



# STRONG TOWNS

ABOUT

EXPLORE

EVENTS

JOIN THE MOVEMENT

## DESPERATE DEVELOPMENT

OCTOBER 23, 2017

BY ARIAN HORBOVETZ

Arian Horbovetz is a Strong Towns member and writer at [The Urban Phoenix](#). The following essay is republished from his blog with permission.

In a time when the economy is surging forward at a tremendous rate, Americans still list jobs as one of the most important needs as the country moves forward. This is understandable, as automation and low-wage employment continue to darken the job market for many middle and lower income citizens. We are a country reeling from an ever-shifting economy, desperately trying to keep up.

The word “desperate” is important to focus on here. I am going to step outside the numbers

world right now and talk about my own personal perspective on what's happening in so many cities across this country.

In nearly every city I've visited, there is a seemingly unavoidable pattern whereby developers and investors look to capitalize on downtown development projects, promising an abundance of jobs, increased vibrancy and higher revenue for surrounding local establishments. Often, developers have the city's best interest in mind when proposing these large-scale projects in an effort to generate revenue for themselves, as well as improve the surrounding community. Just as often, developers and investors sell local governments and citizens on projects that horribly inflate job and economic impact projections in an effort to win the bid.



Source: Johnny Sanphillippo

Honestly, you can't fault either of these motives. Everyone's just trying to compete, right? Furthermore, sometimes investors and developers don't know what projects truly promote a stronger urban economic environment, they simply look to add vibrancy where there was none before, even if it adds little or no value in the long run.

With this in mind, the responsibility falls on us as local residents, community leaders and government officials to make quality decisions regarding large-scale development projects. The problem is, we are not very good at it. Here's why.

## **WE NEED MORE JOBS!**

Let's be honest, we are a country obsessed with jobs. More specifically, we are obsessed with the idea of what jobs used to be instead of embracing the service-oriented job market of today's America. Any time anyone mentions the possibility of new jobs in our area, nobody cares what overall effect the job producer may have on the surrounding economic and social fabric. The proliferation of Walmart stores is the perfect example, as countless studies clearly show that the discount supergiant actually *costs* counties livable wage jobs in favor of minimum wage employment. Yet poor communities continue to clamor for big box solutions that actually weaken their economic environment because A) they promise jobs and B) they have really really cheap stuff.

Furthermore, developers will often include construction jobs in their projections. While these are important and necessary to our local economy, they are temporary and should not be included in long term economic impact projections.

Lastly, the economic impact that expensive entertainment venues have on downtown economies is also often inflated. These venues, like sports stadiums and theaters are inactive most of the time, and the number of people that patronize other local establishments before and after an event is always lower than expected. This can be helped by creating a strong walkable environment and connecting venues with local restaurants and retailers, but the goal, instead, is typically to move people in and out as quickly and easily as possible.



Source: Johnny Sanphillippo

## IT'S BETTER THAN NUTHIN'

When local news stations post to Facebook about a new development project that conflicts with the goal of a strong, sustainable downtown (ahem, casinos), nothing makes the urbanist cringe more than reviewing the comments and seeing person after person say something like “at least it’s somethin’” or “downtown’s a hole, at least now there’ll be something there.” It’s the “Better Than Nothin’” philosophy that makes us all want to bang our heads

on our desks.

The philosophy that *any* development is better than no development is horribly flawed. This belief is rooted, once again, in our desperate desire to see progress. Like a dehydrated desert wanderer that will likely drink anything resembling liquid, we often ignore warnings of doubt by experts because we *need* to “drink in” new progress. Quite understandably, decades of blighted downtowns have starved us for change, and our desperation for this change shows in our lack of ability to see the big picture, long term impact of large development projects.

