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Gas Prices May Revive Cities

Urban planners finally see a way to curb sprawl

By *Bret Schulte*

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Andres Duany is thrilled by the prices he's seeing at the gas pump. The urban planner and high priest of the New Urbanism movement sees today's (and likely tomorrow's) gas prices accomplishing what he and others in his field have long sought: a wholesale re-creation of the American lifestyle. "The urbanism of the United States has been premised on two things," Duany says. "One is inexpensive land. And the other is inexpensive fuel. Both have led to sprawl."

Sprawl—that scourge of urban designers who prize a tightly packaged city, walkable neighborhoods, and mixed-use development that brings together homes with businesses and shops—may have finally met its match. At least, that's the hope of the enclave of people who study settlement and land use, and who now sheepishly admit they're rooting for high energy prices. "Urban planners have been beating their heads against the wall for decades trying to get Americans to settle in a more compact pattern on the landscape for the very reasons we're starting to see now," says Thomas Campanella, an associate professor of city and regional planning at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. "To be honest, I feel that rising gas prices...are going to do more for good, sustainable urban planning than the entire urban planning profession."

Sure, they feel guilty admitting it, but high energy prices—gasoline as well as heating oil and natural gas—could prove to be the force that brings the dreams of urban planners to fruition: a greener, more sustainable society that is also a throwback to the preautomobile age, when it wasn't realistic to have tracts of homes miles away from business centers, which were, in turn, miles away from shopping centers. "There are vast swaths of the landscape that are inaccessible to anything but the automobile," Campanella says. "Obviously, we're going to see real changes if oil is going to skyrocket, and I think we can all assume it's not going to return to levels of the past."

On one hand, the story of the car, and the far-flung communities of huge homes and cul-de-sacs they enabled, is a testament to America's enormous economic success. But it

has also meant more obesity, pollution, and, say urban planners, social isolation. They argue that in some ways, the quality of life was higher when Americans had less money to purchase things like cars. "The great cities that people love," Duany says, "were the result of a substantially less wealthy nation that had to be far more intelligent about its assets." He notes cities such as New York, Boston, and San Francisco, which were built for people to live close to their daily needs. A fringe benefit: more opportunities for interaction with and reliance on neighbors.

High energy prices could mean more U.S. cities joining those ranks, growing thicker with residents, shops, and employers—as they were decades ago. Together with the foreclosure crisis, gas prices "will really take the sheen off the distant suburbs," says Bob Dunphy, a senior fellow for transportation and infrastructure at the Urban Land Institute. Experts are predicting that city homes, often smaller than their suburban counterparts, could gain value for being less costly to heat and cool, as well as for their proximity to mass transit, shops, and employers. "It's what I call a return to reason," Duany says.

The obstacles to such a retro future, of course, are staggering. Thriving cities are expensive and cramped and hardly family friendly. Shrinking cities, like many in the Rust Belt, are dilapidated, crime-ridden—and hardly family friendly. Few offer a quality public school system. But the biggest changes would have to take place in the suburbs. New Urbanists such as Duany, who champion mixed-use environments, say suburbs must adapt to high gas prices by becoming more like villages. Central shopping should replace big box stores (and their aprons of parking) on the town edge. And entire swaths of city blocks with nothing but houses and cul-de-sacs must be retrofitted to fully functioning neighborhoods, with corner stores and businesses in walking distance.

"Communities will have to look at diversifying their land use," says Eran Ben-Joseph, a professor of urban planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "You'll see more people buying into the idea of a more dense suburb." Public transit would have to not only link to the metropolitan core but to other suburbs, which often have their own employer bases.

That's a tall order that would require billions in public infrastructure investment and a massive shift in taxpayer subsidies from highways to other infrastructure. That's not likely to happen—at least, not yet. At \$4 per gallon for gas, Americans are paying an average of about \$500 more to fill up a car this year over last year. That may dent the family budget, but it's hardly enough to trigger a wholesale reimagining of the American Dream. Not to mention that new automobile technology that features plug-in hybrids,

electric cars, and hydrogen-powered cars may blunt the impact of gas prices and allow plenty of Americans to enjoy life as they've known it for decades.

Nevertheless, changes in settlement patterns are already occurring, albeit incrementally. And if the price of energy continues to snowball, so will the changes in people's behavior. "American zoning has largely separated land uses," says Tom Murphy, a former mayor of Pittsburgh and a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute. But across the country, officials are already rethinking that notion. California's new effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is requiring some developers to assess how far residents will have to drive to reach schools, work, and shopping by automobile. "That can be reduced by putting a shopping center in the middle of a development instead of the edge," Murphy says. The once prototypical car-centered western metropolis of Salt Lake City is aggressively adding light rail commuter lines. So is Denver. With the help of Campanella and his students, modest Hillsborough, N.C., recently lobbied for commuter rail service to the state's bustling research triangle in Raleigh. Chicago, Minneapolis, and other Midwestern cities are joining their East Coast counterparts in growing dense with condominiums. "That was a trend beginning anyhow," Murphy says. "There's every reason to believe that's going to accelerate significantly."

