Sustainable Suburbs: Developers’ Perspectives on Transportation and Compact Development

In affiliation with World Habitat Day, the Urban Land Institute convened Sustainable Suburbs: Developers’ Perspectives on Transportation and Compact Development on October 8, 2009. This free forum, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and ULI Trustee Jim Curtis as part of the ULI National Transportation Policy Dialogue, explored how to leverage transportation and land use investments to promote sustainable growth in the suburbs.

Over 110 people, drawn from the public and private sectors, including a number of representatives from the federal government, participated in the event. Members of the Washington press corps also covered the program.

The forum was keynoted by Georgia Institute of Technology professor Ellen Dunham-Jones, co-author of the book Retrofitting Suburbia, who suggested that the suburbs, in terms of climate change and greenhouse gases, are a bigger problem than urban areas. When measured on a per capita basis, urban dwellers are already green— it’s the suburbs where the biggest gains can be made. Plus, Dunham-Jones said, "There will be an enormous market for more urban lifestyles, more urban places, within suburbia."

Three panels then explored different aspects of the Sustainable Suburbs topic. ULI Trustee Carl Weisbrod moderated the first session, The Big Picture, which examined the challenges of regional spatial planning and governance, and the role of Metropolitan Planning Organizations. The panelists in this session noted the historic disconnect between transportation and land use policy, and suggested that the federal government create incentives for more compact development types.

The second panel, Transit Ready and Walkable, moderated by Minneapolis developer Michael Lander, looked at issues of compact neighborhood design, and highlighted the work that ULI Minnesota and its partners have done to create new governance and analytical models for developing compact suburban places. Marilee Utter, President of Denver-based Citiventure Associates, reviewed lessons from the first generation of transit-oriented development. Her key point, that the TOD value premium comes from creating a place near transit-- rather than the transit itself—struck a strong chord with the audience.

The third panel, Where Do We Go From Here?, focused on some of the nitty-gritty challenges of actually building more compact development projects, including entitlements and zoning, parking, finance, and community relations, with presentations by prominent DC area developers. Moderated by Roger Platt of USGBC, the panel also returned to regional planning issues with a presentation by Marilyn Taylor, ULI Trustee and Dean of the Pennsylvania School of Design about infrastructure planning in the Philadelphia area.

In summary, some key ideas from the forum include:

- Why the suburbs?
  - Suburbs represent a key opportunity, because they are where the biggest gains can be made
  - Suburbs are diverse places that will become more diverse over time
  - Options for reusing suburban areas include reinhabitation, redevelopment, and regreening
  - But suburban cities are unprepared for development
- What should federal, state, and regional governments do?
  o At the state level, streamlined approvals and funding for the right kind of projects are needed
  o The federal government should be funding infrastructure at the appropriate levels and creating incentives for the right kind of development
- What are the challenges?
  o Connecting the dots between suburban projects—doing effective subregional planning and creating an appropriate frame—is a key challenge
  o Another challenge will be creating the highly connected street system that supports compact development and aligning the other infrastructure with it (which is one of the reasons why dead malls are attractive places to start)
- What have we learned about transit and Transit Oriented Development (TOD)?
  o The TOD value premium comes from creating a place near transit—rather than the transit itself
  o “Transit-ready” development can’t afford to wait until the transit is built. It is important to get started now even if transit is 10-15 years away and develop the transit-ready project just like you would the TOD project.
  o TOD will not happen on its own: projects are tough to design, entitle, finance and build

This event provided an opportunity to explore the themes of the ULI report *Transportation for a New Era* in more detail, and for developers and policy makers from a number of levels to engage in a thoughtful discussion about the issues that each group faces. ULI will continue to host conversations about the issues at the intersection of transportation and land use as part of the National Transportation Policy Dialogue.