AGENDA

1. CALL TO ORDER

2. CONTINUED DISCUSSION – MEMBER COMMENTS RE 2000 COMPREHENSIVE GENERAL PLAN

3. NEXT STEPS

4. ADJOURNMENT
To: Members of the Comp Plan Subcommittee  
From: Susan Guderley, Neighborhood Planner  
Subject: Comp Plan Update – Recurring Terms and Themes  
Date: March 4, 2013

At its last meeting, the Committee began a discussion of members’ compiled comments and observations related to the 2000 Comprehensive General Plan [See attached]. The goals of this exercise are to determine which ideas and concepts within the current plan continue to inform planning decisions facing the city and to identify where edits or completely new verbiage are needed to craft an updated comprehensive plan.

In the course of their discussion, members noted that there were several terms which appeared repeatedly. While these terms may be familiar to planning officials or planners, they may not be to the general public. Likewise, there were some broad topics (e.g. industrial development, demographic trends) which need to be researched and more fully understood.

Finally, it was suggested that these recurring words and topics begin to suggest dominant themes or guiding principles for the plan update.

Based upon the Committee’s discussion, to date, this memo begins a list of recurring vocabulary and concepts below. Abbreviated definitions, which should be more fully developed, have also been provided. Also, attached, are several planning articles related to last meeting’s discussion of these topics and may be of interest.

1. Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) - a planning approach that incorporates a mixture of housing types and land uses within a defined area. This land use pattern is reinforced by a transportation network which accommodates all modes – pedestrian, bicycles, and vehicles. While TND is often associated with New Urbanism, it is also ‘old urbanism’. Several residential neighborhoods in Evanston grew up near small commercial nodes and their grid system of streets, sidewalks and alleys beautifully separate vehicles and pedestrians, benefitting both.
2. **Transit Oriented Development (TOD)** – a mixed use, residential/commercial land use pattern designed to maximize access to public transportation and incorporates features (e.g. enhanced public realm) to encourage transit ridership.

3. **Mixed-Use** – development within an area or a single building, that incorporates residential, commercial, cultural, institutional, or industrial uses and which is encouraging to pedestrian movement.

4. **Industrial Development** – Committee members requested a better sense of the make-up of city’s current industrial sector before creating a vision for its future. What will modern manufacturing look like and what does that mean for Evanston?

5. **Density** – In planning discussions, this term has been used to conjure the worst (tenements, public housing, low-density sprawl) and best (transit oriented, walkable) development patterns. It can have different dimensions based upon the relevant units, e.g. population or housing units per acre, etc. However, it is also understood to have a direct relation to the physical appearance, texture and functionality of land use development patterns. A useful tool for understanding the terms range and dimensions may be the Smart Code transect (model form based code).

Attachments
To: Members of the of the Comp Plan Subcommittee  
From: Susan Guderley, Neighborhood Planner  
Subject: Member Comments on 2000 Evanston Comprehensive General Plan  
Date: February 12, 2013

During its discussion last month, the subcommittee continued its discussion of the content and organization of a revised Evanston Comprehensive General Plan. Somewhere on the continuum between an update and total rewrite, the revised plan must reflect changes in City policies and programs since 2000, as well as identify emerging planning themes, challenges, opportunities and strategies.

In preparation to move forward with this task, subcommittee members were requested to review the 2000 Plan to identify what they would save, revise or eliminate. The intent was to use these observations during the February meeting to begin to develop both a plan outline and work plan strategy. Members were also invited to share their thoughts ahead of time – comments received to-date are shown below, organized by chapter. Where members’ comments were similar, some attempt was made to combine. Please excuse any inadvertent misinterpretation of meaning and/or handwriting.

