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A Tale of Two Exurbs

Most outer-ring suburbs are being developed into unwalkable sprawl. But it doesn't have to be that way.

BEN ADLER | April 27, 2009

Leesburg, Virginia, is the archetypal American exurb. Named after an ancestor of Robert E. Lee, it is the seat of Loudoun County, 35 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. -- the farthest true suburb west of Washington. To its west are small towns and a few remaining farms; to its east are highways lined with chain hotels, mega-malls, and the office towers of the defense contractors powering the recent growth in Northern Virginia's economy and population. In 2004, Loudoun was the nation's fastest-growing county, and median home prices were rising by about one-fifth every year. In 1990, Leesburg had only 16,000 people. Now it has 38,000.

Ask denizens of Leesburg what they love most about the town and they are almost certain to mention the downtown -- a quaint outpost of the antebellum South, with the requisite ancient diner known for its peanut soup. Downtown Leesburg is a small warren of narrow streets laid out at right angles with brick buildings housing shops on the ground floor and offices above. It evokes such devotion because it offers something in very short supply in Northern Virginia and completely absent from the rest of Leesburg: walkability, a mix of uses and, therefore, character.

The downtown is surrounded on all sides by an incoherent network of strip malls and subdivisions connected by mostly unwalkable roads. This is not an accident, and it is not just the invisible hand of the market at work. It reflects political decisions to zone residential and commercial space separately, to require that every new house have a parking space but not necessarily a sidewalk, and to build at low densities. In fact, without rezoning, it would be illegal to build the beloved downtown in Leesburg today.

"Americans have no choice [but to drive]," says Christopher Leinberger, a developer who wrote *The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream*. "They are captive." Americans use cars for almost 90 percent of their trips -- with some unfortunate results. The decline of walking as part of Americans' daily routine has contributed to the obesity epidemic. The high cost of buying, maintaining, insuring, and gassing up a car for everyone over the age of 16 is a burden on American households. Our oil consumption amounts to an enormous foreign-aid package for Vladimir Putin, Hugo Chavez, and the Saudi royal family. Plus, it's bad for the environment. Transportation accounts for 32 percent of total carbon-dioxide emissions in the U.S.

There is a large unmet demand for walkable urban living. While less than 10 percent of the housing stock is walkable -- meaning that you can safely walk to shopping and mass transit -- in most metropolitan areas, academic research has found that roughly one in three Americans would prefer to live in a walkable urban environment. That is why housing in places such as San Francisco, New York, and Leesburg's neighbor, Washington, D.C., is so expensive and has been

relatively insulated from the dramatic recent drop in home values. By contrast, the automobile-dependent Washington exurbs and even inner-ring suburbs have seen dramatic drops in housing prices. Between September 2007 and September 2008, the median home price plummeted by 44.7 percent in one exurban zip code in Woodbridge, Virginia, compared to a drop of only 3.9 percent in D.C.'s Adams Morgan neighborhood, which had a similar median home price to Woodbridge before the economic downturn. This is a trend repeated throughout the country. "The indications seem to be that the bulk of this housing crisis is on the fringe," Leinberger says. "The rule of thumb is that if the average of housing in an area has dropped X, then the walkable urban places closer in have been flat over the last year or two, and the fringe has gone down 2X."

But America is still overwhelmingly a nation of drivers. Most communities are simply not designed to allow, much less encourage, any other means of getting around, and mass transit alone will not solve the problem. The way streets and neighborhoods are designed can make walking even short distances impossible. To free Americans from their cars, governments will have to implement a different set of rules on land use, parking, zoning, and other sexy topics -- and not just in the bastions of bike paths where progressive leaders tend to congregate. As Joel Kotkin notes in *Next American City*, "Since 1950, more than 90 percent of all the growth in U.S. metropolitan areas has been in the suburbs." If the next few decades look anything like recent ones, the suburbs are where most of the new construction will be built.

The Washington, D.C., region demonstrates how suburban development can be managed -- or mismanaged. Many of the inner-ring 'burbs, such as Arlington, Virginia, and Silver Spring, Maryland, have areas with mixed uses and ample mass-transit links. While their residents generally own cars, many commute to work and even go shopping without them. Farther out, into newer suburbs, transportation without a car becomes increasingly impossible, as giant parking lots and wide roads that lack sidewalks predominate. Regional, state, and even federal transportation policy has created towns like Leesburg throughout the country -- towns that are simply unwalkable.