

Livable Places Update

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

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Dubuque Mayor Shares How City's Economy Moved From Brink of Collapse to Job Growth Leader: Mayor Roy Buol will take part in an afternoon-long discussion at the *New Partners for Smart Growth Conference* to explain how he did what most Presidents can't do — create jobs.

Back in the 1980s, Dubuque, Iowa's manufacturing industries abandoned the City, leaving behind 8% unemployment. Fast forward to 2005 - this City of about 58,000 was ranked as the 22nd fastest-growing economy in the nation! In 2010, careerbuilder.com ranked it as the third best city for job growth. And today, the jobless rate has fallen to 3.9 percent.

How did the City lay the groundwork for this economic turnaround? The answer lies not in just one program but in a group of initiatives that have made the City attractive to businesses, tourists, and families.

One of the first and most important initiatives was to tackle the City's riverfront area that lines the central business district. Closed manufacturing industries had left behind abandoned properties and environmental issues, leaving an ugly sore on the downtown.

Back then, City leaders had a vision — they would turn this 90-acre, riverfront property on the edge of downtown into an attractive tourist destination. A ten-member committee was appointed to guide the effort and included representatives from the City, the chamber of commerce, the historical society and a private developer. Consultants and developers were brought in for support. Together they created a new dream.

There was only one problem with their vision; it had a \$400 million dollar price tag! Undeterred, the City went shopping for funding. The City contributed \$100 million. They received money from the EPA's brownfields program and grants from the U.S. EPA and HUD. Another \$55 million was contributed by the State and the County provided \$1.7 million. This would not have been enough had they not also been able to gain more than \$15 million in private funding. Eventually, the partnership expanded to become a public-private partnership that included 13 federal agencies, the State of Iowa and many of its agencies and departments. Also important was the participation of five governors along the Upper Mississippi River, a number of national navigation associations, and 35 national environmental groups, each contributing expertise or funding.

Clean up of the property began in May 2003 and was finally completed in 2007. Today the riverfront is one of the most popular tourist attractions in the State. It features a riverwalk, a plaza and parks, an amphitheater, museums, a water park, and a conference center/hotel. In sum, it has it all — environmental integrity, economic prosperity, and social/cultural vibrancy.

Also important was the City's attention to the rest of the downtown. A treasure trove of historic buildings was recognized as an important asset. The City implemented measures that would give developers an incentive to invest in and improve these properties. Among them are a streamlined preservation process, assistance with financing, applications, and negotiation with existing property owners. Today there are multiple housing options in the downtown, many located in historic buildings. They that are within easy walking distance of the Riverwalk and it's amenities, restaurants, entertainment, and a major employer — IBM.

Water and energy costs also play a significant role in making a city affordable and livable. Dubuque has recently developed a partnership with IBM, creating a system that allows citizens to monitor their water usage using real time data. Since implementing the system, there has been an eight-fold increase in residents who have identified water leaks, leading to a 6.6% reduction in water use. According to Mayor Buol, the City is now focusing on electricity and is looking for big ways to save there as well.

Over a thousand households have been fitted with meters that give homeowners feedback on their energy usage. The idea is that if you give citizens tools to find the inefficiencies, they'll "tighten the screws" themselves.

A Smarter Travel initiative is now underway, using Smart Phones to track the travel of 1,000 volunteer households. The travel data will be used to help the city figure out how to make the flow of people throughout the city more efficient and less energy intensive.

Implementing these new technologies costs money, of course. The City is looking at the cost of these tools and how quickly the investment will be paid back through new revenues or cost savings.

For an example of the ways that Dubuque has been attracting business to their downtown, download the Downtown Master Plan Citizen's Guide at: www.cityofdubuque.org/DocumentCenter/Home/View/293.

Fresno Reverses Direction From Farmland Sprawl to Smart Growth: The City of Fresno is home to over a half million people and has been long known for its pro-development policies. Hungry for jobs and sales tax revenues, city leaders felt for many years that growth would be a positive for the local economy. An abundance of farmland in the region seemed to make endless urban development possible.