**Comprehensive General Plan Land Use Map Definitions (p. v)**
1. There is no provision for Mixed-Use Areas

**Introduction (p. 1-9)**
1. Evanston’s Relative Strengths and Challenges (p. 2), combine first and second challenges
2. Suggested edits and additions to text on page 3:
   a. Key: Add material on TND as way to do development in already built-up city
   b. Add retain manufacturers
   c. Discussion re higher density infill in paragraph 3 not consistent with Chicago Ave report, but correct.
   d. Discussion re development in West Evanston (par.4) – TND on west side?
   e. Maintaining CTA usage should be addressed by discussion of improved regional mass transit investments (last par.).
3. P. 5, final par., Add material on more recent development discussions.
4. P. 6, Values & Goals of the CGP matrix – Add “TND” and “Retain manufacturing”.
5. P. 7, suggested edits:
   a. Paragraphs 3 & 4 - What might/should replace the discussion of “Technopolis Evanston”?
   b. Revise discussion of economic development strategy (par. 5).
   c. Revise discussion of Chicago Avenue corridor planning (last par.)
6. P. 8, suggested edits/revisions on:
   a. Update discussion of corridor planning (par.5);
   b. Chicago Avenue parking issue (par. 6);
   c. More specifics on discussion of design of new development (par. 7); and
   d. Update discussion about Plan for Downtown Evanston.
7. Add material on increasing density (p. 9, elsewhere?)
   a. Selected locations
   b. Design criteria
   c. Parking & access

Chapter I - General Land Use (pp. 15-19)
1. Good introduction, short, discuss key areas undergoing or having undergone significant changes i.e. Chicago Ave corridor, limit generalities
2. P. 16, delete discussion of Evanston's major corridors.
3. P. 17, update paragraphs discussing Howard Street and Downtown Evanston; comment prioritizing retaining Evanston’s manufacturers is good.
4. Map 1, page 18:
   a. Needs to reflect today
   b. Revise to incorporate Mixed-Use areas

Chapter 2 - Neighborhoods (pp. 20-25)
1. Map 2: General Areas of Future Redevelopment, Revitalization, and LU Modifications
   a. Add another designation for Mixed-Use
   b. Review and revise accordingly areas noted (e.g. Chicago Ave, Main Street Commons Shopping Center, Central Street)
2. Update goals and policies/actions:
   a. Add design & location considerations with regard to mixing uses in neighborhoods; transit aspects.
   b. Add consideration of parking, TND, street design
3. Briefly describe the variety of neighborhoods we have and the balance options to keeping each neighborhood’s character with potential growth/density issues.
4. Create new neighborhoods – describe?
5. Transit oriented development should be introduced and the areas near the Metra and Purple Line should be highlighted for TOD. What is happening at Main and Chicago, etc
6. Existing TIF districts and their effect on neighborhoods
7. Ensure no conflicts with council approved plans for various neighborhoods .. west Evanston, etc
Chapter 3 Housing (pp.27-32)
1. Briefly describe existing housing/changing demographics/projections in housing; revise other sections to cover this.
2. The Gen Y cohort will tend toward smaller living units, discuss issues converting larger living units into smaller ones/ (condo conversion issues to do this?) and multi-generational living units.
3. Add section on accommodating aging population.
4. Tenancy of housing – rental housing is trending up
5. Ensure no conflicts with council approved plans for various neighborhoods ..
6. west Evanston, etc

Chapter 4 Business, Commercial and Industrial Areas (pp. 33-39)
1. Objectives/policies/actions update
2. P. 36 - Map 3, Primary Areas of Commercial Activity & Employment:
   a. Link to COE Business Web page discussion of districts?
   b. Change designation of Noyes, Foster Dempster and Main Street areas to Mixed-Use areas.
3. Industrial sector employment – current, training needs, potential
4. TOD, how public transportation can bring workers to jobs and encourage buildings to house those jobs.
5. Revise to incorporate current economic strategies adopted by the City Council

Chapter 5 Central Business District (pp.41-45)
1. Revise to incorporate the new downtown plan and bring discussion up to date/consistent with what has happened and in the works to happen
   a. Role in recent growth in City’s population
   b. Discussion of office market
   c. Form Based Code
   d. Certainty for developers
   e. End of TIF
   f. Incentivized development characteristics, e.g. on-site affordable housing
   g. Renewed emphasis and efforts re Arts
2. Map on 43 needs updating

Chapter 6 Institutions (pp. 47-50)
1. Update as we lost a few … National Lewis and Kendall .. and map on 49 needs updating.
2. Public Education discussion – linkages between Chapter 4 could also include collaboration on vocational programming.

