

NY UPSTATE PLANNER



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New York Upstate Chapter

Making Great Communities Happen

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President's Message

By Mike Long, AICP, RLA

Anyone interested in volunteering for the APA Chapter or Section Boards? Soon, we will be developing the next slate of board members to take office beginning January 2009. The offices of President, Treasurer, Education Officer and Canadian Officer will be vacant due to term limits. Other officers such as Vice President, Secretary, Membership Officer, Director of Legislative Affairs have additional terms remaining, but all offices are up every two years.

If you are interested in being nominated and possibly elected, please let me (mlong@cityofpoughkeepsie.com) or vice-president Judy Breselor (judy.breselor@gmail.com) know. You can find descriptions of the various positions and responsibilities on our New York Upstate Chapter APA web site.

We also have begun to search, through an RFQ process, to find staff assistance to the New York Upstate Chapter APA Executive Committee. Please see the web site for the specific details. If you are interested, please submit your individual or organization's proposal to me or Rocky Ferraro at rocky@cdrpc.org to be considered. We will be reviewing proposals beginning July 1, 2008 and will continue until a successful solution is agreed upon with the chapter executive committee. This is an exciting time for our organization as we transition to providing a higher level of service to you, our membership.

Don't forget to update your calendar. Our Chapter conference will be held in Rochester and Canandaigua October 8-10, 2008. The planning committee is busy putting the finishing touches on this year's schedule. As many of us need Certification Maintenance credits for AICP, you won't want to miss this opportunity.

Long is the city administrator in Poughkeepsie.

Erie Canalway planners win APA award

As reported in the last issue of the Upstate Planner, the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Preservation and Management Plan received the 2008 Daniel Burnham Award for a Comprehensive Plan, the APA's top national planning prize. Canalway representatives traveled to the national conference to pick up their recognition.

Pictured are Carol Rhea, AICP (2008 Awards Jury Chair); Marcia Kees, AICP (Director of Heritage Areas for the NY State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation); Stuart Stein (Commissioner of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Commission); Hannah Blake (Heritage Corridor Community Planner); and Bob Hunter, FAICP (APA President).



Sharp rise in shopping center vacancies

By Stacy Mitchell

The number of shuttered box stores and empty strip malls has expanded dramatically over the last six months, according to data compiled by commercial real estate brokers and investment advisors. And the situation is likely to get much worse.

Chain retailers have announced plans to close more than 6,500 outlets by year's end, even as shopping center construction continues at a furious pace. Developers are on track to bring an estimated 137 million square feet of new retail space online this year. That's more than the average annual growth during the first half of the decade.

Editor's Note: Stacy Mitchell will be the keynote speaker at the NY Planning Federation's annual conference in October.

"Alarming" is how one commercial brokerage described the unabated pace of shopping center construction. It is an indication of the degree to which the forces driving retail expansion have become untethered from actual consumer demand. Communities that have not taken steps to limit retail sprawl through their land use policies are at risk of seeing growing numbers of buildings become derelict.

Already, vacancy rates at strip malls have reached a twelve-year high, according to the research firm Reis. For the first time since the firm started gathering data in 1980, the total amount of occupied retail space has begun to decline in absolute terms.

Suzanne Mulvee, senior economist at Property & Portfolio Research, estimates that the overall retail vacancy rate will reach

See Vacant Stores, continued on page 9

Our Upstate Chapter seeks members to fill positions on the Chapter Executive Committee. The offices of President, Treasurer, Education Officer, Secretary and Membership Director will be vacated due to term limits. The Legislative Affairs post is vacant due to resignation. However, all offices are up for election. If you are interested in any position, contact Mike Long (mlong@cityofpoughkeepsie.com) or Judy Breselor (judy.breselor@gmail.com). Your chapter needs you.

Upstate Conference: Rethinking Upstate - Common Threads

The 2008 Upstate Chapter Conference will be here before you know it and the Genesee-Finger Lakes Section has been busy preparing for the conference in Henrietta and Canandaigua on October 8-10.

