

**CITY OF NORWALK
REPORT TO THE NORWALK PLANNING COMMISSION**

ITEM: Discussion on the eighth & ninth chapters of *Suburban Nation*

MEETING DATE: September 12, 2016

STAFF CONTACT: Luke Parris, AICP
City Planner
Wade Wagoner, AICP
Planning & Economic Development Director

GENERAL DISCUSSION: City staff asked the Planning Commission to read and provide feedback from chapters 8 and 9 of the book *Suburban Nation*. The purpose of this exercise is to have the Planning Commission gain a better understanding of past development patterns used across the U.S and to learn new practices to implement when developing future plans for the City of Norwalk.

The following are key takeaways identified from City Staff after reading and review of the eighth chapter of *Suburban Nation*:

- **Suburbs That Help the City:** While suburbs have negative consequences on the peripherals of cities, they also have a positive impact on the city centers. Suburbs though have had a problem of accommodating public transit and pedestrian friendly development that supports civic participation and quality of life. One stat in particular is concerning: between one third and one half of urban American's land is typically dedicated to the driving and parking of vehicles. For suburbs to contribute to the well-being of cities, they must coordinate with municipalities in the area and form regional planning initiatives to achieve goals to manage growth at the scale of people's daily lives.
- **The Eight Steps of Regional Planning:** ***Admit that growth will occur.*** Acknowledging the inevitability of growth leads to a further admission, that growth is a problem whose solution must be shared by multiple jurisdictions. ***Establish a permanent Countryside Preserve.*** A consequence of sprawl is the way it consumes farmland and wilderness surrounding populated areas. A way to combat this is to implement a Countryside Preserve, which sets aside multiple parcels of conservation land independent of

their relationship to the city center. A Countryside Preserve is drawn using objective environmental criteria, a so called rural boundary. **Establish a temporary Countryside Reserve.** Unlike the permanent countryside, the Countryside Reserve is available for future high-quality development, when such development is justified. Reserving this land for high-quality development means compact communities based on the neighborhood model, not luxury houses on two-acre lots. **Designate the Corridors.** Corridors are the regional-scale elements that serve both to connect and to separate different areas. **Establish Priority Development Sectors.** The goal here is to counteract the existing government and market forces that make it less profitable for developers to work in the city (Urban infill) than on the rural “greenfield” fringe. **Establish a proactive permitting process for development that follows the neighborhood model.** Assigning a municipal regulator would be assigned to walk the project through an accelerated process if it follows the traditional neighborhood development ordinance that was discussed in previous chapters. **Designate all other types of developments as districts.** Permit these areas only through a rigorous public process of documentation and justification. Districts are sectors where single use dominates (Industrial facilities, medical campuses, etc.). **Fairly distribute the Lulus.** Locally Undesirable Land Uses (Lulus) range from dramatic to the mundane. Responsible regional planning recognizes that even the most privileged – especially the most privileged – must carry their fair share of community service facilities regardless of how unpopular they may be. Lulus must be distributed independent of the pressures of local politics, or they are likely to end up in the wrong places.

The following are key takeaways identified from City Staff after reading and review of the ninth chapter of Suburban Nation:

- Thinking of the City in Terms of its Suburban Competition: For cities to be effective today, urban leaders need to stop thinking of their cities strictly from the inside out, only from a point of view from their own citizens. An approach of looking outside in is needed, through the eyes of a customer who is comparison-shopping. The greatest mistake the planners of the sixties and seventies made was to try to save the city

by turning it into the suburb. The future of the city lies in becoming more citylike, more pedestrian-friendly, more urban, more urbane.