Chapter 7 City Buildings (pp.53-57)
3. Needs updating, what city had done and expects to do.
   a. Disposition of city owned buildings relationship to open space
Chapter 8 Parks and Recreational Areas (pp. 59-66)
1. Update, future of Robert Crown and others if known.
2. Exhibits on pages 64-66 not necessary
3. Possible linear park between Metra and CTA tracks
4. Ensure no conflicts with council approved plans for various neighborhoods
5. West Evanston, etc
6. Deficit of open space persists – are there any new opportunities or alternative strategies to be identified?
7. Impact of changing demographics upon design of facilities and programming
8. Relationship to neighborhoods
9. Bicycle path/facility planning; regional connections
10. Role of CDBG and state/federal grants in funding this function
11. IDNR’s Coastal Management Plan – activities impacted along Lake and canal and also relates to Chapter 16

Chapter 9 Community Utilities (pp. 67-74)
1. Update, electrical purchasing concept
2. Major infrastructure projects accomplished and in the works
3. Review discussion of increased streetlight illumination – is this universally desirable?
4. Exhibits on 70,71 may not be necessary
5. Public infrastructure
   a. Addressing the needs of existing and future industrial users
   b. Economic Development
   c. Green infrastructure – design, regulatory implications and State funding.
   d. New energy discussion – electricity options, renewable(wind).
   e. Do we want to discuss digital divide

Chapter 10 Streets and Traffic Mgt (pp. 77-83)
1. Update to include what the city has done or expects to do
2. don’t know if we need exhibits on 79-82
3. City’s walkability (high Walk Scores) and access to multiple transportation modes a major asset and critical issue/measure of sustainability
4. Bus stop initiative

Chapter 11 Parking (pp. 85-90)
1. Not too much has changed and it could be shortened and still get the message across.
2. Discuss parking space allocation needed when increasing density (i.e. limited on-street spaces and new off-street facilities) at Dempster Street, Main Street, others.
3. Street design criteria associated with maximizing number of on-street spaces (e.g. prohibiting parking near intersections)
4. Might want to discuss parking rates and parking holidays
5. Parking has implications for other issues, i.e. how does it drive/affect building
design, pedestrian areas, merchant/business district constituencies, stormwater
runoff.
6. What accommodation, if any, might be made for the provision of Zip or IGO cars?
7. Update action recommendation regarding additional downtown structured
parking, parking rates for multi-family buildings, widening streets to create on-
street parking.

Chapter 12 Transit Systems, Bicycles and Pedestrians (pp.91-98)
1. Linkage between transit and land use
2. Discuss impact upon transportation needs caused by changing demographics.
3. new bike paths and plans for additional ones
4. how we can encourage more citizens to walk, bike around town
   a. Add 50/50% assistance program to add sidewalks
5. Discussion of the need to work with Metra, CTA, Pace … new Yellow Line station,
other priorities?
6. Bridge replacements made by CTA, anticipated infrastructure improvements by
   them if any. Potential Purple Line stop closings/ridership issues
7. Link City’s transportation strategies/initiatives with CMAP plans and its Plan2030
8. West Evanston Master Plan (WEMP) shows bike path along the Mayfair ROW
   and Main Street TOD Plan will evaluate possible “High Line” pathway
9. Pedestrian/vehicular connectivity (modal coordination) is guiding principle of
   WEMP and will be focus of Main Street TOD Planning.
10. Characterize and support city’s pedestrian improvements, e.g. improved
    pedestrian crossings, bump outs & street diets (Chicago Avenue was narrowed
    as part of Keeney-South Blvd streetscape improvements), narrow street types in
    West Evanston Master Plan.
11. Health impacts of walkable design

Chapter 13 Community Design and Landscape (pp. 101-104)
1. I like the building design and appearance review process but question whether
   the rest of 13 is necessary.

Chapter 14 Historic Preservation (pp.105-110)
1. Could be shortened to include importance, review process.