This year's conference is entitled "Rethinking Upstate - Common Threads," highlighting the connections and interdependencies between urban, suburban, and rural places throughout Upstate New York. The conference will begin with registration and a welcome reception at 5pm Wednesday, October 8th and will continue with full days of sessions Thursday and Friday, concluding Friday October 10th at 4pm.

Session topics include Historic Preservation in the Suburbs, Municipal Responses to Climate Change, Financing City Center Residential Development, New Urbanism in Upstate, Navigating the Environmental Permit Process, a panel discussion on Sustainability and more. Of particular note are two sessions, Planning Ethics and Planning Law, presented by law professor Patty Salkin of the Government Law Center at Albany Law School. These two sessions will fulfill the AICP Certification Maintenance requirement for ethics and law. Most, if not all, conference sessions will be submitted to AICP for approval for Certification Maintenance credits.

Thursday night will be a "Night in the City." Free transportation will be provided to and from the hot spots around Rochester including the East End, Cornhill Landing, and the South Wedge. Conference attendees will receive information on restaurants and suggestions for after-dinner entertainment.

While most of the sessions will be held at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) Inn and Conference Center in Henrietta (www.ritinn.com), the Canandaigua Inn on the Lake will be our venue for lunch on Friday and feature Alexa Gifford from the New York Wine and Culinary Center. Following lunch, attendees can visit the nearby Wine and Culinary Center (www.nywcc.com) or take a tour of lakefront projects in Canandaigua as part of conference sessions. You may wish to plan to stay after the conference for a long weekend in the Finger Lakes region. The fall foliage should be spectacular and the region's harvest season will be in full swing.

On behalf of the Genesee-Finger Lakes Section, and the entire Upstate Chapter, we hope that you will join us for the 2008 Conference: Rethinking Upstate - Common Threads. The knowledge and networking that will be gained from the experience are invaluable. See you there.

Michael S. Batcher, MS, AICP Ecologist and Environmental Planner

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Upstate Chapter Conference

Dates: October 8 to 10

Place: Rochester Institute of Technology Inn and Conference Center in Henrietta with additional events in Canandaigua.

More info:

- Look for mailing in July
- Check out chapter website
- Contact G-FL section director Jason Haremza at jason.haremza@cityofrochester.gov



A tour of Canandaigua's Lakefront will show off major improvements, including the new Wine and Culinary Center (above), that bring tourists and raise the quality of life for residents.

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The High Cost of Free Parking

In the years ahead, Donald Shoup may be remembered as a transformational figure in the world of parking planning. For now, Shoup is trying to turn decades old parking policies on their heads. The author of "The High Cost of Free Parking" sat down with the APA's Roberta Rewers for a podcast on www.planning.org. An edited version of their discussion is below.

Planning in a Page

Q: What are the costs of free parking?

Shoup: In a nationwide survey, drivers reported parking for free on 99 percent of their trips. Of course, the cost of parking doesn't go away just because the drivers don't pay for it. So if drivers don't pay for parking, who does?

Everybody pays, even if they don't drive. Initially the developer pays, but then the cost of parking is diffused everywhere. So when we shop or see a movie or eat in a restaurant, we pay for parking because the cost is included in the price of merchandise and meals and theater tickets.

But your question was, how much does it cost? I think the best answer was given by a professor at the University of California at Davis, Mark Delucchi, who did the most elaborate of estimates of the costs of the car. He calculated the annual capital and operating costs of off-street parking in the U.S. are between one and four percent of the nation's economic output. And drivers only paid for four percent of that, four percent of that one percent of the whole economy.

In 2002 when this estimate was done, the federal government spent \$231 billion for Medicare and \$349 billion for defense. The parking subsidy fell somewhere between those numbers. So how much do we pay for free parking? It's somewhere between what we pay for Medicare and what we pay for national defense.

