Essentials

Strong Communities

A community is a group of people living in the same place or having a characteristic in common. Community can be a neighborhood, a town, a retirement village, a university campus, or a religious community.

Communities grew at the intersection of transportation (trails, roads, rail) and the source of natural resources (water, oil/coal, minerals, food). Since the industrial revolution of the early 1800's, manufacturing has played a role in local communities across the U.S. Factories large and small became ingrained into the very fabric of the local communities in which they were built. This had many advantages: living wage jobs for citizens, and more businesses to support the factory. It also came with some disadvantages: increased traffic, strain on public infrastructure and services along with risks of devastation if the factory closed.

The layout of ancient towns was the byproduct of years of human experimentation. People came together and tried different living arrangements. What worked was copied and expanded. What didn't work was disbanded. A person could find a meal, earn a paycheck, and find a place to sleep all within a reasonable walk. The result was an adaptable, productive, and strong pattern.

The same is no longer true in North America. Instead of functional neighborhoods we have highways, parking lots, big box stores and cul-de-sacs. We have transformed everything about how we live, get around, conduct commerce, interact with one another and many other aspects

of human existence. We also replaced architecture that harmonized us with nature and the rhythms of life with concrete.

Our modern pattern of development was established at a time of unprecedented abundance after WWII. The U.S. was the only economic power not devastated by war, we held the global reserve currency, had access to oil and natural resources as well as space to grow. So, we built to a finished state and spread out. The approach worked well for short-term problems. But, because neighborhoods were built to a finished state with no higher use anticipated or allowed, properties have no choice but to stagnate or decline with time and entropy. Simultaneous with the building of highways and auto-oriented suburbs this led to the destruction of property values in the core of American cities.

In addition, governments frequently invest millions of dollars or make long-term maintenance commitments in public infrastructure to attract new growth. Deals are often sweetened with tax subsidies, the waiving of fees and expedited permitting.

This infrastructure creates short-term transactions and economic growth, but if it is not productive there isn't enough wealth to maintain the infrastructure. The town/city is stuck with the expense of maintaining all those miles of roads and pipes with a stagnating or declining tax base.

Unlike individuals, towns/cities have the capacity to borrow large amounts of money or delay other expenses, minimizing the incentive of financial failure. An insolvent city will linger on, performing its functions poorly, failing to serve, perhaps even harming the people that form the community. Our modern development experiment has sacrificed the stability of the community for short term objectives.

The impacts are not just limited to finances and physical structure of the community. Education suffers. Health suffers – all that driving causes not only stress, but weight gain.

We have also lost the advantages of community: a safe place where people can strengthen and reinforce their beliefs and interests. We no longer know our neighbors or work together to address common issues. We barely speak to one another, preferring to enact new laws and codes instead. We have collectively developed a low tolerance for discomfort and reduced our ability to adapt to stress.

> *"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."*
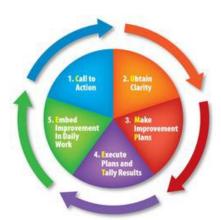>
> – Margaret Wheatley

So, how do we strengthen our communities (town/city) to flourish?

- First, develop a cohesive team of elected officials, civil servants, business leaders, educators and citizens that can productively debate important issues, have crucial conversations with members of the community and make the tough decisions.
- Make tough decisions
    - On infrastructure investment, including stopping maintenance on unproductive neighborhood roads.
    - Encourage and invest in businesses that bring income to the community. Prioritize businesses owned by local families that will stay and contribute to the community over big box stores and large corporations that may bring in more income, but not be loyal to the community. This includes small-to-medium family-owned manufacturing. Today's manufacturers are clean and quiet and can be good neighbors.
    - Prioritize projects that encourage walking vs driving and that encourage people to be outside together.
- Learn more about Strong Towns and become part of the Strong Towns movement at www.strongtowns.org.

References

Marohon, Charles L, Jr. *Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020.

Plusscommunities.com. "What makes a Community? Characteristics and Examples of Community". *Community Stories Blog*. April 22, 2021.

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