Chapter 15 The Arts (pp. 111-114)
1. Update and discuss Noyes Center and Evanston Art center Building (one up for
   sale)
2. Are there recommendations from the NEA funded study of potential downtown
   arts venue(s)

Chapter 16 Environment (pp. 115-121)
1. This chapter can be shortened and still get its main points presented
2. Relationship to sustainability
3. Brownfields –unites discussions of community health, economic development, sustainable development

General Comments
1. Might be possible to combine 10-13
2. Where plan alludes to improvements that rely, in part, to federal $ (e.g. park improvements, alley repaving) , should alternative funding sources be identified/discussed?
3. Where possible and relevant, identify commonality/coordination of Evanston’s planning goals with neighboring jurisdictions and CMAP goals, (federal grants often look for 1) consistency with regional objectives and intergovernmental cooperation; and 2) integrated land use/transportation/environmental strategies, e.g. HUD/DOT/EPA Sustainability Partnership Grants)
4. Community Survey – what are opportunities for community input component. Comp Plan web page that can host meeting info, educational pieces, web based surveys on plan components,...
Density vs. Livability in the World's Biggest Cities

RICHARD FLORIDA  FEB 06, 2013  19 COMMENTS

Density is an issue that’s generated heated debate among urbanists — much of it covered here on Cities.

On the one hand, a growing number of economists extol the benefits of greater high-rise construction as a panacea for everything from innovation and job creation to affordable housing. Writing in the pages of The Atlantic in 2011, Harvard’s Edward Glaeser points out that "tall buildings enable the human interactions that are at the heart of economic innovation, and of progress itself."

On the other hand, urbanists like Natural Resources Defense Council’s Kaid Benfield (also a frequent Cities contributor) as well as the Urban Land Institute’s Edward McMahon counter that density can be better achieved "without high-rises." As McMahon noted last year, "one block of an older neighborhood might include a community theatre, a coffee shop, an art gallery, two restaurants, a bicycle shop, 10 music rehearsal studios, a church, 20 apartments and a couple of bars, and all with much more 24/7 activity and intensity of use than one block of (much taller) office buildings."

Here on Cities last year, I pointed out that urban innovation and high-tech start-ups tend not to occur in skyscraper canyons but in mixed-use, mid-rise neighborhoods that spur interaction, like New York’s Chelsea and Williamsburg, London’s East End, San Francisco’s SoMa and Mission District, Venice and Santa Monica in Southern California, and of course Silicon Valley. High-rise districts risk becoming vertical suburbs, as sterile, isolating, and unlivable as sprawl.

That's why a recent report [PDF] from the Urban Land Institute and the Centre for Liveable Cities is so interesting. The diagram below, from the report, arrays the world's great global cities along the key dimensions of density and livability. Density (on the Y-axis) is measured as population per square kilometer and livability (along X-axis) is based on the Mercer's 2012 Quality of Living Survey, which rates cities on factors like public services, transportation, recreation, and their economic, political, and social environments.

This report arrays the world’s major cities across four key quadrants. The upper right hand is a "win-win" combination of high density and high livability. The upper left shows high density and low livability. The lower right combines low density and high livability. And, the lower left is the proverbial "lose-lose" of high density and low livability.

http://www.theatlanticcities.com/jobs-and-economy/2013/02/density-vs-livability-worlds-b...  2/22/2013
Just two cities — London and Singapore — fall into the win-win quadrant of high density and high livability. There are two more which straddle the line — Hong Kong (which hugs the Y-axis of the win-win quadrant) and Tokyo (which hugs the X-axis of that same quadrant). All four of them are among the most expensive cities in the world: density need not be panacea for affordable housing. Contrast this to the many more who fall into the category of high density and low livability.

Many of the world’s greatest cities fill the lower right-hand quadrant — Paris, Sydney, Stockholm, Los Angeles and, yes, New York — where low density goes together with high livability. San Francisco, Boston, Washington, D.C., Seattle, Vancouver, and Toronto would also likely fit this segment as well. These cities also number among the world’s leaders in innovation and high-tech start-ups. Cities like this which mix densities and uses appear to have a considerable advantage in high-tech innovation and new business creation.

Sadly and dishearteningly, the largest number of cities fill the lose-lose quadrant combining lower densities and lower levels of livability.