Q: Is this just something that Americans have been given for a long time so we think we should park for free?

Shoup: People think they should park for free mainly because cities are planned to give everyone free parking. Nothing can be built that doesn't have ample off street parking and by ample usually cities mean enough parking to meet the peak demand. If we put it into an ordinance, then you can't blame it on the citizens, because they live in a city that is designed for people to park free.

Every city requires off-street parking for every possible land use – from hot tubs to monasteries. But nobody can explain where these parking requirements came from. Nobody learns



"So how much do we pay for free parking? It's somewhere between what we pay for Medicare and what we pay for national defense."

Donald Shoup

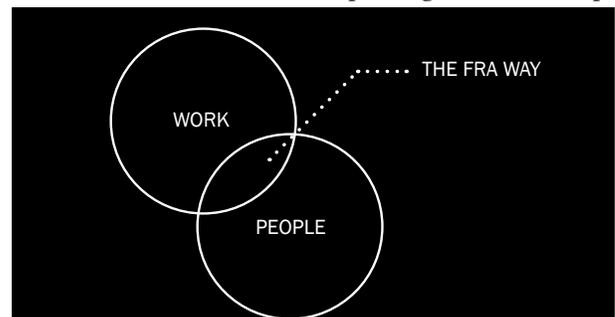
anything about these parking requirements in planning school, because professors know nothing to teach them.

All of the academic research condemns off-street parking requirements as dangerous nonsense. Yet the profession blunders on as if nobody had questioned the idea of off-street parking requirements.

Q: What can cities do to change?

A few cities have begun to charge the right price for curb parking and eliminating off-street requirements. They charge prices for curb parking that lead to about 85 percent occupancy. Parking is always available. Nobody has to hunt for a parking space because they see one on every block. Curb spaces

See Free parking, continued on page 7



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OPPI Planners to Examine Aging

By Jeffrey Celentano

Since the New Year, there has been excellent progress made on the Ontario Professional Planners Institute's upcoming symposium ("The Grey Tsunami - Aging Communities and Planning"), to be held on Sept. 18 and 19 at the Clarion Pinewood Resort, North Bay. Keynote speakers and panelists/presenters include:

- Dr. David Foot (Keynote - author of *Boom, Bust & Echo* and noted demographer)
- Susan Eng (Luncheon Speaker - Advocacy Director, CARP)
- Suhana Meharchand (MC for OPPI Awards reception/dinner - CBC-TV journalist)
- Hon. Jim Watson (Minister of Municipal Affairs & Housing)
- Brad Graham (ADM - Ontario Growth Secretariat)
- Gaylene Pron (Ministry of Health & Long-Term Care)
- Paul Bedford (Urban Mentor & former Toronto Chief Planner)
- Beatrice Schmied (Executive Director, Ontario Public Transit Association)
- Jean Monteith (Monteith Brown Planning Consultants)
- Dr. Charles Gardner (Medical Officer of Health and Chief Executive Officer, Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit)
- George Farkouh (former Mayor of Elliot Lake)

A new feature for this year's Symposium will be a morning Run/Walk as a unique (and age-appropriate) fundraiser for the OPPI Student Scholarship Fund. The evening of the 18th will feature the OPPI Awards reception and dinner. There will be a day of technical and practical workshops scheduled for the 19th, building upon the themes established on the 18th. Event promotion is ongoing and will be 'ramping up' over this quarter in order to encourage early registration for this event. Further details, including the Preliminary Program, will soon be posted on the OPPI website at: www.ontarioplanners.on.ca.

National Mottos

"Peace, order and good government" is the tripartite motto of Canada as well as the principle upon which the federal government there can legislate. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are the aspects listed as inalienable rights of man in the United States Declaration of Independence. The phrase originated with John Locke who expressed a similar notion of "life, liberty and estate (or property)."



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Green AICP CM Credits Available On-line

Wondering how you can make your communities more sustainable? Now you can learn, while you earn certification maintenance credits from the comfort of your computer. The Washington State Chapter of the American Planning Association has developed an eight-session series approved for a total of twelve credits.

