

Developer builds case to put end to sprawl

Vision: A Baltimore County audience hears how car-addicted suburbs threaten the earth and imperil our health.

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Christopher B. Leinberger is a man on a mission - a real estate developer who is building to reclaim the past.

When not spearheading an ambitious redevelopment of downtown Albuquerque, N.M., he crisscrosses the country, trying to sell builders, planners and the public on converting the nation's sprawling, car-addicted suburbs into more compact, walkable communities - like the neighborhood he grew up in outside Philadelphia.

At stake, contends the silver-haired, Santa Fe, N.M.-based developer, is nothing less than our personal health, and that of the planet.

"The way we're building our suburbs presents such difficult problems," Leinberger said yesterday, as he prepared to speak in Towson to a group of area developers, bankers and local officials.

"Our kids walk about one-tenth of what we used to, and that explains a lot of our obesity," he said, recalling that he must have trudged 3,000 miles to and from school while growing up in Drexel Hill, just west of Philadelphia.

The car-dependent suburbs built over the past 50 years must share the blame for our national weight gain, Leinberger says. They also are helping to bring on global warming, he contends, as car and truck tailpipes emit the gases research has linked to climate change.

He said he saw a classic case of problematic suburbia in a brief driving tour yesterday of the White Marsh area, with its shopping centers, big box stores and single-family homes - "all segregated," he noted, "and the only thing that connects them is the roads."

But Leinberger - who once worked with a development firm in Baltimore County - also said he saw potential for enlivening downtown Towson, thronging its streets with pedestrians by building a mixture of housing, shops and entertainment.

"Towson has never taken off, which has always mystified me," Leinberger said. "It's a great place. It should be a very lively, mixed-use place."

That was music to Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr., who brought Leinberger to town to build support for his "Renaissance" program, which aims to redevelop the county's older communities, including the county seat. Smith, who introduced Leinberger to the VIP lunch crowd yesterday, called him "a visionary who's also very practical, who knows how to get things done and not just dream."

Leinberger is a partner in Arcadia Land Co., which is involved in a \$95 million "new urbanist" remake of 12 blocks at the core of downtown Albuquerque. His first projects include a 14-screen movie and retail complex, plus a building with loft condominiums over offices and street-level shops and restaurants.

"He's a developer, but he got tired of developing the crap, the shopping centers that decline in value," said Dru Schmidt-Perkins, director of 1000 Friends of Maryland, a group advocating more compact development.

Leinberger contends there is a vast, unmet demand throughout the country for more compact, pedestrian-friendly communities, whether it's called "New Urbanism" or "Smart Growth." The demand is only going to grow, he added, as the baby boom generation retires and looks for places to live where they won't have to do yardwork anymore.

"The market more and more wants integrated, walkable communities," he said. "They're very desirable, but we in the industry don't know how to build them."

Urban-style developments that mingle apartments and condos with shopping and offices often face legal and political hurdles, as well as skepticism from builders and bankers, he said.

Many communities' zoning laws and building codes actually outlaw the kind of redevelopment his firm is doing in New Mexico, Leinberger said. Lenders also balk at financing such new and relatively unproven projects, he said, and the public frequently objects to dense development, fearing more traffic, congestion and crime.

To break the cycle of status quo suburban development, Leinberger has crafted his own 12-step program, which involves a gradual reintroduction into rundown communities of entertainment facilities, then rental housing, shops, condos and offices, all within a few blocks of each other - or sometimes in the same block.

Some developers and bankers took notes yesterday as Leinberger went on for 90 minutes, peppering his PowerPoint lecture with real estate jargon and examples from New Mexico and elsewhere.

The county executive quizzed Leinberger about the differences in how government financed parking decks for apartments, condos and shopping.

"I'm willing to do this stuff, but I've got to figure out how to make it work," Smith said.

"It is a complex process, but we now know how to turn around downtowns," Leinberger said. "We learned from the Inner Harbor," he said, acknowledging the contribution 25 years ago of local developer James W. Rouse, whose firm built Harborplace as a centerpiece of Baltimore's downtown redevelopment.

Despite the continuing spread of suburban development farther and farther from cities, Leinberger says he still sees the beginning of the end of sprawl, which he predicted five years ago.

"This is like turning a supertanker," he said.

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