The report contains a range of useful suggestions and lessons on how to combine high density and high livability drawn from a detailed case study of Singapore, including: undertaking more systematic planning for long-term growth and renewal, investing in green transportation and infrastructure,
drawing nature closer to people, embracing diversity and fostering inclusiveness, and improving the quality of public space overall.

This is especially timely and useful given the massive urbanization that will occur over the next several decades. Hopefully the recommendations in the report can help these rapidly developing cities, especially those in the emerging economies and the "global south" develop more effective approaches to increasing density in ways that can simultaneously spur higher rates of economic development, while improving livability for their rapidly growing populations.

Lede image: sunsetman/Shutterstock.com

Keywords: Hong Kong, London, Singapore, Tokyo, density, Reports, livability

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[?]
Ways to Improve High-Density Cities

Kaid Benfield  Feb 13, 2013  18 comments

Getting the right city density – generally expressed in the US as people per square mile or homes per acre – to support sustainable and pleasant living is one of the trickiest problems we face as we address the future of our communities. The typically low densities of suburban sprawl built in the last half of the 20th century, despite their popularity at the time with a considerable share of the market, have been shown by a voluminous body of research to produce unsustainable rates of driving, carbon emissions, pollution, stormwater runoff, and adverse health impacts.

Yet the highest densities can bring their own set of problems, including noise, traffic and even pedestrian congestion (perhaps more a matter of pleasantry than environmental problems per se), local hotspots of runoff and air pollution, and loss of contact with nature, among others. I’ve argued repeatedly that, if we want market preferences to continue trending in the direction of walkable sustainability, we must be more sensitive to these concerns. Finding the right density and accompanying urban features for the right place is critical.

To an extent, this is what the new urbanist transect is about. I have my issues with the lower-density parts of the transect and with the extent of prescriptiveness in some of the zoning codes it has
spawned, but frankly neither the environmental community nor smart growth advocates have even attempted to sort this out.

I’m not sure it is fair for us to criticize the best of the answers that is out there so far without coming up with a better alternative. Indeed, the bulk of our advocacy seems limited to “density + transit + mixed-use + bike lanes + making driving and parking less attractive”; more of each is always better; and the rest is someone else’s problem.

I don’t see it that way. In truth, we need more sophisticated and nuanced answers. They may be elusive and often site-specific, but they are also critical to building a better world for our children, ourselves, and the planet.

Something to bear in mind in our search for those answers is that the same research showing low-density sprawl to be horrible for rates of driving, emissions, and runoff also shows diminishing returns in improving those rates after moderately high densities are reached. And relatively high-density places can still be unsustainable sprawl, depending on the context. Myself, I tend to prefer incremental and moderate increases to density in the places that are not already sufficiently dense, and accompanying those increases with important mitigation of density’s local impacts.
All that said, there are cities and districts that are and will be truly high-density by almost anyone’s definition. What are the things we should include to make those places as sustainable and hospitable as possible? The Urban Land Institute, an industry association and think tank, has come up with some answers. The following are from ULI’s recently released report, *10 Principles for Livable, High-Density Cities*:

1. **Plan for long-term growth and renewal** – “A highly dense city usually does not have much choice but to make efficient use of every square inch of its scarce land. Yet city planners need to do this in a way that does not make the city feel cramped and unlivable.”

2. **Embrace diversity, foster inclusiveness** – “There is a need to ensure that diversity is not divisive, particularly in densely populated cities where people live in close proximity to one another.”

3. **Draw nature closer to people** – “Blending nature into the city helps soften the hard edges of a highly built up cityscape and provides the city dwellers pockets of respite from the bustle of urban life.” The report cites Singapore, whose Centre for Livable Cities co-sponsored the report, as a dense city that has adopted “a strategy of pervasive greenery” and “transform[ed] its parks and water bodies into lifestyle spaces for community activities . . . Nearly half of Singapore is now under green cover, which is not only aesthetically pleasing, but also improves the air quality and mitigates heat from the tropical sun.”

4. **Develop affordable, mixed-use neighborhoods** – “The ease of living in a compact neighborhood that is relatively self-contained can add to the pleasure of city living. With density, it becomes more cost effective to provide common amenities.”

5. **Make public spaces work harder** – Often, parcels of land that adjoin or surround the city’s infrastructure are dormant, empty spaces . . . The idea is to make all space, including infrastructural spaces, serve multiple uses and users.”

