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Web Posted: 09/02/2008 12:00 CDT

New respect for sustainable development

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Scott Polikov - Special to the Express-News RSS | EMAIL | PRINT | SAVE
Overnight, the ground rules for development have been eviscerated.

Yes, real estate investment will always be about cash flow and value. And yes, the zoning commission will continue to hold meetings until midnight to decide whether to approve zoning for the proverbial townhouse project down the street from a single-family enclave. But, have you recently heard of a developer securing a construction loan for townhouses, or for any development?

The fundamentals of the "bedroom community" economy have collapsed. Banks have not figured out at what point they will hit the bottom of their financing crisis.

Some have argued for years that sustainable economies are achievable when business interests and environmental concerns are linked. Paul Hawken, author of "Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution," observed "[t]he next industrial revolution, like the first one, will be a response to changing patterns of scarcity. It will create upheaval, but more importantly it will create opportunities. Businesses must adjust to these new realities."

Hawken's prescient observation hits home with millions of looming foreclosures, \$4 a gallon gas, an economy in decline, and broad agreement that the Earth's fragility is no longer just the cry of the fringe.

Not so long ago, economic development was solely focused on recruiting businesses. Today, economic development has become firmly connected to place and the environment.

Business decisions will always be driven by competition. And competition is more and more about recruiting the best talent. Accordingly, attracting the best and the brightest means that companies must also provide access to a great place to live in addition to competitive compensation.

This new focus on economic development dovetails with the necessity of rethinking the capacity of developers and public servants to create sustainable communities, as well with bankers figuring out how to lend capital in a sustainable way. The new urbanism brings together these opportunities.

But the "new" in the new urbanism is really just a new appreciation for more sustainable approaches to planning and development. Developer J.C. Nichols, a founding member of the Urban Land Institute, embodied those ideals. He developed numerous communities including the Country Club District in Kansas City, anchored by the famous Country Club Plaza.

Building on his development experience and that of the community builders from the city planning movement of the early 20th century, Nichols promoted the notion that predictability in land markets and protection of value over time requires neighborhood planning, reliance on design, the engagement of a multiplicity of expertise, and the integration of the civic realm such as grand boulevards, parks and public buildings.

Today, this approach is being put into practice across the country and in San Antonio. For example, we recently planned Verano, the university community surrounding the new Texas A&M University campus, as an urban enclave in a suburban location. Leveraging its regional location on the proposed Austin-San Antonio commuter rail line, Verano will provide a cosmopolitan center for the south side.

Providing a mix of housing options, pocket parks, plazas and neighborhood businesses, Verano will attract talented young professionals as well as empty-nesters.



Scott Polikov is president of the Gateway Planning Group.

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3 comment(s) on "New respect for sustainable development"

Badpenny3:39 AM

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Mr P states, "But, have you recently heard of a developer securing a construction loan for townhouses, or for any development?" Have you been asleep for the past several years? When is the last time the planning commission turned down any developer's request???

ccd12:16 AM

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San Antonio presents A LOT of problems when trying to come up with the type of development that you are advocating. One of the most important (and least mentioned) reasons is that even though San Antonio has labeled itself "the River City" there is very little water or waterfront here.

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