The series is titled "Planning for Sustainable Communities" and includes the following eight sessions:

- Understanding the Science of Climate Change and Local Impacts
- How Cities Can Make a Difference
- Land Use and Urban Form as Tools for Sustainable Communities
- Transportation Solutions for Sustainable Communities
- Urban Ecology Solutions for Sustainable Communities
- Green Buildings and Green Communities
- Local Solutions to Climate Change - What Acting Locally Really Means
- Leadership in Planning for Sustainable Communities

Each session costs ten dollars and has been approved for 1.5 CM credits. The courses will expire on August 31, 2008 and you can register at: <http://www.washington-apa.org/events/training.shtml>.

Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

Jane Jacobs



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Creating a Green Neighborhood in the Southern Region of Albany

By Jingkang Gao

Editor's note: The following is an edited version of one of two winning essays recognized by National APA in the 2007-2008 High School Essay Contest. The essay, including extensive footnotes, can be seen at <http://www.planning.org/institutions/hseessay.htm>.

Gao of Slingerlands, New York, will receive a \$5,000 college scholarship and complementary attendance to one of the American Planning Association's National Planning Conferences over the next four years. The two overall winners were selected from more than 145 submissions.

Today's environment, filled with fast driving and air pollution, compromises the health, safety and welfare of humans. We must redevelop the natural environment, get rid of pollution, and restore the friendship and mutual understanding within our communities by building green neighborhoods.

A neighborhood harmoniously connects residents. Green neighborhoods have sustainable environmental systems and harmonious connections among residents in the community, ensuring people a high quality of life. As Jane Jacobs describes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a green neighborhood meets the needs of people's activities, values and interactions. In such an environment, like a network, people may access public facilities such as schools, hospitals, post offices, and libraries through safe and self-enclosed sidewalks; the streets are filled with plants, gardens, resting benches, barbeque tables, and playing fields so people are connected. Creating green neighborhoods allows people to control pollution, save energy, increase employment, decrease crime rates, develop friendships, and utilize public facilities. Its benefits may extend beyond the neighborhood to neighboring districts, cities, the country, and even the world.

Plan for revitalizing historic southern area of Albany

The southern area of Albany, the capital of New York State, urgently needs revitalization into a green neighborhood. Since its discovery in 1609, this region has embraced business, industry and western civilization. The southern area has since evolved into three districts: the core South End, the Schuyler Mansion named for renowned Revolutionary War General Philip Schuyler and Historic Pastures, totaling five square miles. Sixteen percent of the lots sit vacant among a total of

4,435 house units and 60 percent of the houses were built before World War II.

The median house value is relatively low at \$71,000. As of 2006, the regional population, estimated at 7,840 people (50% black) had been declining at a four percent rate this decade. Owner-occupied houses make up only 23% and half of these owners are over age 50. High poverty and crime rates add to the critical importance of revitalization.

City planners have devised The Capital South Plan (CSP) focusing on the South End; they intend to stabilize, energize, develop the neighborhood, and link it with the city.

However, creating a green neighborhood does not seem to be its ultimate goal. On this basis, my plan strengthens the idea of building this area into a green neighborhood.

First, my plan aims to initiate environmental and energy conservation while preserving Albany's unique historical and cultural traits. CSP ensures preservation of the historical Howe library, Schuyler Mansion, St. Ann's Church and many old houses. The poorly conditioned walls, windows, doors, ventilation, pipe

See Student Essay, continued on page 6



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Award-winning high school essayist revisions Albany's South End Plan

Student essay, continued from page 5

systems and outdated construction materials of these buildings cause high energy consumption. My plan not only preserves these buildings' appearances, but also utilizes new energy-saving heating/cooling systems with high standard insulation through their walls, windows and doors. Historical buildings and homes must pass energy saving tests before residents put them back in use.

