US DOT: $1.5 BILLION FOR LIVABLE COMMUNITIES, SEE PAGE 12

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Lack of money to build streets impedes regional transformation

Even in smart growth strongholds like Portland, Oregon, new walkable neighborhoods are rare because of scant funds.

PHILIP LANGDON

One of the keys to reducing automobile travel — and thus cutting greenhouse gas emissions — is the creation of relatively dense neighborhoods where people can reach destinations on foot or by mass transit. But a shortage of funds to build local streets is making it difficult to develop more than a sprinkling of such neighborhoods, even in the regions that want them.

That was the provocative analysis offered by Stuart Gwin, senior planner in the Portland Bureau of Transportation, during a Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) transportation summit in downtown Portland, Oregon Nov. 4-6, which brought together 170 new urbanists and transportation specialists from throughout North America.

For roughly 20 years, metropolitan Portland has been viewed as the epitome of smart growth. Gwin, however, told the summit that leaders in the region are finding it nearly impossible to convert many areas outside of downtown into mixed use precincts where people can readily do without a car.

A chief reason, he said, is the daunting cost of building street networks. Most of the places that the three-county Metro government would like to see evolve into denser, mixed environments simply don't have the downtown network of short (200-by-200-foot) blocks that makes walking comfortable and efficient.

In outlying areas, the blocks are much bigger and the intersections fewer, ham-

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A community garden backs up to an alley in Hammond's Ferry, North Augusta, South Carolina. New urbanist developers see food production as a vital feature of future residential and mixed-use communities. See commentary on page 2.

PHOTO BY PHILIP LANGDON

New Town's builder reorganizing in bankruptcy

Whittaker Builders, developer of New Town at St. Charles, the largest traditional neighborhood development (TND) in Missouri, filed papers Oct. 15 requesting Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. The fifth-largest homebuilder in greater St. Louis, Whittaker sought to reorganize under Chapter 11 rather than get dragged down by a troubled bank that was sucking the company dry of its house-sales revenue.

Whittaker, in business since 1977, had managed to hang on through the national real estate depression, which has reduced homebuilding in the St. Louis area to about a quarter of what it was in 2003. The company, based in St. Charles, cut its work force from more than 400 employees in 2006 to a little more than 100 this fall, the *St. Louis*

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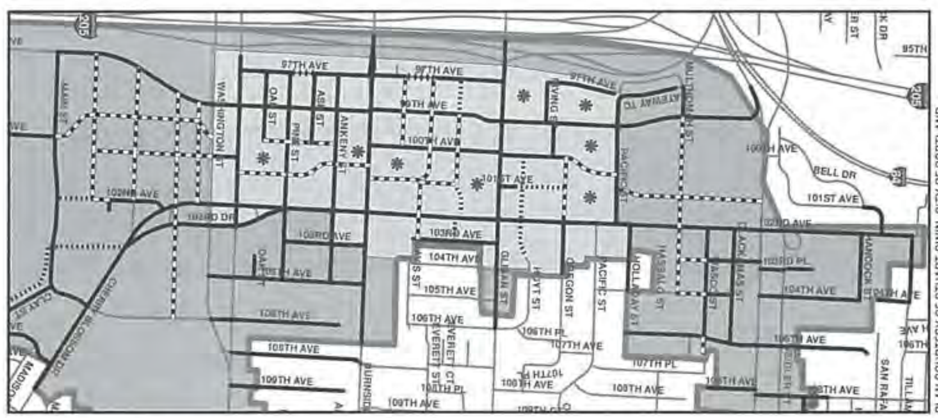
pering the goal of creating satisfying, pedestrian-oriented settings, according to Gwin. It's currently too expensive to build the local street networks that would do much to transform those places, he said.

The problem is evident in the Gateway Regional Center, a 650-acre urban renewal area in East Portland, north of Portland International Airport. Metro designated Gateway as a regional center because it sits at the juncture of two Interstate highways and is served by three of the region's MAX light rail lines plus six arterial roads. Developed in a low-density suburban manner after 1950, the area contains apartments, detached houses, small offices, low retail buildings, and the Adventist Medical Center, among other uses.