Lawrence Yun, an economist for the National Realtors Association, is already seeing the evidence. Yun was amazed at the 3,000 responses he received from a recent survey of the nation's realtors. "People are now saying affirmatively they want to live closer to town centers and have a shorter commute," Yun says. "And smaller homes mean less energy consumption." Homes in the exurbs are "being hammered on two fronts, gas and heating and cooling costs." Realtors are reporting that they are having a difficult time even getting people to show up at open houses in some distant suburbs. Homes in cities and close-in suburbs are not only selling faster than homes in far-flung suburbs, they are appreciating more rapidly. That's especially noteworthy. While homes inside thriving cities, such as New York or Washington, have always been more expensive than in the suburbs, they tended to appreciate at the same clip. Not any more. Houses closer to the urban core are now outpacing their peers on the fringes. "Areas in the suburbs requiring long commutes are very weak," he says.

Some cities are better poised to take advantage of this trend than others. Namely, those that are already have strong urban cores and public transit lines. Meanwhile, developers are buying up abandoned rail lines, anticipating their revival as people ditch their cars. Duany says he's betting on oil-rich Texas, the very home of suburban sprawl and the

derisively dubbed McMansion. "Dallas has more retrofitted downtown suburbs than any place," Duany says. "I'm always betting on Texas. It's such a can-do place." Duany's calling on American city planners to look at Europe's many thriving cities, where gasoline has always been expensive. But, he says, "we can also learn from our own cities of the past"—back when the automobile was the future.

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public transit & people

I take the bus to work because it works well for me. It's a 10 minute drive to the park & ride (well, I have to park in a local shopping center because the lot is always full), jump on the bus, 1 stop enroute, and then I get off 2 blocks from work. I wouldn't drive this commute for anything - I'd much rather read a book when I-5 bogs down, and I couldn't do it any quicker myself.

However, there are people who have evaluated using the bus, and it would take 2 1/2 times longer, if not 3 times longer, to get there, so they still drive.

Also, if I miss the 8:40 p.m. bus, I'm stuck for the night!

I generally find a positive attitude towards the bus, and I've met some really nice people on there.

PRM of WA

Jul 19, 2008 01:33:52 AM

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We'll just revert to the past

The sudden increase in gasoline prices takes time to work thru the economy but I don't see any long-term improvements in our urban or transportation policies. As usual, we will revert to our old ways when we finally accommodate gasoline prices between \$4 & \$5 a gallon into our suburban-sprawl lifestyles. There may be a noticeable increase in downtown and near-downtown living, but the majority of our homes and

even workplaces are spread all over the place, and the investment by families and businesses cannot be readily undone or modified. As long as mass transit is looked down upon by most Americans from a social and economic perspective, it will never be embraced and is used as a last resort. And forget any major investments in infrastructure in the U.S., despite contrary developments in Europe and particularly Asia. Our country (people, government & business) has a long antipathy towards taxes and we know we are going broke financially on all levels of public and private debt. Perhaps most consider me a pessimist but after almost 50 years on this planet, I look to experience and human nature, and expect very little. The U.S. dominance of the planet is quickly falling apart, and as a future second-rate economic, military and cultural power to China, we won't be leading humanity towards anything.

Peter Martin of **AZ**

Jul 18, 2008 13:26:10 PM

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In Wisconsin, our Smart Growth law was drafted when gas was \$1.15 a gallon.

Planners talked about the New Urbanism, but urban density was still the poor stepchild of development. It never got invited to the ball.

At \$6 a gallon, density might be the life of the party. But government is a dinosaur all its own, and a lot of time and effort has been invested in planning for a future of \$2 a gallon gas.

Written only 10 years ago, our Smart Growth Law didn't even mention what will constitute smart growth tomorrow: consideration of climate change, energy conservation, solar power or sustainability.

But the public has spoken. Even at \$3 a gallon, you'd have to pry drivers' cold, dead fingers off the steering wheel to get

them on the bus. At \$4 a gallon, they're lining up at the turnstiles.

"Even regions that have traditionally resisted giving up cars and have limited access to mass transit are reporting a surge in public transportation use," CNN reported this week.

The cable network said the growth in demand includes all types of transit: buses as well as light rail and trolleys.

Rich Eggleston of **WI**
Jul 18, 2008 10:49:07 AM
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