Second, the key to creating a green neighborhood involves increasing land capacity in the residential area. CSP points out that the city maintains vacant lots by charging homeowners \$200 annually. Keeping these vacant lots hinders investors and developers from coming into this area. Crime at these locations threatens everyone's safety and debris causes air pollution.

My plan will build two large apartment complexes at the locations filled in by the vacant lots; one between the east side of Lincoln Park and the triangle's center, the other halfway between the center and the very south end. Developers will pay for the construction costs since most of the residents cannot afford the expense, and the city will reward the developers with the land saved as a result of the creation of high capacity residential buildings. The developers can use the emptied land to erect office buildings to attract more regional business.

Third, my plan places public facilities, including schools, grocery stores, and community centers, within walking distance of the new apartment complexes. I also plan to build one kindergarten and one health clinic inside each apartment complex to provide employment opportunities. The public transportation system makes major stops at the apartment buildings to

increase running efficiency, save energy and reduce pollution.

CSP suggests renovating the Giffen Elementary School, currently located at the northeast corner of the South End, largely populated by recycling factories, but few residents. The poor location forces some residents to travel more than ten blocks, relying on vehicles. My plan moves the school to the central location of the South area near the apartment buildings.

CSP recommends creating a community center near Giffen School's current location. I suggest relocating the center near the new site of Giffen School, as well as the new apartment buildings, rendering the center convenient to all.

CSP proposes developing the field next to the Department of Motor Vehicles north of the Mansion, which would create jobs and provide services outside the residential area. My plan creates a medium-scale retail store near the new community center, so residents can make one trip to the school, community center, and store.

Fourth, my plan renovates roads and plants more trees, flowers, and shrubs, unlike CSP, which advocates building lawns in vacant lots. Preserving lawns demands a higher cost of labor, more money and more water than maintaining gardens, trees, and plants without polluting water with inorganic fertilizers.

My plan limits paved roads and parking lots, and uses water-permeable material instead of concrete for any necessary pavement. It renovates sidewalks, builds playgrounds, and encourages neighbors to put BBQ grills, instead of fences, between houses, thereby improving relations among neighbors while enhancing the safety and harmony of the neighborhood.

See Student Essay, continued on page 6



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Green plan for Albany's South End

Student essay, continued from page 6

Fifth, a waste separation system would regulate each household. All recyclable garbage, indecomposable and industrial waste should be treated outside the city. Currently, eight waste disposal and recycling plants inundate the southern area, some quite close to the Giffen School. These recycling sites seriously threaten the quality of air and life in the neighborhood. On garbage collection days, loosely packed garbage obscures sidewalks and floats freely on rainy days, damaging the environment and image of this neighborhood. Waste disposal presents major problems in the southern area, but has not been sufficiently addressed in CSP. My plan sets up garbage storage in each of the new apartment buildings. Per the Albany "Waste Collection Rule" the containers separate wet and dry, recyclable and non-recyclable, and burnable and non-burnable garbage. Households outside the apartment complexes will also have these containers. The current recycling and disposal factories will be relocated to a non-residential area. Some of the current waste disposal sites, which will be defunct under my plan, may be awarded to the developer who brings advanced waste technologies and facilities into the new development.

Implementation of my plan

The existing CSP, adopted in July 2007, provides the essential strategies to renovate and revitalize Albany's southern region. CSP provides an administrative and organizational network to improve the southern area economically, but places no strong emphasis on environmental improvement. My plan acknowledges the most important environmental issues while promoting the revitalization that results from a green neighborhood.

Implementation of my plan would improve the southern region economically, socially, and environmentally. Residents will live in a much more convenient environment, as high capacity apartments will rise next to the shopping center, school, and community center, decreasing the need for transportation. My plan controls pollution from waste, recycling processes, and the debris in vacant lots, while promoting citizens' welfare and safety following the removal of vacant lots. Walkways, well separated from traffic lines and residents, will connect neighbors in the improved environment.