There were negative economic impacts of this unfettered growth observed early on. Former Fresno resident and *Fresno Bee* reporter, Timothy Egan, noted, "Hemmed in by property tax limitations, cities were compelled to increase revenue by the easiest route: expanding urban boundaries. They let developers plow up

walnut groves and vineyards and places that were supposed to be strawberry fields forever to pay for schools and services demanded by parents and park users. . . So the trade off is that they trade new growth at the edge (where its value still doesn't balance with its cost) in exchange for leaving behind properties that become negative revenue gains in the property tax base."



Tract homes and rich farmland meet in sprawl development near Fresno, CA.
Photo courtesy of American Farmland Trust

The 2008 housing crisis hit Fresno particularly hard. They joined the top 20 cities in the nation with the highest number of housing foreclosures. The City had depended upon fees from new development to pay for the amenities promised to the previous project, but without new development, income from fees was gone. Lacking enough money to cover pensions promised to previous employees and inadequate revenues to continue to provide infrastructure and services to their residents, Fresno began to flirt with bankruptcy.

Sometimes we have to hit a wall before change becomes possible. This happened in Fresno. A new Mayor was elected in 2009; the city council changed, and in 2011, a new general plan process began. For the first time, there was widespread community engagement in the planning process — from affluent business owners to middle- and working-class people. Further, new computer tools allowed policy makers and local residents to fully understand the implications of land use decisions being made in their community.

This past Spring, the city council was presented with five different general plan alternative growth scenarios from which to select. At one end, was scenario E, a Building Industry Association-sponsored plan providing more sprawl. The other, scenario A, focused on a revitalized downtown as the community core, and the development of self-contained neighborhood communities along four boulevards on property currently occupied by mostly declining strip development. These neighborhoods are envisioned as containing housing for all income levels, as well as shopping, schools, parks and other recreational opportunities; and entertainment, financial and medical services — all within walking or biking distance. Forty-five percent of all new development is to occur as infill.

About 300 residents packed the Council chambers at two successive hearings to comment on

these alternative general plan visions. They were ethnically and economically diverse, of all age groups, the disabled participated and children spoke. All walks of life were represented, from affluent business owners to middle- and working-class residents.

Responding to the business-as-usual scenario E, one speaker captured the emotions of many in the room, "I have lived in central Fresno all my life. . . I have witnessed large portions of my neighborhoods disappear to those developments that left behind long strips of land sitting without development for nearly two decades. I've seen homeowners turn into renters, watched major businesses dwindle away or be relocated to the north."

At the same time, new computer analyses provided information to the process that was difficult to ignore. Compared to business-as-usual, scenario A's emphasis on walking and biking would reduce vehicle miles traveled by 32%. By 2035, this would mean an annual 14.4 million gallon reduction in the consumption of gasoline. Further, scenario A would save enough energy by 2035 to power over 9,000 homes a year and enough water to serve 7,500 homes. Infrastructure and maintenance costs would be reduced by \$162 million annually, and \$13.8 million a year would be saved in reduced health care costs due to reduced air-pollution related illnesses. Scenario A was approved on a 7 to 2 vote!

While they are waiting for the Environmental Impact Report to be completed, city leaders are thinking about developing new policies to assure that the vision of the new general plan can be realized. The Council has adopted a resolution to move ahead with an "Infill Development Act" that will change the current economic incentives that favor sprawl over infill development. This may mean changing the permit process and reducing parking minimums along with street width and lot size requirements. It will likely mean establishing reapplication conferences, streamlining legal reviews, and developing online permitting and new fee schedules. Download the Fresno Infill Development Act at: www.fresno.gov/CouncilDocs/agenda11.1.2012/3a.pdf.

An infill development finance task force is about to be created and charged with digging deeper into possible developer incentives, with a report to be delivered when the EIR is completed and a draft of the 2035 general plan is made public.

At this point, it appears that the planning mistakes of over a half-century will not be repeated. Citizens are now more fully informed and engaged, and the City now has a way to measure the fiscal and resource impacts of their decisions.

Fresno city and community leaders are scheduled to appear on a session panel at the *New Partners for Smart Growth Conference*. We invite you to join us to learn more about how this city has rejected sprawl to embrace a new way of growing. You can register for the *12th Annual New Partners for Smart Growth Conference* at www.NewPartners.org.