

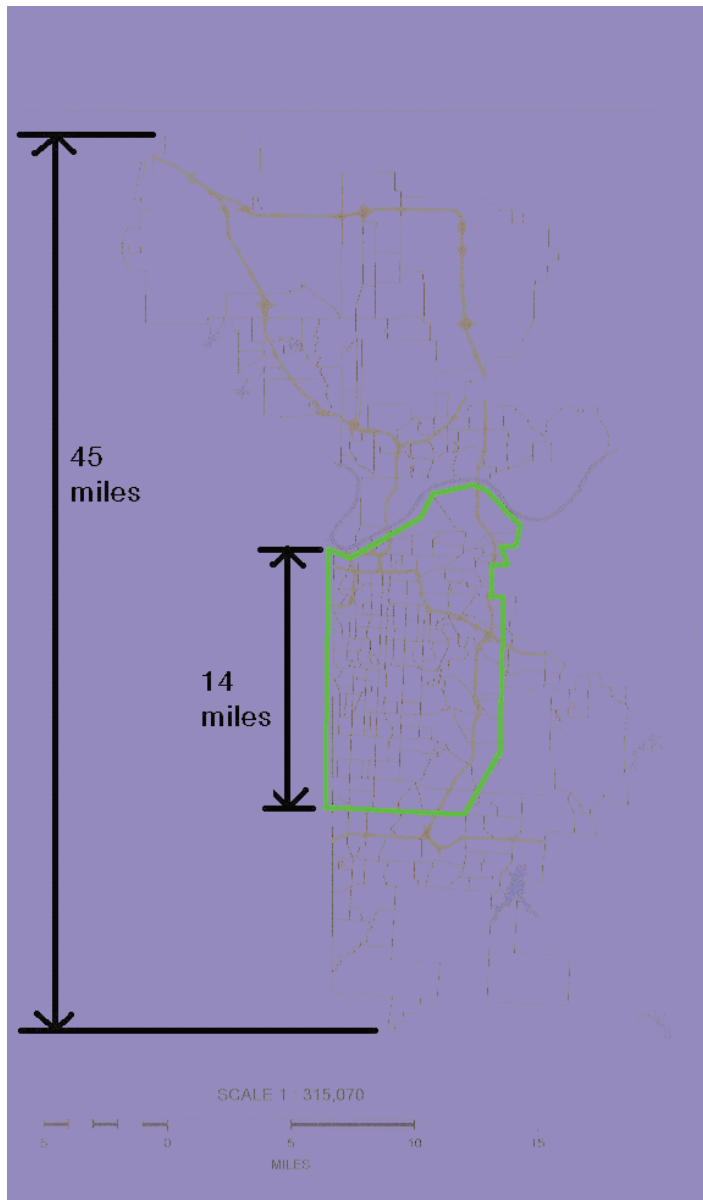
Whither The 21st Century City?

In the years since *The Kansas City Star* published the “Sprawl Series” (1995), describing the continuing outward growth of this region’s suburbs, many things have begun to change. A later *Star* article by Jeff Spivak described increasing urban real estate values, growing at a rate 25% faster than the region as a whole. Look at our sister cities across the nation, experiencing a distinct, new investment interest in city center development and redevelopment. Even road building has taken back seat status to road maintenance and public transit according to recent Mid America Regional Council (MARC) polling. It seems that the public has recognized, even if our state transportation agencies have not, that our road system has reached a saturation point. There is a growing desire to reduce the distances we have to travel and the time and the fuel we waste in those long commutes and shopping trips.



As lot sizes have increased to 2 acres, 5 acres and 10 acres in suburban and ex-urban subdivisions, the cost of providing services like roads, police, fire, schools, utilities, snow removal, sewage treatment increase disproportionately. It may take a mile of road to serve 20,000 urban residences, compared to a mile of road serving only 20 exurban “minifarms”. Yet most Americans are unaware of these excesses, and go about their lives buying the products that the market provides. These practices have resulted in increased costs that now have begun to show up in house prices and taxes, and especially in tougher economic times, the market is beginning to notice. The trend toward “walkable”, “neo-traditional” neighborhoods is testimony to a glimmer of the market’s dissatisfaction with the status quo, a desire for change in the single-use, cul-de-sac suburb, to a place where costs can be reduced and lifestyle can be simplified, calmed.

Shouldn’t we begin to apprise the public of this waste, to focus our increasingly limited resources on more efficient ways to live? Shouldn’t public officials begin to define their extent, to show in tangible ways how we can accomplish more with less...how we must in order to compete...to survive?