- The Amenity Package: Suburbs offer amenities that differ in scale than their city counterparts: more lawn, more golf courses, more gatehouses. The city should not strive to offer these amenities in abundance, instead cities should continue to offer a public realm, with vibrant street life that is inhabited around the clock with people eating, shopping, working, and socializing.
- Civic Decorum: Keep it clean and safe has been a phrase that suburban developers have taken advantage of when selling people and businesses to move to the suburbs. Homeowners' associations (HOAs) demonstrate that elective taxation is viable if the revenues are spent in proximity, where residents feel that have some control over the outcome. Private management districts can be implemented in similar fashion to HOAs. The faceless bureaucracy of a large city tends to become accessible and responsive if it is broken down into neighborhood-scale increments.
- Physical Health: The rise of the automobile culture resulted in the loss of the public realm due to the construction of freeways, parking lots, sidewalks eliminated, etc. This has resulted in city centers vacant of people outside of the 9-5 business hours. Removing the automobile is out of the question for cities in today's age, but taming them via narrowing streets, improved traffic lights, sidewalks with continuous building frontage, will help make downtowns safer for both cars and pedestrians. The need to also designate an A/B street grid is more evident today than yesterday. An "A" street would maintain the high standard of spatial definition and pedestrian interest, while "B" streets can be assigned to the lower-grade uses (parking lots, garages, muffler shops, etc.). In most cities, when a new or renovated building is considered, it must provide its own parking on site, which is a giant killer to urbanism in the US today. It prevents the renovation of old buildings, since there is inadequate room on their sites for new parking; it encourages the construction of anti-pedestrian building types in which the building sits behind or hovers above a parking lot; it eliminates street life, since everyone parks immediately adjacent to their destination and has no reason to use

the sidewalk; it results in a low density of development that can keep a downtown from achieving critical mass. Cities that wish to be pedestrian-friendly and fully developed should eliminate on-site parking requirements and provide public parking in carefully located municipal garages and lots.

- **Retail Management:** Most new malls, big-box outlets, and other shopping centers are built not to satisfy unmet demand but to steal demand from existing retailers. Concepts and techniques that mall designers use can be easily adapted for the benefit of the city core. **Centralized Management:** In its strongest form, it would be an agency legally empowered to coordinate hours of operation, security, maintenance, landscape, storefront design, etc. **Joint Advertising and Merchandizing:** Shoppers are attracted to malls by an advertising strategy emphasizing the variety of merchandise available at a single location, a “park-once environment”. Instead of offering mall events for shoppers, downtown merchants can organize town events for all. **Anchors:** Downtowns should be prepared to offer subsidies – even free leases or land – in order to secure a major retail draw. This should not be thought of as socialism for capitalists, rather as the city operating competitively within the reality of a cutthroat marketplace. **Strategic Relation of Anchors and Parking:** Any new anchor downtown, whether it be a convention center, sports arena or movie theater, must be designed to maximize street activity, with parking at least a block away and not adjacent to the site. In between the parking that is a block away and the site should be shops and restaurants in-between to encourage pedestrian-quality street frontage. **Proactive Leasing and Retail Mix:** Mall management realizes that certain stores fare better or worse in proximity to certain other stores, and arranges shops according to a careful merchandising plan. An effective merchants’ association can monitor the store mix and actively seek the ideal businesses to fill vacancies as they arise. **Dimensions:** Whether indoors or out, the best retail street has certain dimension, related to complex physical and social predilections. **Retail Continuity:** Stores such as banks, brokerage houses, and real-estate offices should be located so as not to interrupt retail continuity for more than the shortest stretches. **Incubators:** Often, for such ventures to be successful, fledgling businesses must be allowed to occupy older buildings without upgrading to code.

- **Marketing:** One of the most effective ways to revitalize an underbuilt city core is to subdivide undeveloped superblocks into smaller increments affordable to individual investors. This technique opens the door for local stakeholders to become small-scale developers, lessening the city's dependence on larger real-estate corporations. To encourage urban pioneers, cities must be prepared to bend the rules a little. Zoning that prohibits housing in commercial and industrial areas – often largely empty and therefore affordable – must be replaced with a mixed-use classification. A proactive municipal government should act in the role of the developer when there is a desire to spur growth. Civic leaders must develop a physical vision for their city which they commit to and then actively promote and they must determine the type, scale, and quality of new growth and then act as the lead booster for that growth.
- **Investment Security:** The best way to ensure predictability in downtown neighborhoods is with an urban code, a physically based code that visually describes the building's volume, articulation and relationship to the street – in other words, it's building type. It would also make sense to complement the urban code with an architectural code: neighborhoods hoping to achieve a high degree of harmony in building style – either to protect and enhance their historic character or to develop a new character of their own. Since these codes are prescriptive rather than proscriptive, buildings can be permitted automatically and allowed to move forward immediately. City staff would also see themselves as an enabling staff rather than a regulatory staff to concentrate on supporting good development instead of fighting bad development.