## YOUR DOWNTOWN IS NOW A NEIGHBORHOOD

The thing that many people forget about today’s urban revival is that people are actually moving into our downtowns again. Those old manufacturing buildings that have been vacant for years, or the outdated, empty offices spaces from the 70s? Yeah, they’re now luxury loft apartments. While EveryCity USA is seeing a resurgence in the number of new downtown residents (albeit mostly 20-30 year olds and wealthy empty nesters), most people still believe that a downtown has two functions... to produce jobs and provide entertainment for the surrounding communities. Even local governments are struggling to remember that they

have a new influx of residents they now have to cater to. The old model of building a city for suburbanites who are looking for a fun Saturday night out must give way to the reality that our downtowns are once again places where people live, and need livable amenities, not just entertainment. We have to start shifting our idea of which development projects are really needed for our new downtown neighborhoods.

## IN CONCLUSION

I often come off as a NIMBYer, demonizing developers and fighting for a perfect Jane Jacobs utopia. Actually, I am a huge supporter of local development, job creation, vibrancy additives and all of the above mentions (as was Jacobs, for what it's worth). I simply believe we as citizens and leaders need to be more aware of what truly creates long term, inclusive socioeconomic growth in our communities. The model for what makes stronger cities has changed, and yet we continue to embrace (and be sold on) archaic constructs that no longer apply. It is not our job to discourage development, rather, it is our duty as city residents to inform ourselves on which development projects create a strong, lasting impact and which prey on our desperate and unquestioning thirst to see our downtowns rise again... at any cost.

## RELATED STORIES



### DESPERATE DEVELOPMENT

Here are 3 reasons why our cities are desperately drawn to short-term megaprojects instead of small-scale improvements that will make our downtowns more successful in the long run.

Oct 23, 2017 · Arian Horbovetz



### WHO GETS TO DECIDE HOW A NEIGHBORHOOD IS REDEVELOPED?

A new redevelopment plan for an empty site in St. Paul, MN has pitted neighbors against neighbors, and blurred the lines of typical narratives that explain opposition to urban



### THE CLEMENS HOUSE PARADOX: WHEN DEVELOPMENT DOLLARS SPEED NEIGHBORHOOD DECLINE

A big developer bought up tons of historic properties in St. Louis. Now he's letting them crumble and burn.



development.

Aug 23, 2017 · Kea Wilson

Sep 6, 2017 ·

Nathaniel M. Hood

 [2 Comments](#)  0 Likes  Share

*Posted in [Member Post](#), [Top Story](#) and  
tagged with [development](#), [Megaprojects](#), [Jobs](#), [Economy](#)*

# Strong Towns Comment Policy

Please read our [Comment Policy](#) before commenting.



2 Comments

Strong Towns

1 Login

Recommend

Share

Sort by Best

Join the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

**iceberg** • 2 hours ago

A common reason given for development of all types is the desire for cities to "increase the tax base" so they have more money to spend without increasing taxes too much on existing residence. Bigger buildings mean more leasable square feet on a value that is freshly assessed. Political decision making is also biased in favor of concentrating results so they are highly visible because it provides the appearance of "progress". Developers are simply following the bread crumbs put down by local policies and regulations. This happens with the large developments that in all appearances are a perfect fit for a downtown environment as much as a big box store in the suburbs. So often the street level spaces that cities often demand be designed for retail and restaurants sit vacant or are leased at a deep discount because there simply isn't the demand for that much retail/restaurant space.

The core issue is a fear of truly organic growth and development. People largely favor the idea that they can "build a vision" of their communities and force it in to existence through policy and regulatory means. This means dozens of contradicting "visions" fighting for control of those regulations which then end up being an inscrutable mess that are quickly manipulated by the people doing the actual work of developing and building the spaces. If we want organic and natural growth patterns than we can neither encourage or discourage development. This means that each development needs to be judged simply on its able to pay for itself.

^ | v

• Reply • Share

**Paul W** • 14 hours ago

This is one the things we struggle with, the development at all cost. We

Newer / Older



Search

[CONTACT US](#) | [EMAIL SIGN UP](#) | [DONATE](#)

[ARCHIVE](#) | [MEMBER BLOGS](#) | [SUCCESS STORIES](#) | [PITCH A STORY](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [COMMENT POLICY](#) | [RSS FEED](#)



Strong Towns is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Our work is performed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. Please share with others to use for good.