Meanwhile, gardens, plants, and playgrounds will inspire the residents to stay outdoors. The development of local business and opening schools, kindergartens, retail stores, and health clinic will provide employment opportunities. The developer-rewards strategy helps both the low-income households and the city's overall development.

The successful implementation of my plan requires obtaining public and administrative participation, as well as the cooperation of city planning officials. We must educate residents about the vital necessity of this plan and show them the personal benefits that it will bring.

I will send my plan to and a meeting request with city planners. I will assist the planners by posting the information online so that residents may access it. Via local media, such as the Times Union and various TV channels, we will explain my new proposal to the public. Prior to the plan's finalization, we will hold a neighborhood representatives' meeting to hear more public voices, which may result in better ideas to improve the plan further. Finally, my proposal will be submitted to city officials to obtain their approval.

Cost of free parking

Free parking, continued from page 3

are well-used, they're 85 percent occupied, but they're readily available because 15 percent of the spaces are vacant.

Redwood City does this. The code says curb spaces should be 85 percent occupied and the Department of Transportation adjusts prices up and down to achieve this rate. They don't adjust them in real time, but they have different prices at different times of day. The advantage of this is the city council can just look outside its window and see if the Department of Transportation is doing its job. If half the spaces are empty, prices are too high.

Q: One of the ways to get this idea passed, I understand, is to have the parking meter revenues returned to the neighborhoods.

Shoup: You're right. Nobody is going to get very far recommending price performing especially if this just means higher prices. Nobody wants to pay higher prices, including me.

What cities have done and it worked brilliantly in Pasadena is to create support for paying for parking. They return all of the meter revenue to pay for added public services on the metered streets. As soon as the merchants and residents understand that the meters are going to be their source of nightly street cleaning and graffiti removal and putting the wires underground and extra security and things like that. Then they say, now I understand the idea of charging the right price for parking because I'm going to benefit from the revenue.

Pasadena started this earlier in the 1990s with Skid Row. Nobody would go there after dark, and not many people in the daytime. Still there were a few stores. All of the merchants and their employees parked on the street and then complained about the lack of parking for the customers.

The city wanted to put in meters, but merchants said, no way, it will drive away our few customers. The city had to store the meters for two years in the basement of city hall while they argued.

Finally the city said all right, if we put in the meters, we'll spend all the meter money in Old Pasadena in the metered area. Instantly the debate changed. The merchants said, let's run them till midnight, let's run them on Sunday.

They get over a million dollars a year in this 15-block area. They completely rebuilt the sidewalks, put in historic street lights, street furniture cleaned up the alleys and put wires underground. Now it is one of the most popular destinations in southern California.

Q: As you travel around talking about this. Are you starting to see more communities doing that?

Shoup: Unfortunately no. It's usually the green planners, the young planners and the enemies of the car who invite me. There is a lot of interest in it, but not much has changed yet.

Anything that is unsustainable will eventually stop and I think that when we do come to our senses we will discover that we have a hidden land reserve for all kinds of infill developments in our cities. If cities did remove their off-street parking requirements and stop forcing all development to have free parking than we will find that there is a lot of land available for much higher value uses than little used parking lots.

The entire discussion with Donald Shoup and other APA podcasts are available from iTunes.

Planning's dirty little secret: Glee over gas prices... ... but with such joy comes great responsibility

By George Homsy, AICP, LEED AP

It's whispered across the table at conferences and bandied about out loud amongst more trusted colleagues. Gas prices may finally force the kind of development and transportation planning that we all studied as ideal

We all wish it hadn't come to this. If our politicians – from both parties – developed a coherent energy policy, we might have, by now, divorced ourselves such an oil addiction. Gas prices might be lower, the air would be cleaner, roads better and public transit more comprehensive.

But our elected officials did nothing. Nothing, that is, except let the CAFÉ standards wallow for decades, fail to close a mileage loophole for gas-guzzling SUVs, continue to foster sprawling communities and fail to fully invest public transit.

