. After World War II, vibrant urban neighborhoods emptied and suburbs exploded across farm and field.

Among great American cities, St. Louis today is a shadow of what it once was -- not to mention what it might have been. Only now, the city is finally playing catch-up as it recoups some of its vibrancy of old.

St. Louis, quite simply, failed to think ahead.

Can the Nashville region be smarter? As Middle Tennessee rides the current sea of optimism, will alert sailors foresee the sandbars to avoid?

For the next four Sundays, this series will look at how the Nashville area has handled its growth thus far and suggest ways to meet great urban expectations in the next century.

Good times being had by all -- for now

As Nashville and the counties it calls neighbors -- Williamson, Rutherford, Wilson, Sumner, Montgomery, Robertson, Cheatham and Dickson -- head in that direction, the region is richly blessed with growth and prosperity:

It rivals New York and L.A. as music capital of the nation and excels in printing, publishing, health care and automotive manufacturing.

It includes a state capital.

It has a rare total of six interstate highway spokes.

It can boast not only famed universities like Vanderbilt and Fisk but also is home to Tennessee's second-largest and fastest-growing public university, Middle Tennessee State.

Region wide, population is up, unemployment down. Incomes here top the list in Tennessee, with five of the state's 10 most affluent counties, including the two very highest -- Williamson and Davidson.

While none of the mega-banks born of the recent merger wars chose to headquarter here, the newest global currency is information technology, and America's fastest-growing computer firm -- Dell, the darling of Wall Street's best decade ever -- has just chosen Nashville as its expansion site.

Add in the natural setting -- gentle rolling hills, rich tree canopies, hundreds of miles of streams and rivers -- and it's a small wonder that a recent Middle Tennessee Poll conducted by MTSU shows Nashvillians are satisfied at

amazingly high levels.

The question now: How does the Nashville region maintain the momentum and mature to the next level as master of its success, not as victim?

More to the point, how does Middle Tennessee make sure its people -- across the richly diverse spectrum of classes, neighborhoods and counties -- set the course instead of turning it all over to the developers, highway builders and power brokers?

Growth -- and how the Nashville region handles it -- will be the key as Middle Tennessee makes the turn into the 21st century. For already, population is soaring past the one million mark, and the demand for land on which to build is soaring with it. Traffic is more troublesome than one would have imagined just five years ago.

Stuck in our ways and headed for trouble

Without charting a smart course, the Nashville area could well be veering toward worsening traffic gridlock, a critical lack of open space, foul waterways and air. When growth careens out of control, it can do all of that to a place.

It can be wrestled under control and has been elsewhere, successfully. But it takes pro-active planning, strategies that don't just happen on their own. Ideas that have worked elsewhere to tame the growth behemoth include:

Rebuilding older towns into places where people will move and "fill in" rather than spreading out and scarfing up open countryside.

Beating the traffic with better public transit.

Setting aside certain acreage and making it "hands off" to development.

Sounds good on paper, but what could prove trying is this: The old Southern thinking always has been that land is what matters, the more the better -- whether it is a rolling old farm or a quarter-acre lot in a new subdivision. And for many, these ingrained ideas die hard and new ways of thinking come slowly.

Middle Tennesseans, for example, don't seem to have caught on to the leading architectural trend of the '90s: [New Urbanism](#) -- the idea of building more traditional front-porch neighborhoods with real town centers, the kind where your parents and grandparents grew up. Several hundred such projects are sprouting up across the nation -- and they are succeeding in conserving precious land and turning people on to public transit.

The idea can encompass a rich variety of neighborhoods like [Hillsboro Village](#), or South Broadway (SoBro), or [Rolling Mill Hill](#), which overlooks the Cumberland River.

Where New Urbanism has set in, the result is communities that are not just well-tended but rich in architectural variety, with shops of all sorts, civic spaces, interesting mixes of people. These standards can be applied in brand new suburban neighborhoods, as well.

In most U.S. regions today, finely designed old towns and neighborhoods -- even if they spent years in the valley of low real estate expectations -- are thriving. People point almost instantly to these places as the soul of their region and the models for the future.

Yet in the Nashville region, we heard only a select few professionals championing such communities here.

Instead, when Middle Tennessee growth came up, a frequent focal point seemed to be Tennessee State Route 840 -- a "ring road" of economic development being built 35 miles out from the urban center to the south and eventually slated to swing on around to the north before coming full circle.

