

On the Northeast Neighborhoods Plan

Overview: The Northeast Neighborhoods Plan is a deeply disappointing exercise in sustainable and forward-looking urban design. All of the rhetorical flourishes and modest gestures toward sustainability cannot disguise the essence of the plan, which is to continue the fundamentally unsustainable practice of reserving relatively undeveloped and distant parcels of land for future highly urbanized development that may or may not ever materialize. There is no immediate reason to absorb this parcel of land into greater Madison. Between the deteriorating conditions in the local commercial and residential real estate marketplace and the current excess of vacant land already zoned for development, it is doubtful that development pressure will return to boom levels any time soon, if ever at all. And, from a sustainability perspective, that is not a bad thing, considering how much land was consumed and pavement was created during the housing boom that ended in 2007. It's worth adding that no amount of "green" add-ons--bike paths, electric vehicle charging stations, district heating systems or rooftop solar systems--can offset the environmental degradation that will arise from transforming a relatively undeveloped area with few roads into a full-blown city neighborhood.

The City's Northeast Neighborhoods Plan does not represent a departure from conventional growth-for-growth's-sake thinking, nor does it seem to embody the core principles of The Natural Step. Like other new, automobile-centric neighborhoods that have been grafted onto the city's periphery, the Northeast Neighborhoods Plan would trigger the expansion and extension of roads, bus routes, water and sewer mains, electrical service, and heating infrastructure into what is still basically countryside. But with increasing distances come diminishing returns. This up-front investment in high-maintenance infrastructure represents a large claim on future city budgets, but it's by no means a certainty that the anticipated increase in taxable wealth will emerge as projected. With the passing of the real estate boom and the ongoing weakening of the national economy, the City should be thinking more about job creation that supports existing neighborhoods and services, and less about new neighborhoods that would strain the city's existing tax base.

Below are a few more specific considerations that the Committee should keep in mind when reviewing the Northeast Neighborhoods Plan.

1) **A truly sustainable community recognizes physical limits to growth.** The farther a residential neighborhood is from the city's economic core areas, the more expensive it is to service it. Given its distance from the city's commercial districts as well as from area schools and hospitals, providing effective public transportation services to the Northeast Neighborhoods would be very expensive and likely trigger fare increases.

2) **Current developments along Madison's periphery are devoid of neighborhood-supporting businesses.** Car-dependent neighborhoods like Grandview Commons and Door Creek do not provide accommodating environments for attracting small-scale businesses. In areas where the automobile is dominant, the coffee shops, restaurants,

taverns and specialty stores that could otherwise provide magnets for social interaction tend to be clustered near high-volume shopping zones and along busy arterial roads. Also, the street design in new developments discourages circulating about the neighborhood either on foot or on a bicycle.

3) People who value a less-resource intensive living arrangement are not going to find the Northeast Neighborhoods a desirable location. That particular market slice will likely gravitate toward neighborhoods closer to town, where there is a real payoff in terms of aesthetic appeal, availability of low-impact transportation options, fewer hours spent commuting to work and running errands, and general rat race avoidance.

4) If a sustainable urban neighborhood can be made to exist through city policy, it makes more sense to place it in an infill development context rather than a greenfield site. There are a few areas in Madison where neighborhood-wide experiments in sustainable design can go forward without major infrastructure improvements and disruption to existing residents. One that comes to mind is the stalled Union Corners redevelopment, now an open field. Another is the abandoned Royster-Clark property, once remediation has occurred.

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