Urban-Light Living — A New Residential Option: Throughout the United States, downtowns in big cities and small are being revitalized and densified. This is being driven, in part, by changing demographics.

Today, families with children represent only about 20% of all households. The number of baby boomers with empty nests continues to increase, as do the echo boomers — the fledglings that have left the baby boomers’ nests. These groups have discovered that the lifestyle that comes with downtown living — going to museums, restaurants, coffee shops, shows, or engaging in sports activities — may be preferable to a weekend spent mowing the lawn.

It isn’t just our larger metropolitan areas that are developing places for people to live an urban lifestyle. Smaller communities are also revitalizing their downtowns, adding housing, and providing a living option that has been labeled “Urban Light.” It’s an alternative for people who want a more urban lifestyle but don’t want to locate in the downtown of a large, metropolitan city.

Escondido, CA: Downtown Escondido in San Diego County (population 141,000) initiated plans to revitalize their declining downtown last year. In 1988, the City constructed a new downtown city hall and, in 1994, added a Center for the Arts. However, suburban malls were still drawing customers away, downtown businesses were closing and vacant buildings had become commonplace.

The new plan for downtown focuses primarily on housing — from new high-end condominiums to condo conversions, row homes and townhomes. The city plans to add more than 1,000 housing units downtown by 2010. Some of the units will be built atop parking garages, and others will be situated in mixed-use projects, where retail shops and condos coexist to form mini-neighborhoods.

A successful downtown needs public transportation. Escondido is planning to complete a 22-mile “Sprinter” commute train that will connect the city to Oceanside and points in between.

Windsor, CA: The Town of Windsor (population 21,500) built their new downtown from scratch. In collaboration with a private developer, the town initiated the 10-acre redevelopment project in 2001. Today, the first six of the seven-phase project are essentially complete.

Three-story buildings are centered around a four-acre town green. They offer retail and commercial space on the ground floors, with 250 units of condominiums and apartments on top. One building is designed for disabled and senior residents. Happily, some units are affordable, built by a Housing Development Corporation. This is fortuitous because the market-rate units have risen quickly in value.

The developer has excluded chainstores. Eighty to ninety restaurants, clothing, specialty foods, book stores and services occupy the storefronts, with some owners living above their businesses.

To address transportation needs, local and regional buses serve the area, however the downtown is on an existing rail line. If all goes well, an intermodal center will be built and the train will offer service into the San Francisco Bay area. Recognizing that this 10-acre project could have been 50 acres of sprawl, even the local Sierra Club supported it.

Vallejo, CA: Partnering with a good developer can be a practical and affordable way to achieve the revitalized downtown that residents want. The City of Vallejo, CA (population 121,221) has joined Windsor in employing this strategy.

Vallejo was once a shipbuilding center with an authentic downtown. In the 1950s and 60s, Vallejo’s vitality and charm eroded as streets were widened for autos and numerous parking lots replaced historic buildings.

Several years ago, the City joined with a developer in a partnership to create a downtown that would be a delightful place for residents and commuters to walk, shop and live. With money available through a public-private partnership, a new specific plan and design guidelines were developed to revive a 12 square block area of downtown as a center of the community. Developed through an extensive citizen participation process, the specific plan provides the framework for a 20-year project to build 4,000 new homes, a transit center, and additional infill development of up to 5 stories in height.
The plan provides for narrower streets and wider sidewalks that will link downtown to the waterfront ferry and Victorian neighborhoods.

The city is selling their developer-partner seven large city parking lots to be developed in accordance with the new specific plan and design guidelines. It is expected that these buildings will serve as a catalyst to spur additional downtown development. Construction is expected to begin within the next few months.

**New Resources:** A Model Form Based Code: The SmartCode and Manual is having a significant impact on redevelopment of the Gulf Coast and is now available in hard copy. The SmartCode is a form-based code masterminded by leading new urbanist architect Andres Duany.

The SmartCode and Manual includes the complete SmartCode version 8.0 plus detailed notes explaining each section along with supporting materials and tips on implementation.

The first 400 copies of the code were shipped to Biloxi, Mississippi for a March workshop and most of the 11 Mississippi coastal communities are moving toward adopting a version. To order the full-color, printed version of the SmartCode and Manual, go to www.newurbannews.com. Version 8.0 is also available as a free download at www.placemakers.com.

**Guidelines for Urban Thoroughfares:** A new draft guide dealing with major urban thoroughfares — including arterial and collector streets — has been jointly written and released by the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) and the Congress for the New Urbanism.

This document addresses what has previously been a major challenge in creating walkable places — the unwelcoming, unwalkable arterial. While some cities have had success in creating neighborhoods with narrow and pedestrian-friendly local streets, walkers and bicyclists are usually trapped on islands that are surrounded by wide, unsafe, high-speed corridors. This is a result of traffic engineers following the existing street manuals for arterials streets such as the Green Book published by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. The Green Book focuses on capacity, speed, and topography.

The new guide also addresses transportation alternatives to the car including pedestrians, bicycles, and transit. It goes into great detail on design features that combine to make walking, transit, and bicycling efficient and attractive transportation choices including the placement of adjacent buildings and businesses. These are aspects of thoroughfare design for which there are currently no guidelines.

The document also addresses the concept of the Transect — considering gradations from rural to urban — rather than labeling all situations either urban or rural. It looks at the context of urban development as defined by the density and mixture of land uses.

The guide is being released as a proposed recommended practice for planners, engineers and others who design major urban thoroughfares. It is currently in draft form. Comments are being taken until the end of this year, at which time the manual will be submitted to the ITE for their final blessing. A copy can be downloaded from www.cnu.org.

**A Tool to Assess Flood Risks in Your Neighborhood:** No one wants to buy a home in a flood zone, and no elected official wants to subject their constituents to floods by approving development in the wrong place. However, it is sometimes difficult to find an easy-to-read flood map that applies to a specific street or neighborhood.

A new computer tool now makes it possible to go online and, in minutes, determine the flood risks of a specific place in your community. Just type in flood.firetree.net. There you will find a map of the world. The tool allows the user to zoom in until you find the specific place that you want to research. You can then determine how high above sea level that place is and compare it to the height of surrounding areas, including bodies of water that might overflow in the event of a levee break or intense rainstorm.

**Study Shows Poor Planning Harms Health in Several Ways:** Researchers have shown for the first time that the same pattern of unwise land use can adversely affect a wide range of health indicators, including obesity and air pollution. This comprehensive study was commissioned by King County, WA. It shows that land use decisions can affect health in more than one way.

When a built environment results in less physical activity and more auto-created air pollution, it can lead to an increased risk for several major chronic diseases, obesity, exposure to pollutants and risk of respiratory ailments. Considering each health effect by itself may not lead policymakers to change zoning regulations. But together, the importance of doing so becomes even more compelling. The study’s findings were reported in the special health edition of the Journal of the American Planning Association publishes in Winter 2006. To access abstracts, go to www.planning.org/japa/byissue/06winter.htm.