But elsewhere in the United States, ring roads are falling off the planning maps. People are saying: Sure, ring roads spur economic development, but they sprawl across the countryside, robbing assets from city and town centers to feed the ring-road corridors. They're clearly the antithesis of smart growth.

' Sprawl' as bad as Atlanta's ?

That is not to say that Nashville is ignoring the future, full of overconfidence the way St. Louis may have been a century ago.

Business and government leaders are eager to point out that the region is not content to limit itself to being a health care, auto manufacturing, music and entertainment center. They are quick to say that Dell coming here is just the beginning of a broader move by Middle Tennessee into technology, even the frontier of biotechnology. There's plenty of talk in business and government, across the entire region, on how to use commuter rail and other ways to beat back the traffic gridlock that growth threatens to bring.

Growth, as the Nashville region makes the turn into the 21st century, is the overwhelming challenge. Population is soaring past the one million mark. Demands for land to build on are escalating. Traffic is reaching levels of congestion scarcely imagined even five years ago.

But even with all of this staring Middle Tennesseans in the face, land is still considered up for grabs in most parts of the nine-county area. There is little to restrain new construction (except for some septic tank checks), and zoning heavily favors standard suburban-style development.

Middle Tennessee counties are still in a race for development, a course that can lead straight into the worst kind of growth problems.

"Our sprawl behavior is as bad or worse than anything Atlanta ever did. But nobody connects this to the next subdivision development," a member of the Metro Council told us.

Will [Public Law 1101](#) -- a measure passed in 1998 in an effort to manage growth in Tennessee -- make a difference? Though it doesn't apply in Metropolitan Davidson County, it does cover all the other Middle Tennessee counties. And committees in the counties are coming up with the growth plans required by the statute.

They have to designate urban growth boundaries; they're supposed to designate paths where intense future development can go, but they are told to set aside open space and conservation areas, too.

No doubt, this law has sparked debate about how to use land in the future, even in counties where the issue has never been on the radar screen. That's a big plus. But will the law actually lead to compact communities, full-scale land conservation, a return to old-style towns?

That's not likely unless local governments and citizens commit to trying new ideas. And the public in the Nashville area has a lot of learning to do first: We interviewed many business, civic and government leaders as well as workers in Nashville and surrounding counties, and mention of smart growth evoked blinks of disbelief.

But then, maybe that is because of the "sweet spot" in which the Nashville area finds itself right now.

Lull before the storm

Last autumn, several economists who specialize in growth patterns confirmed a "one-million mark hypothesis" for *The Tennessean's* Renee Elder. At a population of one million or a little more, they suggested, a region moves into a "sweet spot," a so-called second tier between smaller metro regions and the really large ones with big-time congestion and higher costs.

Second-tier regions are still livable, still affordable. With population passing the million mark, they attract businesses with their work force as well as a variety of legal, financial and specialized services.

But the sweet spot brings danger, too. It invites rapid growth and investment and quickly brings on waves of stop-and-go traffic and sometimes an alarming loss of open space.

Those symptoms have already cropped up in and around Nashville.

The rapid growth begins to expose fault lines -- problems and conditions in the region that may have existed before but become truly critical when growth is intense.

That's where Middle Tennessee is today. It needs a sharply candid debate about its future, the debate St. Louis failed to have a century ago.

Behind the curve, mostly

Check most American regions of the late '90s, and you find a big shift -- a growing concern about how America has developed over the past 50 years -- with haphazardly placed subdivisions, shopping centers and office parks, sterile zoning, neglect of historic city and town centers, and total reliance on private autos.

The result: a full-scale "smart growth" movement that has even found its way into national politics as Vice President Al Gore has spoken up on the issue. Activists, environmentalists, and more and more business leaders (Bank of America CEO Hugh McColl, for example) are saying we ought to be smart enough to enjoy robust economic growth in a way that respects our historic towns, our farms and our landscape.

But in Davidson and its surrounding counties, smart growth has caught the attention of but a few leaders and thinkers. And they can barely be heard over the din of bulldozers clearing the next subdivision lots and super-store sites.

There are some notably hopeful signs though:

Careful planning clearly went into the Bicentennial Mall area.

In Hillsboro Village, a "zoning overlay" permits mixed residential-office-retail development. It requires that some buildings have no setback, to encourage a traditional village feeling.

The Madison Chamber of Commerce is intent on carving out an identity for its traffic-plagued business district by utilizing brick sidewalks and cleaner landscape.

