



Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson Hurtling Toward Atlanta's Fate

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Middle Tennessee has been a strong runner in the great growth race of the '90s for key investments, higher paying jobs and signature companies. The region is poised to break out of the pack with a spectacular sprint into the 21st century. The area is such an employment magnet that it has many more jobs than workers, drawing tens of thousands of commuters from outlying counties each day. But as Middle Tennessee moves forward, it may also find that growth is its Achilles' heel.

"We could almost go brain dead here and still get economic development," a Williamson County leader said during group interviews with some of the area's leaders and residents.

"But," he continued, "I'm really concerned about transportation, roads. We keep moving forward a step and then slide two back. That's what could stop us -- the quality of life issue."

Then he added: "I see us hurtling toward Atlanta conditions, just 10 years behind."

Ah, Atlanta. The "A" word. In years of interviewing across America's metro areas, we've never encountered as much fear of becoming another place as Nashvillians express toward Atlanta. Bankers, mayors, county commissioners, schoolchildren all said it: "We want to grow, but not like Atlanta."

The fear is understandable. With the horrendous traffic jams it's now experiencing, Atlanta has managed to squander a good share of its economic stature, its national standing. The story provides an alarming insight into the peril of stoking the economic fires, but failing to protect the quality of life, of ignoring land use and transportation decisions when they cry out to be made. Now, like Humpty Dumpty, Atlanta has to conjure up a recovery solution. It won't be an easy task.

The challenge for today's vibrant Nashville region, even as it confidently takes the next economic curve, is clear enough: Can Nashville emulate Atlanta the prosperous without ending up -- maybe five or 15 years from now -- resembling Atlanta the paralyzed?

Part of the answer lies in putting alternative region-wide systems of transportation in place -- light rail, commuter rail, exclusive bus routes, whatever is feasible. Then citizens at least have choices. (We'll discuss those possibilities in Part 3.)

Another response is to create an all-powerful state agency to enforce the transportation decisions and to veto sprawling land development moves. That's the route Atlanta has had to take.

Yet another strategy is for the business community, the great job producer everyone reveres, to start making much better decisions. The first signs of that are starting in Atlanta. Witness the extraordinary decision by BellSouth to close 75 suburban offices and relocate 13,000 employees into new complexes inside the Atlanta beltway. Duane Ackerman, BellSouth's CEO, told *Newsweek*: "I'm not a member of the Sierra Club. But we are a company aware of the environment."

Or consider the change of heart and strategy of Atlanta's John Williams, head of Post Properties, one of the nation's largest real estate development firms. Williams was Mr. Sprawl personified, building \$2.5 billion worth of suburban apartments out, around and beyond the Atlanta beltway and across the rest of the Southeast. Three Post properties exist here -- Post Green Hills, Post Hillsboro Village and Bennie Dillon apartments.

Now, Williams has executed a 180-degree turn. Virtually all his projects within the city of Atlanta proper are a mix of apartments and single-family homes and commercial development. They are constructed on walkable scale, close to transit.

"We have to interconnect people again," Williams said in an interview earlier this year. "We have to restore the sense of neighborhood, all the things that humans feel comfortable in. We need sidewalks, and we need to get people out on those sidewalks. We can't have a shopping center dropped in the middle of a field somewhere anymore."

Williams isn't alone. Chairman of the regional business coalition pushing for reform in the Atlanta area is Ray Weeks, builder of \$1 billion worth of shopping centers in suburban Cobb and Gwinnett counties. All these men remain committed to ongoing growth, but they believe it can happen internally, in the city of Atlanta, and around nodes of concentrated suburban development.

Are there counterparts to John Williams, Ray Weeks, Jim King in the Nashville developer community? A truly smart development community would be learning from Atlanta right now.

But a vital shift takes more than new developer attitudes. It requires county and town governments to start taking full responsibility for the future of their areas. It hasn't been sufficient, and surely won't be in the years ahead, to refer to Tennessee's tradition of private property rights and announce that "they" (development interests) are free to make virtually all the decisions.

