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As downtowns blossom, nation's 'burbs face new challenges



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Shortly after moving to Kern County 19 years ago, we eyeballed a house in a brand-new northwest Bakersfield development. In fact, the sales agent talked us into signing on the dotted line. But we didn't sleep well that night, terrified that the \$101,000 price tag would drive us to ruin. The next morning we backed out.

About a year later, curious and a bit wistful, I drove by the still-new house. There were two cars in the driveway, hoods up, apparently in some stage of ongoing repair. A sofa was in the middle of the ragged front lawn, and the two pitiful little trees in the yard looked dead. Neighboring houses didn't look any better.

After my initial surge of relief subsided, it hit me: The suburbs can be a crap shoot, each new outer layer more so than the previous. That's the case even in the best of economic times. The new neighbors might prove to be slobs and the almond orchard down the street can turn into a liquor store overnight.

In rocky times, it's all that much worse. Add a foreclosure epidemic that devastates one in every 557 households nationwide and you've got a recipe for shattered neighborhoods.

Now, demographers are seeing a trend that further endangers suburbia: An increasing interest in no-commute, low-maintenance urban living. It hasn't hit Bakersfield enough for many people to notice, but large- and medium-sized cities across the country are seeing more buyers -- and more builders -- moving into the areas people were fleeing just 10 years ago.

Viewed from one perspective, that's good news. Although it's generally more expensive to pull off, infill development brings cities back to life, helps free up congested commuter routes, contributes to cleaner air and negates the need for expensive, far-flung infrastructure. It's also promising investment news for developers with the vision (and wallets) to act.

But it doesn't bode well for the 'burbs -- which in semi-isolated Bakersfield refers to new housing on the ever-expanding perimeter of a metropolitan area nearing the half-million mark.

Christopher Leinberger, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institute and a former developer, explained in the current issue of Atlantic Monthly why this is a hinky turn of events. If trends continue, McMansion developments could deteriorate into impoverished pockets of "slumburbia," with all the attendant crime that implies. The recent downturn, he notes, has produced troubling signs: Looters stealing copper pipe from new homes, gunshots piercing pristine house facades, and squatters moving into abandoned houses. We've seen a version of the latter problem here in those impromptu kegger parties staged in foreclosed-upon homes.

We just can't sustain isolated, car-dependent neighborhoods, Leinberger says. High gas prices, lengthening commutes, high employment and renewed interest in downtown residential life all make neighborhoods on the outer reaches of cities increasingly likely to become the refuge of the have-nots. The outer 'burbs already have poor connections to public transportation, businesses and services, and they're so widely distributed they present challenges to law enforcement.

In Europe, where the cities never were abandoned, the outer 'burbs have always represented those challenges.

This is the price we pay for listening to builders who insisted buyers want 3,000 square feet of house on three-quarters of an acre. Did they really? Many no doubt did, but then how many examples of first-class, small-lot, walkable/bikeable semi-urban living were there for comparison's sake? Few, if any.

But the reluctance of Bakersfield builders to look toward the city's core means the opportunity is still largely untapped. At this juncture, the smart builder can still look for partners who own underutilized downtown property.

Yes, it's more difficult and challenging to create infill housing. More difficult, certainly, than building on flat, virgin ag land.

Bakersfield clearly can't meet its future housing needs converting old office buildings into condos (although there ought to be a good market for that). Mixed-use development, clustered in self-sufficient pockets around parks and commerce, is still the way to go for fast-growing cities.

It's not too late to try. Not yet anyway.