Gateway is regarded as a logical place for intensified development because of its transportation connections. But whereas Portland's small downtown blocks produce a lively, walkable environment, thanks to their approximately 600 intersections per square mile, Gateway is poorly connected, with only a little over 100 intersections per square mile.



PLAN COURTESY OF STUART GWIN, CITY OF PORTLAND

The plan for Gateway Regional Center calls for new streets and pedestrian paths (dotted lines).

Gwin said that to convert Gateway into a walkable, denser place, many local streets would need to be added or reconstructed. The number of intersections per square mile would have to be "250 at least," he estimated. That would allow a mix of uses and housing types at a walkable, transit-supporting density.

Based on what Portland has already achieved — the Pearl District on the northern edge of downtown is one of the most impressive, human-scale urban neighborhoods created in any US city in the past 15 years — Gwin argues that "about 50 dwelling units an acre is the breakpoint for really being able to achieve a mixed use, walkable environment. Anything below that is not as productive."

Bringing Gateway up to the needed intersection density would cost about $70 million, Gwin pointed out. That's more than the property owners or developers can pay (unless they were to erect much higher buildings, which might not be as well accepted by residents of the area). "The profit margins are not great enough to justify the new infrastructure," he explained. Paying for a new, dense street network would be "a huge burden to put on the shoulders of adjacent property owners," he said.

If property owners do not have the resources, neither does local government, he added. Thus, he said, "We haven't built any new streets in Gateway. That's why you have properties in these suburban areas languishing. They can't afford it."

Gwin pointed to the lack of intense development around stations on the MAX Blue line, which opened in 1986, running approximately 16 miles from downtown Portland to suburban Gresham. "In 23 years, there has been no significant redevelopment of any of the line outside of downtown," he observed.

A few places in the Portland suburbs have managed to produce compact, walkable development — notably the Orenco Station new urban community in Hillsboro, well to the west of downtown. But Orenco was unusual in being a single large greenfield site developed by one company, PacTrust, Gwin emphasized. Where property ownership is more dispersed and existing buildings are scattered across the terrain, it's extremely difficult to change the nature of the area and boost its density and walkability substantially, he said.

WHERE TO TURN

In general, intersection density in metro Portland needs to grow about six-fold to achieve the walkability, mobility, and environmental benefits that the smart growth movement is aiming for, according to Gwin. If that happens, people will drive less. Carbon emissions will fall. The goal, as he sees it, is creation of "transit-oriented communities" — something broader than "transit-oriented development," which tends to be concentrated close to the transit stations.

"For us to have the kind of environments we want, we have to find a way to fund the local street network," Gwin told *New Urban News* in an interview. "I can't see any other way than through federal policy."

Federal funds are allocated mainly to highways and arterial roads, with the intention of increasing mobility and reducing congestion. Gwin thinks a portion of this money should be shifted to local street networks. "We're going to have to recognize there's not as much importance in creating state networks as in creating local streets — to make good cities," he said.

Responding to Gwin's ideas, CNU CEO John Norquist said, "The federal government should put its money where it has the most value" — in local street networks. Fort Worth, Texas, planning consultant and CNU board member Scott Polikov said in an interview that he agrees with much of Gwin's argument: "There is an artificial demarcation between federal spending on arterials and highways and local spending on the connective tissue, the local network."

Gasoline taxes are paid by motorists driving on local streets, but the money is not returned to be used for construction or maintenance of those streets, Polikov said. Polikov noted that CNU board members have been communicating with Obama administration officials about the need to direct some of the federal transportation funds to the connective tissue. "If we get people onto the local network, it lessens the overall congestion problem," he said.

Building local street networks would help municipalities to increase their tax base, Polikov added. Senator Thomas Carper (D-Delaware) has inserted into a climate-change bill a provision that would authorize federal spending on local networks. As of mid-November, the bill had not been approved.

Polikov said CNU is trying to tackle the problem by altering the procedures that metropolitan planning organizations can use. He suggested that demonstration programs — perhaps allocating $2 to $3 billion each to several large metropolitan areas — could show the effectiveness of spending federal transportation funds on local street networks. ◆

GOOGLE MAP VIEW COURTESY OF STUART GWIN, CITY OF PORTLAND

An analysis of downtown Portland reveals 600 intersections per square mile.

Walmart reverts to old ways in Mississippi

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