So, oil-producing nations, oil companies, the growing fossil fuel thirst of countries, especially China and oilcommodities traders have caused action – something America's so-called "leaders" have been unwilling to do.

We still have no energy policy. Instead our politicians continue to boggle the mind by making calls for budget-busting repeals of gas taxes or pushing efforts to increase the use of inefficient corn-based ethanol or taxing oil companies or threatening to open environmentally sensitive areas to drilling.

But take heart, planners. Change is coming – forced upon us by rising prices. We see it anecdotally in our lives. My dental hygienist is moving to an office closer to her home – turning an hour-long drive to work into an eight-minute commute. Her main reason: gas prices. An architect and a landscape architect in my office have started carpooling, as have another architect and a planner. Two other colleagues take the bus from Ballston Spa to Saratoga Springs. A friend's parents living in a rural part of the Southern Tier coordinate shopping trips to town with their neighbors and relatives.

Solid data support these anecdotes. The Capital District Transit Authority reported that bus ridership is up eight percent from a year ago, hitting a 30-year high. The Rochester Genesee Regional Transit Authority saw record ridership as well. The U.S. Transportation Department reports that miles driven dropped for the sixth month in a row. According to a June "Traffic Volume Trends," Americans drove 1.4 billion fewer miles in April 2008 compared with the same month last year, and 400 million fewer miles than they did in March.

So we are on our way... cleaner air, better communities and improved public transit. In the long term the transition will be good for our nation and good for New York. But it comes with a cost much higher than simple fuel prices.

The high gas prices, high food prices, and continued economic slowdown are going to cause some people a lot of pain. Many in the middle and lower income groups cannot afford to move closer to work or buy a more fuel-efficient car. Many others will lose their jobs or their businesses as the economy wretches through this necessary transition.

Planners must be more vocal and more persistent than ever in pushing economically, culturally and environmentally sustainable land use, economic development and affordable housing policies. We need to speak up about the real disadvantages of new sprawling developments in our community. We must more carefully target our economic development dollars towards producing higher quality jobs. We must make sure that our increasing political bosses and clients do not destroy our defining historic and natural assets in the name of short-term economic fixes.

As cities and denser development continue to become popular we must advocate to make sure that quality, affordable housing remains a priority.

And we must learn how to work together. Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon have shown that fragmented government stymies economic growth. It is our responsibility to push communities to think beyond and reach past the municipal boundaries.

We can start with a simple call to the planners next door. Make a series of lunch dates and find ways to work together. Encourage your town engineers, code enforcement officers and elected officials to do the same.

For many families the coming years of economic upheaval will be extremely challenging to say the least – for some it make prove devastating. As we secretly smile at the rise in bus ridership, cleaner environment and increase in downtown living, we must try hard to make sure that people do not get left behind.

Editor's Notes

Executive Board

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Communities react to increased retail vacancies

Vacant stores, continued from page 1

12.5 percent later this year. That's roughly 1.2 billion square feet, or around 40 square miles of empty shopping space (plus perhaps another 100 square miles of unused parking lot). To put that into perspective, the total land area of the city of Miami is 36 square miles.

"I would avoid ... anything related to commercial construction," advised Michael Larson, associate editor of Safe Money Report and an early predictor of the mortgage crisis.

Last year, developers built 143 million square feet of new shopping centers and big-box stores. Another 137 million square feet is expected to be completed this year.

This growth is on top of fifteen years of unprecedented expansion as big-box retailers sought to overpower independent businesses and competing chains by building ever more and bigger stores — a problem compounded by billions of dollars in development subsidies doled out by local governments.

Between 1990 and 2005, the amount of retail space per capita in the U.S. doubled, from 19 to 38 square feet. In contrast, European countries generally have less than 10 square feet per person.

This level of expansion has not been supported by population and income growth. Since the early 1990s, per capita retail spending, adjusted for inflation, has increased by only about 14 percent.