In 1947 Kansas City, MO was 14 miles long...now it stretches 45 miles from Cass County to Platte County

Regional Solutions

The primary reality of urban life today is that the most critical problems we face in our communities cannot be solved at a local jurisdictional level; people's day-to-day lives span neighborhoods, city limits, county boundaries, state lines, even national borders in places like San Diego/Tijuana and Detroit/Windsor. Many of these jurisdictions receive disproportionate tax revenues and therefore services for a variety of reasons – by the time the Colorado River gets to Tijuana, it is a dry gulch - and for us to ignore neighbors who shoulder burdens that we do not is to deny our common interest in regional progress.

Just in terms of competition among cities, working as a regional community makes sense. Investors in San Francisco or New York don't think of Overland Park or Lee's Summit...if they think of us at all, they think of Kansas City...we need to build on our strength as a region. Parochial prejudices

have no place in today's urban competition, and that reality demands more than platitudes. To be effective, it demands the fostering of a *regional* Kansas City Spirit. MARC offers the best vehicle for this kind of cooperation – other regional councils have done it - but it has to extend to regional funding approaches, a new order that will call for hard choices by people committed to achieving more with less.

At the conclusion of the Citistates program, Charles Garney suggested the idea of consolidating our Jackson County and Kansas City governments. To take it a step further, to its logical conclusion, incorporate our Kansas side too. This was Citistates authors, Peirce and Johnson's original idea in their provocative book, *The Nine Nations of North America*. And now, Mayor Funkhouser is pushing for this realization in a regional transit system.



Portland public transit has reduced the demand for downtown parking and increased the vitality of pedestrian life.

To be more prosaic, in activities like 911 emergency service and the “Scout Intelligent Highway” system now under construction, this region has already embraced regional solutions where it has made sense. And the current “Smart Moves” regional funding concept plan is a prime example, has passed in Jefferson City, leaving Topeka to take up the issue when Kansas jurisdictions recognize their interest in this approach. But it will take elected officials’ leadership and business community enthusiasm to pull off this step toward a more exciting, successful region.

Safer Communities

Shortly after the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) was challenged to answer the question of how to design *Safe Communities*. This request was met with an immediate and unanimous AIA reaction: a totally “safe” community is no community at all, but a dispersing across the countryside in individual bunkers, so as to deny an

aggressor any target of reasonable value. So AIA began discussing *safer* communities, recognizing that the human need for gathering is the essence of community. Look at how we rushed home, rushed to our churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and public places after learning of the attacks; we needed to be together with those we loved, worked with, worshipped with. That need for joining with others *a priori* creates targets that we need to defend and that we may lose, but this risk is an essential facet of being human. “Fortress America” is no America at all...it is a creation of our enemies, the antithesis of what our founders sought and what we treasure.

Safer Communities are communities in which we know our neighbors and where citizens feel comfortable to come together in the public realm. Design, especially urban design can have a decisive impact on this objective, discouraging the isolation of our homes and businesses from each other and increasing the opportunities for interaction among neighbors. The Boston Common or the little parks scattered through central London or the Trolley Track Trail in Kansas City are examples of public spaces that encourage this kind of community pride, identity and togetherness.

Above all we should *not* encourage citizens to reduce their participation in community activities. We all participate in risk-filled behaviors on a regular basis: the potential for dying in a terrorist attack is measurably less of a risk than dying in an automobile accident. On the contrary: the *Safer Community* is a place where risk is minimized, yes, but primarily it is a place where people feel drawn together and empowered to provide mutual support in time of need.



The sidewalk is the life blood of the urban experience

So where do we go from here in the 21st century?

Are we going to buy more weapons, move to the urban fringe to more and more dispersed locations where we can defend ourselves and our families from all comers? Some are continuing this pattern, and you can see it in mini-farms in the ex-urban fringes of our regions.



Exurban sprawl is the creature of cheap gasoline and a misguided “pioneer” misconception

Or is another reaction more likely to be predominant? Does the growing popularity of center city living reflected in rising real estate values in our urban centers suggest a market condition in which the old sprawl patterns have reached their apogee? The “throw-away city” is being picked up by savvy investors who see an opportunity in acquiring low cost real estate and capitalizing on this trend. Is the 50-year pattern of sprawl ever so slowly changing? Are we witnessing a new-found interest in a safer, calmer, more diverse, more urbane and more efficient lifestyle in United States’ cities?

Whether this is simply a market reality or a response to terrorist attack or some other factor we don’t understand, this trend bodes well for the quality of life in our urban centers, and gives us a chance to develop a new impetus to live better with less. In our sister cities across the country urban sprawl is continuing, but instead of its being the only game in town, development in downtowns, in older first-ring suburbs and in the centers of many outlying towns is becoming marketable and profitable.

This is a critical alternative to the status quo and a trend we need to support with new policies and funding initiatives like public transit, which render our old urban centers less dependent on parking and more friendly to the pedestrian interaction of healthy urban life.

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