Downtown's SoBro area, a 12-block-long sector south of Broadway, was the subject of a remarkable three-day planning process in January 1997 -- an inspiration of Christine Kreyling, writer, and Bruce Dobie, publisher, of the

weekly *Nashville Scene*. In place of the roaring seven-lane Franklin Street Corridor the Metro bureaucracy had been pushing for, the participants suggested a boulevard, including a turnaround, that would be a great public space, like Boston's Commonwealth Avenue or Monument Avenue in Richmond, Va.

In East Nashville, 450 people turned out in July to provide national experts with ideas for rejuvenating an historic but economically troubled part of the city. [The Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team \(R/UDAT\)](#) heard these citizens talk about things like "pedestrian friendly" streets, greenways, newly designed intersections, concentrations of apartments and townhomes to promote foot traffic. These ideas are in line with the most creative thinking on neighborhood rejuvenation anywhere in America.

Nashville has a coterie of determined design professionals pushing for smarter growth -- mostly notably the five-year-old Urban Design Forum, an alliance of architects, planners and historic preservation advocates.

There are some gems of advanced town planning in other Middle Tennessee counties. We were charmed, for example, by old downtown Clarksville in Montgomery County. Ravaged by retail loss in the '70s, this town of many spires made a comeback, first as a haven for attorneys and courts, then came specialty shops, good restaurants and a museum that's one of the most photographed buildings in Tennessee.

Clarksville was attacked by a vicious tornado last January, but it is forging ahead with design guidelines, architectural review, promoting its conference center and recruiting the businesses that support the community's needs.

Another breakthrough: this year's formation of the [Land Trust of Tennessee](#), chaired by outgoing Mayor Phil Bredesen and run by Nashville lawyer Jeanie Nelson, former chief counsel of the Environmental Protection Agency. The trust draws up agreements with individual landowners that help them keep their property and protect it from development. The result is that unusually scenic and valuable rural property -- land that might otherwise fall to development -- has a chance to remain pristine.

"You do hear more people saying than ever before that we can't just pave over the world, that land is precious -- more people saying they don't want to see agricultural land disappear," one civic leader told us in Robertson County.

Problems, solutions on the horizon

What about **public transit**? Just in the past couple of years, Davidson and its neighboring counties have been seriously discussing the possibility of commuter rail. There's even talk of a light rail line from downtown to West End and I-440.

From Dallas to Denver, Orlando to San Antonio, similar ideas are ricocheting around in communities that up to now thought only in terms of automobile transportation.

The idea is not to replace private cars but to offer choices in a world of rapidly worsening traffic congestion.

What about the existing [Metropolitan Transit Authority](#) bus system? It seems to be regarded as the "community's car" for people who can't afford autos -- transporting ticket-takers to the arena, waitresses to Second Avenue restaurants, maids to Belle Meade. Ironically, these least-wealthy folks really get soaked for their rides: The MTA makes riders pay the highest share of operating costs imposed by any bus system in the United States.

Another issue getting fairly meager attention: **water quality**. Since the [Clean Water Act](#) passed in 1972, Tennessee has been one of the states dragging their feet in protecting rivers and streams from raw sewage, uncontrolled agricultural runoff and unsafe landfills.

Middle Tennessee, with its thin soils, porous limestone and rapid population growth, is especially vulnerable. Among the seriously damaged waterways are parts of the Harpeth River in Williamson County, the Stones River in Rutherford County and Richland Creek in Davidson County.

As *The Tennessean* reported last year, many of the region's streams run brown with silt from eroding land and car fluids that run off pavements when it rains. Many are tainted by pesticides and fertilizers, by fecal matter and chemicals from leaky septic tanks, by landfills and overflowing sewage treatment plants.

Growth will only intensify the water problems. It begins with storm water runoff from development sites, eventually choking the life out of rivers and streams. The acres of asphalt for new roadways and parking lots inhibit natural drainage and create the perils of permanent flooding and pollution.

Several groups, including the [Tennessee Environmental Council](#), are threatening to sue under the Clean Water Act, a step that's likely to produce a 10-year program of stream and river remediation.

But have these threats made it less appealing to develop fresh, hitherto untouched lands of Davidson and its neighboring counties? The answer appears to be no.

All these issues require that the public become concerned enough to buy in to finding solutions, and that kind of citizen activism so far is pretty rare in Nashville and Middle Tennessee. As the next three Sunday's articles will suggest, that's what the 21st century will require of regions that don't want to repeat the St. Louis experience.