By flooding markets with an excess of shopping space, chain retailers have not only caused a drop in customer traffic in downtowns and other areas home to independent businesses, but have increasingly cannibalized sales at older shopping centers and big-box stores, thousands of which are now vacant.

Many chains are now downsizing. Linens N' Things is shuttering 120 stores. Ann Taylor is closing 117. Home Depot has abandoned 15 locations. Starbucks is eliminating 100 outlets. The International Council of Shopping Centers has forecast that a total of 6,500 chain store closures this year.

National statistics mask considerable variation in the degree of vacancy in different regions. States like Vermont and Oregon, which have relatively strong land use laws that place some constraints on development, are not overrun with nearly as many dark shopping centers as other regions.

The retail vacancy rate in San Antonio, for example, is likely to rise to above 20 percent over the next year, according to experts. Kansas City is on track to hit 17 percent.

Shopping center vacancies in Tulsa are currently at 13 percent, the highest level in 14 years, while some two million square feet of additional retail space is now under construction there, according to CB Richard Ellis.

Malone Commercial Brokers in Portland, Maine, reports that retail vacancy in the Greater Portland region tripled in the last year, even as more than 1 million square feet of new shopping space is in the pipeline for the coming year.

In regions that have experienced a major housing boom and bust, such as Phoenix and Florida, the amount of ghost retail has risen sharply and includes stores that were built in advance of new outer-ring subdivisions but never occupied.

The market has largely failed to check over-building in part



Chain retailers have announced plans to close more than 6,500 outlets by year's end, even as shopping center construction continues at a furious pace. (Photo: Stacy Mitchell)

because the chains routinely abandon their existing, mostly leased, locations for newer developments and also because much of the retail development industry is structured around short-term profits from new construction, rather than long-term property ownership.

The ultimate losers are the communities that end up saddled with vacant, deteriorating structures and the independent businesses that struggle to maintain a viable customer base in a sea of excess retail.

In an attempt to address rising vacancies, some cities have adopted ordinances that void contract provisions that prevent property owners from marketing vacant structures to competing retailers. Others are requiring developers to put up demolition bonds that can be used to tear down a building should it be abandoned and left idle.

But, while these approaches can alleviate some of the symptoms, they do not address the underlying cause, which is over-building.

Getting to the root problem requires enacting more prudent planning policies that set appropriate limits on retail development. These may include limiting the land zoned for retail to areas in and around established business districts, adopting a store size cap, and requiring an economic impact review before approving new development. Cities also need to eliminate subsidies and tax breaks for retail development.

Such policies not only help to protect communities from vacant shopping centers and big-box stores, but also foster more investment and activity in neighborhood and downtown business districts, strengthening and creating new opportunities for local businesses.

Stacy Mitchell is a senior researcher with the New Rules Project, a program of the nonprofit Institute for Local Self-Reliance. (www.ilsr.org) This article is reprinted with permission from The Home-town Advantage Bulletin, a free email newsletter published by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. To read back issues or join the mailing list, visit www.newrules.org/retail.

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Nation's largest Wal-Mart opens in Upstate

In May, the biggest store of the nation's largest retailer, opened in upstate New York. At over 260,000 square feet, the Wal-Mart Supercenter on the outskirts of Albany is the biggest of the 3,000 Wal-Marts in the United States.

The store is 25 percent bigger than the average Supercenter's 205,000 square feet. The two-story store will employ 485 associates and boasts a 120-foot organic food section. Carts have their own special escalator.

It is unusual for a store this big to be so close to an urban center, a Wal-Mart spokesman told the Associated Press. Typically he said that rural areas host the larger stores. The new Albany Supercenter owes its super size to the expansion into the space left vacant by a closed Sam's Club, which closed in 2006 due to low membership.



The nation's largest Wal-Mart, in Albany has a special escalator (above) to ferry customers and their carts between the store's two floors (top right). Photos: George Homsy

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