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**BUILDING
STRONG
TOWNS
REQUIRES
CHANGING
THE
CONVERSATION**

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BY QUINT STUDER

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The follow article by Strong Towns member Quint Studer was [originally published in the Pensacola News Journal](#) in response to a recent Strong Towns presentation in Pensacola that Quint helped to arrange. It is republished here with permission.

No doubt about it, our cities are in trouble. Not only are they saddled with insurmountable debt, but some are on their way to becoming functionally insolvent. Many are borrowing from the future to balance the budget. Many cities are not that different than Detroit. Detroit is just 20 years ahead of us because they started this style of development that is bankrupting us earlier.

In addition, cities are ill-equipped to develop and design the kind of neighborhoods that make sense for the way people want to live. Our current development models have not served us well and we know that. We must move forward in a different way. We are asking future generations to subsidize the decisions we are making now, so we owe it to our kids and our grandchildren to make some real changes.

“Our current development models have not served us well and we know that. We must move forward in a different way.”

This week, Chuck Marohn from Strong Towns spoke at our very first CivicCon. He did a great job of laying out *why* the current development model isn't working and what we must do to save our neighborhoods. Here are just a few of the insights from that presentation:

1. The system is broken. We can no longer support the infrastructure costs of big suburban development and incentives for large industrial complexes just don't work. We can't keep taking a loss on residential, hoping to make it back on industrial and commercial property. It just doesn't happen.

2. We have to stop confusing activity with progress. Growth gives the illusion of wealth, however not all growth is healthy for a city. We must take a long hard look at where our revenue comes from and more importantly, what isn't generating revenue. There are a lot of misconceptions in this area. For example, a big box store on edge of town might seem attractive. However, once we give tax incentives, build a new bypass and run water and sewer, the net revenue isn't very much. Plus, if they leave, it's a very difficult space to fill. We have to stop chasing big projects and have an honest assessment as to where our revenue is coming from.

3. We need development that is productive, adaptable and flexible. Downtown buildings are a

great example of this. If you need more residential, more office or more retail, you can easily shift in a different direction. If one store goes out of business, it doesn't decimate the whole community.

4. Towns must develop organically. The build-it-and-they-will-come model doesn't work. Private investment must lead and then public investment and infrastructure can follow. We have been doing it the other way around.



5. Incremental development (one block at a time) is much more sustainable than urban sprawl. The magic bullet for building cities is small investments over a long period of time. Small, low risk, high return projects can really improve neighborhoods and impact people's lives.

6. We must look for solutions without building something new. We often have underutilized or non-performing assets that could be converted. People are attracted to big, new and shiny projects, but we often overlook the smaller projects that really generate revenue. We should occupy intensely, fill in gap and thicken our streets. We have spread out and the infrastructure to support this style of development is costly.

7. We don't need more roads. We have more road than we can currently maintain and more pipe than we can pay for. The Florida Department of Transportation, like many government entities, does not have deep pockets of dollars. The gap between the funds needed just to maintain the roads they have and their anticipated revenue (even under the best-case scenario) is insurmountable.

8. Changing the way we build cities and towns does more than fix a revenue problem. Functioning communities are important on many levels. The breakdown of our cities has other ramifications:

- **Our bodies aren't working.** We depend too much on cars and our sedentary lifestyles are killing us.

- **Social relations aren't working.** We need and want to be connected.
- **Politics aren't working.** The revenue model doesn't make sense.
- **Conversations aren't working.** We aren't working together as a community to solve neighborhood problems.

9. We must change our relationship with local government. It is no longer a place where we pay taxes they do things for us. That model is forever broken. It must move to a thing we actively participate in. We have to roll up our sleeves and make things happen. Marohn told a wonderful story about a blighted neighborhood in Memphis that took matters into their own hands. They painted cross walks and parking spaces, cleaned up old buildings and put together a weekend street fair that invited vendors to become permanent tenants on deserted streets. It worked! These citizens revitalized this street with zero government engagement or dollars.

10. Take the time to experience your community at 2 mph, not 45. Take a long look around. There are simple things you can do that pack a big punch. Observe where people are struggling. Things like street crossings and sidewalks can make a big difference. Schools are a great place to start, as they are a major part of community life. Go there and observe how people are using the space and ask what you can do to make it better.

"If your roof was leaking and the porch was falling off and you were lucky enough to have a big windfall, you wouldn't go straight to a new addition with a swimming pool."

Finally, Marohn cautioned us on how we think about the [Triumph funds coming to the Gulf Coast](#) — "house money," as he calls it. Marohn feels good that the Triumph funds are not coming in a single lump sum and rather like an annuity over time. Triumph should consider utilizing these monies for small-scale projects that improve neighborhoods. If we are not careful, he fears Triumph will resurrect large-scale projects previously dismissed because they were not fiscally responsible, setting us up for large unfunded maintenance expenses in the future. He suggests

starting with small projects and focusing on what needs fixing. If your roof was leaking and the porch was falling off and you were lucky enough to have a big windfall, you wouldn't go straight to a new addition with a swimming pool.

We must humble ourselves to see things differently. Too many of our neighborhoods are in disrepair. We have the capacity to energize a whole generation to pitch in and help. They want to be engaged and they are hungry for change. The neighborhoods that make sense fiscally are the ones they want to live in. They want a vibrant downtown and to be connected in a meaningful way.

Bigger and newer is not better. We have to change that conversation. Our conversation now has to cen

around how to develop and sustain communities that serve all of us and satisfy our human desire to be all without placing unfair liabilities on future generations.

We are blessed to live in a community where so many people are looking for solutions for improving the life for everyone.

(Top photo source: Kevin Schuchmann)

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