6. **Prioritize green transport and building options** – “An overall reduction in energy consumption and dependence adds to city sustainability.”
7. **Relieve density with variety and add green boundaries** – “A high-density city need not be all about closely packed high-rise buildings. Singapore intersperses high-rise with low-rise buildings, creating a skyline with more character and reducing the sense of being in a crowded space.”

8. **Activate spaces for greater safety** – “Having a sense of safety and security is an important quality-of-life factor.” Cities should improve visual access to public spaces to maintain “eyes on the street” and help keep neighborhoods safe.

9. **Promote innovative and non-conventional solutions** – “As a city gets more populated and built up, it starts facing constraints on land and resources, and has to often look at non-traditional solutions to get around the challenges. To ensure sufficient water, Singapore developed reclaimed water under the brand name NEWater-to drinking and industrial standards.”

10. **Forge “3P” (people, public, private) partnerships** – “With land parcels in close proximity to one another, the effects of development in one area are likely to be felt quickly and acutely in neighboring sites. The city government and all stakeholders need to work together to ensure they are not taking actions that would reduce the quality of life for others.”

ULI says that the ten principles in the publication were developed during two workshops hosted in 2012 by the Singapore Centre for Livable Cities and ULI Asia Pacific, bringing together 62 thought leaders, experts and practitioners from different disciplines related to urban planning and development. The full report may be downloaded [here](https://www.theatlanticcities.com/neighborhoods/2013/02/ten-ways-improve-high-density-c...).

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*Top image: Flickr/Juan Campderros-i-Canas. Upper right inset: Flickr/xcode. Lower right inset: Creative Commons/Mr. Dew.*

*This post originally appeared on the NRDC’s [Switchboard blog](https://www.nrdc.org/).*

**Keywords:** Singapore, green space, Singapore, livable cities, high-density, Urban Land Institute

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Kaid Benfield is the director of the Sustainable Communities and Smart Growth program at the Natural Resources Defense Council, co-founder of the LEED for Neighborhood Development rating system, and co-founder of Smart Growth America. He writes (almost) daily about community, development, and the environment. For more posts, see [his blog’s home page. All posts »](https://www.nrdc.org/).
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If You Want Walkable Development, You Must Show That It Pays

Mariela Alfonzo remembers when she really got the message about what’s important to real estate developers. She was discussing big-box stores with an investor in Orange County, California, who had put a lot of dollars into strip malls and megastores.

Alfonzo, an urban design researcher, adjunct professor at NYU-Poly, and consultant who has done extensive research on what makes places truly walkable, explained to him all the ills of this type of development. Big-box malls are bad for the environment, she said, and destructive to communities. They have horrible aesthetics, discourage physical activity, and are damaging to public health.

"Do you even look at what you’re buying?" she asked.

His reply was the equivalent of a shrug. "But they make money."
If she could convince him that walkable communities would be more profitable, would he invest in that type of development instead, she wanted to know? In the end, he told her, the answer is in the bottom line.

That’s when Alfonzo realized that all the quality-of-life arguments she could muster about walkable communities, all the academic research she could conduct, all the idealism she felt about changing the way cities and towns are constructed, wouldn’t make a difference unless she could make an economic case.

"There’s always a drive to understand the economic value of walkability," she says. "For people in a decision-making capacity, especially now, after the recession. If you explain the economic piece, people get it right away."

That "economic piece" has to be based on data, not vague notions of what is "good for the community." Alfonzo wrote her dissertation on failed malls that were being redeveloped, "ostensibly to develop a sense of community," she says. As she researched the cases more closely, though, she discovered that the nebulous "community benefit" wasn’t the driving factor. "A sense of community was important, but it was really about the economic bottom line."

Since then, Alfonzo has worked on creating and refining hard-data tools to quantify just what makes a place appeal to pedestrians. She began by working as part of the team that created the Irvine Minnesota Inventory, a comprehensive index defining and measuring 160 factors that contribute to the pedestrian experience: metrics like accessibility, pleasurability, perceived safety from traffic, and perceived safety from crime. She’s currently adapting that tool for use in a walkability study she’ll be conducting in China.