The public agrees. Even the [National Association of Home Builders](#) confirmed public planning responsibility in its recent nationwide survey of 2,000 randomly selected households. The question: "Which of the following approaches should local government take to influence growth and development?"

The answers: plan and manage growth, 75%; pass laws to restrict growth, 12%; let people use property as they see fit, 11%; pass laws to stop growth, 2%.

But the challenge goes further. We need to hear the desires of ordinary citizens in how their neighborhoods, and the larger region they live in, are developed.

The Home Builders group reported large majorities of Americans, given a choice, would pick a detached house in the suburbs over a townhouse in the city.

But probe deeper into the results of thousands of neighborhood discussions and town meetings across America. Today's Americans are starting to reject the severe separation of houses from parks, schools, shops, and good transportation that the Great American Growth machine has been delivering. They miss knowing people and having real neighbors. They're asking for a community in which they can feel known, safe, secure.

Those sentiments prevail whether the focus is on the tony hills of Brentwood or the Jefferson Street corridor in north Nashville.

Even the folks who first populated the subdivisions -- today's baby boomers, fast entering their 50s -- are looking for new lifestyles where they don't have to rake the yard and fix the roof. They want to be close to restaurants and the best medical care and not have to suffer some horrific commute through the region's thickest traffic.

As for Generation X-ers and younger folks, they too want a community that can recapture the collective responsibility that was once famous in America, where anyone's child was everyone's responsibility.

Yet with still-too-rare exceptions, the development community continues to crank out more subdivisions that lack

these characteristics. It exposes the market to just the familiar single houses on serpentine streets and cul-de-sacs, and then claims it's all people want. Yet when real estate expert [Chris Leinberger](#) conducted consumer surveys recently in such regions as Albuquerque, N.M., Chattanooga and Atlanta, he found a full third of respondents prefer an urban-based, pedestrian-oriented lifestyle.

The challenge to our suburban and city neighborhoods alike is to restore a sense of community, to re-establish what place means.

It shouldn't be so hard to recover our senses about what makes a real community. In fact, recovering the right melody may be merely like reversing all the themes of old country songs. Just think about it. You'd get your truck back, your house back, your lost dog back.

What we need to get back now are town centers, parks within a few minutes walk, neighborhood schools, a sense of towns that are someplace special, not Generic, USA.

There has to be more to community than stowing your children in your Ford Explorer and transporting them to every place they may need to go.

And there has to be a better way to get to work than being given one choice -- a crowded, roaring freeway.

With this in mind, here are some smart growth thoughts for Nashville and Middle Tennessee:

1. Plan smart growth as a region by pushing the growth policy law.

The Tennessee General Assembly law requiring all counties to develop a growth policy that addresses municipal annexations and the formation of new municipalities needs to be pushed and pushed hard. This region needs to use the planning processes (required in all the region's counties save Davidson) to draw a broad range of citizens into thinking about their communities' futures. We heard criticism of the law, called [Public Chapter 1101](#) and passed in May 1998. People say it lacks teeth. It's imprecise. It doesn't say what growth densities need to be achieved.

But the law does challenge whole counties or municipalities to get specific, to say where denser urban development ought to go, and what lands (farms, wetlands, open space, parks) ought to be protected. It's a sign of serious thinking about the future. It certainly contradicts the "let 'er rip" mentality about growth.

During our visits and research, we did see signs that some Middle Tennessee counties understand the law's logic. "We'd begun before the state required," they told us in Montgomery County. "We see an opportunity for denser development, for in fill, saving money on infrastructure and increasing property values and the quality of life."

The growth law plans, when finally submitted, should be the product of real citizen commitment, so they're nailed down and can't be pried loose by the crowbars of special interests.

