

**December 2011 WYPR Commentary by Kirby Fowler  
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## **RETHINKING GROWTH**

The national economy is still struggling to recover from the mortgage crisis that led us into recession. And economists have been sifting through the tea leaves looking for signs of growth. But they tend to rely on standard economic benchmarks, like new home construction. However, they often miss a fundamental shift in the way Americans choose to live in this new century.

Since the 1950s, government policy has subsidized suburban growth by defraying the true costs of things like highway construction and home ownership. But that's changing as the popularity of outer-ring suburbs is on the decline and more people favor mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods that are closer to job centers and transit connections.

This shift is being pushed by the sub-prime lending crisis, rising fuel costs, and frustration over things like longer commute times. Growth patterns are also changing as baby boomers, Gen-Xers, and millennials are choosing urban centers. And, they're choosing them for a variety of reasons.

They like that cities are generators of innovation, economic activity, and personal wealth. Cities are cultural centers with diverse people, architecture, and experiences. And, per capita, city residents have lower carbon emissions and energy use.

As a result of this shift, policy analysts like Christopher Leinberger of The Brookings Institution, predict that “the demand for the housing that once supported commercial activity in many exurbs isn’t coming back.”

Inner-ring urban centers in Towson and Columbia are responding by increasing housing density and making it easier for people to live close to where they shop and work. In Downtown Baltimore, areas that were once exclusively business districts are rapidly gaining population, which has driven apartment occupancy rates to almost 100%. And, more companies are moving or expanding Downtown because their employees want to be here, not in an isolated office park.

[PAUSE]

Maryland is a small state and, it’s easy to see that the “growth at all costs” mentality has led to diminished air and water quality, reduced the amount of farmland and forests, put a strain on public infrastructure, and created some of the worst traffic congestion in the country. These are serious challenges, and we applaud Governor O’Malley for addressing them head on and for creating a blueprint for sustainability through his PlanMaryland initiative. It is a sensible plan and promotes density in the right places, thereby protecting the character of rural areas. For reasons we can’t understand, though, many of these rural communities are objecting to the Governor’s proposal.

Many local jurisdictions across the state still favor unmitigated growth. But they should not benefit from government funding or infrastructure support to do so. And they would be wise to bring their development strategy in line

with increasing market demand for dense, walkable communities. Because, in the words of one urban policy analyst, the jurisdictions that change with the times “will win the future.”

*This is Kirby Fowler, President of Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, for 88-1 WYPR, your NPR news station.*