

# URBANLAND

THE MAGAZINE OF THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE

## More Open Space, Walkability, and Multifamily Are Future of Suburbs

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April 29, 2016

“Suburbs isn’t a dirty word,” declared Adam F. Ducker, RCLCO managing director and moderator of the “Next Stop Suburbs” session at the ULI Spring Meeting in Philadelphia. “The reality is that the suburbs are where the majority of people live today, and where they move.” The percentage of people moving to the suburbs is still high, and, confounding the stereotype of millennials, “the classic American suburban neighborhood is still the predominant place to live for 25- to 40-year-olds,” especially among first-time homebuyers.

“Are we as community developers creating the kind of place these people want to live?” Ducker asked. Homes are getting bigger, and prices continue to climb, with a median price of \$285,000 for a single-family home. The fundamental drivers are still a larger home with as much yard and space as the buyer can afford. But many metro areas are challenged by housing costs, and not enough developers are looking at suburbs for building affordable housing, he said. Although the majority of suburbanites are white, the character of suburbs is changing with respect to race and ethnicity. He said developers and municipalities need to consider not only how to deliver housing, but for whom.

Tyler Niess, chief marketing officer for Crescent Communities in Charlotte, North Carolina, which develops housing in urban, suburban infill, and new suburban communities across the Southeast, said his company is trying to address these different markets and “understand what consumers want and need.” Developers can differentiate themselves by “understanding lifestyle and values preferences as a driver for community and home design. If people have kids, they need a bigger house. We can look community by community at intensity and concentrations of those values.”

Crescent Communities conducted a three-year nationwide study to determine the “best in class” approaches and understand the preferences and needs of homebuyers and renters. Crescent concluded that “there are more similarities than distinctions across consumer values and how that impacts where they chose to live,” said Niess. All consumers want a unique setting, authenticity in design, and innovative materials in their new home. “It’s more the character of the community that separates people.”

Crescent has used the study to inform planning and design. Lockwood Glen, located south of Nashville, Tennessee, was intended as a master-planned residential community, but as the company looked at the opportunities and values, Niess said, it planned a large-open-space, multifamily, built form that fits the context, and more neighborhood retail space for the single-family detached homes the firm is building.

“Some suburbs will die a slow death if they don’t position themselves for change,” said Eric Goldstein, executive director of the King of Prussia District in Pennsylvania, with \$1 billion in economic development underway that is transforming a suburban office park into a mixed-use business district. “Companies, employees, and residents are looking for a dynamic and stimulating environment to live and work, and suburbs aren’t typically that, so they’re looking for suburbs that are already that way or are repositioning themselves.”

Goldstein described efforts to redevelop suburban Philadelphia's largest commercial center into a thriving edge city. Some 57,000 people commute to King of Prussia daily, 95 percent by car. The King of Prussia business park, with firms such as eBay and FedEx, is split by the 55 mile per hour (88 kmph) First Avenue corridor, which has no sidewalks and is flanked by buildings that each house 1,000 workers. Recognizing a shift in company and employee preferences for mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented amenities, the King of Prussia District is working with Upper Merion Township to update zoning, which had not changed since 1963.

"Place making through new zoning" will allow mixed uses with retail and housing in the district, Goldstein said. A pedestrian- and bike-friendly road diet and \$3 million site redevelopment with a linear park will connect 22 property owners with a multiuse lighted and interactive path. Shuttle buses connect the district to a regional rail station, and a proposed 4.5-mile (7.2 km) extension of high-speed rail will connect the district to other business parks and the expanding King of Prussia Mall, the East Coast's largest mall. The new King of Prussia town "lifestyle" center, as well as new hotel, office, and medical facilities are under development near the mall. Zoning changes are also allowing construction of new housing options. Within the business district, multifamily projects include the \$63 million 751 Vandenberg Boulevard with 320 luxury apartments in four buildings.

"The notion that suburbs are urbanizing has been around for a while," said Justin B. Schor, principal of Wells + Associates, Silver Spring, Maryland-based transportation consultants, citing Brooklyn, New York, as an example of a suburb that is now the fourth-largest city in America. But urbanization is happening farther out now, and it's happening everywhere, he said. Tysons Corner, 12 miles (19 km) west of Washington, D.C., in suburban northern Virginia, has 8 million square feet (743,224 sq m) of development and dozens of relatively high-density projects planned for the next four years—and by 2019 anticipates growing 25 percent over 2009.

"How do you do that and not choke on your success?" Schor asked. "How do you build high-density buildings without making traffic worse?" Wells + Associates is working with Tysons Corner on transportation demand management to try to influence travel behavior so people travel by bus or car share to reduce congestion. As development gets more intense, he said, the goal is "basically eliminating the car from the picture."

The Mosaic District, 13 miles west of the District of Columbia, is a 32-acre (13 ha) former industrial park that has been developed over the past five years with high-density multifamily buildings, a park, and a "city feel," one mile (1.6 km) from the nearest rail station. The district's response to a county requirement to reduce vehicle traffic on the local road network was to provide shuttle connections to the region's Metro system, ample bicycle parking, carpool spaces, and the Mosaic Green Commute, a website resource that helps identify multimodal transportation options.

So what makes a good suburb? "Desirable communities make it easy to get where you want to without a car," said Niess. Biking and walking infrastructure "is the first amenity we put in new communities."

Walkability is "in many ways the cheapest and highest return" in a community, said Ducker. The commonalities of successful suburbs, he said, are place making, aesthetics, and multimodal options. Buyers are resisting "old-school streetscapes" that all look the same, he said. "A thoughtfully designed community with a diversity of product drives preference if not premium."

"People want an experience and to engage and be social with others," said Goldstein. "That's starting to happen in the suburbs, and the smart ones are starting to recognize the demographic shift."