The law does not require that you deal in citizens beyond basic hearings. Such hearings too often just present take-it-or-leave-it plans. Their message to citizens, says Chattanooga city council president David Crockett: "If we want your opinion, we'll give it to you."

Middle Tennessee's counties could do better. They could stage a conference this fall, looking at the plans instituted by Public Chapter 1101. County and municipal leaders could meet with neighborhoods, developer, environmental representatives. It could be a chance to compare notes and advertise the best planning models and breakthroughs.

The [Greater Nashville Regional Council](#), which develops regional planning and economic development for 13 Middle Tennessee counties, would be an ideal entity to call the meeting. Valuable support might well come from two groups already deep into these issues: [the University of Tennessee's Energy, Environment and Resources Center](#) (sponsor of a recent statewide Smart Growth Conference), and the [Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations](#).

The theme should be straightforward: We're all in one region. It matters to all of us how everyone else plans. Let's compare notes, make sure all of us are exposed to the most creative ideas and challenge each other to do better.

2. Get specific about ways to fill in and develop existing neighborhoods and towns.

There's a big national debate about sprawl these days. Some of the commentary seems to fault suburban living, criticizing citizens and businesses for abandoning historic urban centers. But there's a raw truth not always told: Families will keep rushing out in search of large green lawns and freshly built homes until cities do what it takes to make older neighborhoods in urban centers attractive again.

People move because they want their families to be safe and want their kids in good schools. So, in a fundamental sense, nothing matters more than restoring reliable safety to urban neighborhoods and giving families access to good education. Otherwise there's no way to stop sprawl.

Failure is a costly prospect. No American region can easily afford continued sprawl. The smart ones are figuring out that making their urban centers places people want to live, as well as do business, is the vital next step.

Just think about the potential. There are thousands of empty lots and vacated properties beckoning for commercial adoption. They are scattered through the whole Middle Tennessee region -- not just downtown Nashville and nearby neighborhoods, but the wonderful old neighborhoods in Hendersonville, Murfreesboro, Franklin, Lebanon, Clarksville, and smaller places not so well known.

Infill development won't handle all the coming population growth. But, if the region made infill "priority one," it would save an enormous amount of public infrastructure costs, even while restoring resilience to many of its communities.

In Davidson County, community schools will be making a comeback with the end of busing. But the challenge is really the same across the region -- reviving the market for small groceries or diners back on the corner, parks refurbished and ready for kids to play again. Why not aim for neighborhoods that could work in the future the way they worked in the past?

Take your own drive through any older urban area in the Nashville region. Check out the inventory of tawdry, low-density commercial strip malls, many of them showing their age and about to be abandoned. Just a little imagination transforms such scenes into badly needed three-to-four story apartments over retail shops that serve local neighborhoods. Or: Take over a failing shopping center and redesign it into a real town center. A neighborhood in east Chattanooga just did that. Sure, some asphalt will disappear. But as one West Coast activist put it: "God never intended for parking lots to have an uninhibited view of the heavens."

3. Price development honestly and realistically.

In a culture that's been protective of property rights, people ought to be demanding clarity. What does new development really cost -- for streets, water connections, sewers, fire stations, schools, burdens on existing roads? And who's actually paying for it -- the developer, the buyers, or the taxpayers at large?

With that information, then there can be an honest debate about such issues as impact fees. The Nashville region

registers extreme political sensitivity to the idea of impact fees. Clearly, powerful development forces are telling the politicians, "hands off!" After all, what's the real chance, in the Nashville area's hot development climate, that such fees would actually stop projects?

[Nashville's Agenda](#), the region's impressive citizen-based visioning process of the '90s, had the right idea -- to aim for "a community with an involved citizenry with free access to the information necessary for taking part in decisions, from the neighborhood to the metropolitan level."

Yet to cope with today's growth avalanche, there's no policy shift that might have more dramatic impact, do more to ensure the longevity of today's heady rise in the economy, than transportation. Next week, that's our story.