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Economic Downturn Might Be a Catalyst for Smarter Growth

The land use and transportation policies of the 20th century are destined to change dramatically. They enabled sprawl -- the unbridled expansion of American cities that has engendered enormous unforeseen economic, social, environmental and aesthetic costs.

Instead, we are turning to a list of R-words: rethinking, redeveloping, renewing, revitalizing, retrofitting.

Those words have figured repeatedly in recent articles about major proposed suburban makeovers in Tysons Corner, Rockville Pike and downtown Columbia. Private and public entities also are developing plans for other sites in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs, as well as in the District.

Cities were invented before we invented cars. The suburbs weren't invented until we invented cars. That is why in the "Space Domain" city and suburb maps look so different. In the "Time Domain" they are identical. {see tab 22 on the [Woodmont Triangle](#) page of my website.}

You do not walk to "do" anything, in the suburbs, though, because nothing is close enough (wrong land plan/zoning.)

Sprawling American suburbs, developed at very low densities, have been zoned and subdivided into residential enclaves designed primarily for driving convenience.



Widely dispersed employment, commercial and recreational destinations, coupled with inadequate road systems, have produced severe traffic congestion and climate-changing carbon emissions while denying suburbanites the choice of conveniently walking, biking or using transit.

And does anyone find beauty in sprawl?

Sprawl's emblem is the ugly, ubiquitous commercial strip, dominated by surface parking lots, garish signs and cheaply built, disposable structures.

See the "Cover Page.." item on my [Woodmont Triangle](#) web page

Land has long been cheaper and more available on the suburban fringe. For decades, semi-rural counties willingly promoted growth and enacted sprawl-inducing zoning laws. Lower costs made exurban homes of all styles and sizes cheaper than comparable homes closer to cities.

Minimal government impositions and delays also kept cost down.

At the same time, states and counties continued building roads ever farther out, aided by federal funding. Inexpensive gasoline and easy credit spurred sales and use of cars. Easy credit coupled with the federal tax deduction for mortgage interest also helped home sales. Given the American dream of owning an affordable single-family house, sprawl was inevitable.

But this dream has become a nightmare for many. The latest housing bubble burst as borrowers defaulted on subprime mortgages, home prices fell and foreclosures soared.

We zone land with an "automobile frame of mind." BUT:

- Metro-rail serves pedestrians, not cars.
- Metro-rail is a regional system, NOT local.

The zoning we must invent has a simple, clear mission:

- Maximize sources and destinations of pedestrians within walking distance of rail stations.

Almost every number in zoning is arbitrary, yet they assume a "divine" significance. This is actually contrary to the legal foundation for zoning which is to "protect the public health, safety and welfare."

The single most important thing we can do to protect the public health, safety and welfare is to fix our broken zoning system to enable more people to function as pedestrians.

An elevator is a vertical Metro-rail. It takes a pedestrian from one place to another with no car, no bus, no gas consumption, no air pollution, no stress from traffic, no injuries or deaths or property damage from accidents.

If a site is within walking distance of a rail station (this, too, is NOT a number!) zoning that limits building height or FAR (floor area ratio) to any specific number is dysfunctional. Design is key!

My Woodmont Triangle work is a model of how to solve this problem in a delightful, exciting way {see tabs 9 and 8 on the web page.}

Growing a Metro-rail served urban area in a pedestrian-friendly attractive mixed-use form requires a balancing of nearby natural areas, predominantly undisturbed (not 10-25 acre large lot zoning!)

A re-engineered TDR program could achieve this easily.

Not surprisingly, many distressed loans and foreclosed properties are in sprawling exurbs, especially in high-growth states including Florida, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, California and, of course, Virginia.

Today's nightmarish economic crisis does teach a lesson. It at last illuminates the consequences of policies and practices yielding costly sprawl. It shows that **growth by limitless outward expansion is no longer sustainable, no longer an option.**

What's possible and desirable, if not unavoidable in the future, is growth characterized by the R-words. We must transform portions of our cities and suburbs that already enjoy favorable locations and serviceable infrastructure, but are poorly or insufficiently developed. Properties apt to become economically and functionally obsolete should be revived.

Shifting demographics make such transformations more feasible.

Traditional families -- parents with children -- may continue to opt for the suburban model. But traditional families represent less than half of all American households. Millions of households are made up of singles, couples or housemates who neither want nor need the traditional suburban home. They **tend to embrace a more urban lifestyle**, choosing to live in mixed-use environments where they can go shopping on foot, commute via transit and get along without a car.

Investments in roads, transit and utilities must be aimed at enhancing infrastructure quality and performance within metropolitan areas, not at the fringe. Rather than continuing to suburbanize the agrarian landscape, we should urbanize more of the existing suburbs. This is the essence of "smart growth."

And recession, unemployment and government budget deficits may be just the pushes needed to finally motivate smart growth behavior by citizens and policymakers.

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We can dramatically simplify government actions in the land-use arena thereby improving their efficiency. {eliminate APFO, forest conservation and storm water management in urban areas, as they will be designed at the big picture level.}

We waste far too much money trying to defy the laws of real estate (location) and economics (supply and demand.)

Money will be saved in government administration, plan review will be simpler and much faster. Public revenues will increase because the massive public investments in transportation and water and sewer will be used more efficiently by more people. The cost of providing services like school buses, fire, police will fall as more people are closer together. There will be fewer car accidents, injuries and deaths, and greater public health from walking and biking.

Virtual Adjacency will help here: see tab 22 on my [Woodmont Triangle](#) web page

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see tabs 6 and 10 on my [Woodmont Triangle](#) web page