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Returning to mass transit and walkability

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At the 1939-40 World's Fair in New York City, General Motors reshaped society and economics for the next 70 years. Fair-goers marveled at an exhibit called Futurama. It made them believe cars would make their lives easier. Toy model cities and suburbs were crisscrossed with expressways. Homes, shops and factories were put far from one another.

This maximized "convenience" and "efficiency." The automobile linked it all together. And eventually, the auto industry made up a third of the nation's economy.

"So when you were seeing the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet you were making yourself wealthier," Chris Leinberger told land use advocates in Lansing April 15.

A place like Troy is the dream of Futurama come true. Almost impossible to get to on foot or by bike – although Somerset recently added some sidewalks and benches. Birmingham, on the other hand, according to Leinberger, will stand the test of time because it's "walkable urban."

Leinberger is a developer, University of Michigan professor of real estate and author of <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200803/subprime>">"The Next Slum?", a recent Atlantic Monthly article about the far suburbs. His research shows consumers want to get out of their cars and walk. But even today, building to meet those desires is hard. Apartments often can't be placed on top of a store, for example, because cities and towns don't have it in their building codes.

Anyone following the push for a light rail line on Woodward Avenue would have clapped with all the other people in the Lansing conference hall as Leinberger spoke. "First and foremost," he said, "you gotta build rail transit. It is the most important infrastructure investment you can make in the early 21st Century. Not building rail transit is akin to not building the freeways back in the '50s. And it is every bit as important to your underlying economic growth."

With GM near bankruptcy, Michigan citizens and government officials can release themselves from a 70-year-old pledge — and the vision portrayed in Futurama, which you can see for yourself <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74cO9X4NMb4>">here on YouTube.

Traveling by bike or on foot, instead of by car, is no longer a betrayal. Who or what is there left to betray? Walking allows you to slow down, to listen to your body and your neighbors.

People have walked in their communities for thousands of years. It's time for Americans, and especially Michiganders, to have those communities again.

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