She went on to incorporate the IMI into an algorithm she calls the State of Place index, which was used in that recent Brookings Institution study she worked on with Christopher Leinberger that linked walkability to economic performance.

![Percent Capacity - Community 3](chart.png)
Now she's using that algorithm in her business, Urban Imprint, aiming to help developers and governments to create better places that will also produce economic results. Alfonzo’s State of Place tool is much more fine-grained than Walk Score, which has become a standard for people seeking to evaluate real estate choices such as home-buying or renting on the basis of walkability. It uses the IMI to measure things like outdoor dining, benches, street trees, sidewalks, number of vehicle lanes, and the like. Then State of Place takes it to the next step, generating 10 “sub-scores” that rate connectivity, density, safety from crime, safety from traffic, public space/parks, proximity to commercial destinations, physical activity facilities, aesthetics, pedestrian amenities, and form.

"State of Place is not only measuring walkability and quality of place, it also acts as an economic indicator, not unlike an S&P-type rating," says Alfonzo. "In that regard, it can be used by investors, lenders, retailers, developers, etc., to make investment and siting decisions."

Not only that, Alfonzo thinks her system could help cities and towns to fix places that are broken.

"Stakeholders can customize their interventions and investments based on their urban design profile and, because each of those ten dimensions matters differently to the economic bottom line, users of the index can identify those changes that will be the most effective and generate the most bang for their likely limited buck," she says. "In other words, it's an economic development tool."

That’s exactly how Alfonzo’s first client, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, is using State of Place.

Having a start-up business is a big challenge, says Alfonzo, much different from doing academic research or consulting. But she’s come to understand that if she’s going to get decision-makers to pay attention to making better, more humane places, appealing to them from a business perspective is the only way to go. She points out how these days, "walkability" is a buzzword that comes up all the time, whereas just a few years ago, no one was talking about it except academics and advocates.

"Part of the reason that walkability is being pushed forward is that it’s economically viable," she says. "You’re dealing with people for whom design is not on the table. I want to show it as a way to generate value."

Top image: SVLuma/Shutterstock.com

Keywords: Big Box Store, economic development, Walkability

Sarah Goodyear has written about cities for a variety of publications, including Grist and Streetsblog. She lives in Brooklyn. All posts »

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Prior to the recession, a lot of us binged on things we had no business buying, like big houses and second cars and smaller luxuries affordable only with credit card debt. In the process, Americans—and young Americans in particular—became an impressively (and historically) indebted lot. In retrospect, this wasn’t such a sustainable masterplan. But there are already signs that Millennials—if not their parents—are starting to seriously offload that debt. A report released today by the Pew Research Center reveals that households younger than 35 have shed substantial debt since the start of the recession. And that has largely occurred as they’ve backed away from owning two big-ticket items cherished by their parents’ generation: cars and houses.

What’s most notable about the Pew study is that young Americans seem to be offloading debt at a much higher rate than older generations. Back in 2001, the typical household headed by someone younger than 35 held about $18,000 in total debt. That figured soared by 2007 to $22,000. As of 2010, in the most recent data available from the Federal Reserve Board’s Survey of Consumer Finances, the median young U.S. household owed only $15,000, with an expanded share of it now coming from student loans instead of consumer debt.

Between 2007 and 2010, median young household debt fell by 29 percent. Households headed by adults aged 35 and older, on the other hand, saw a decline in debt of just 8 percent. The share of young households now holding any debt (78 percent) as the lowest it’s been since government data was first collected on this question in 1983:
Behind these numbers are a pair of trends we’ve been aware of for a while now. Fewer Millennials are now owning and driving cars. In 2007, 73 percent of households headed by an adult younger than 25 owned a car. By 2010, that figure was down to 66 percent.

Meanwhile, among the under-35 cohort, the share of households owning their primary residence fell from 40 percent in 2007 to 34 percent in 2011. In 2011, 3 million homeowners who had recently moved became renters instead. This chart from the report shows how the shape of American homeownership has changed in only a decade, as younger households now more often opt to rent:
Delivering Car and Home Ownership Has Helped Millennials Dramatically Reduce Their ...