

Baton Rouge Advocate

Planner: Policies weren't smart

Growth summit kicks off in BR

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Baton Rouge's wasteful, post-war sprawl may have had the appearance of a free market acting on the will of its residents, but was in truth heavily subsidized by bad policy that rigged development to unfold the way it did.

Such was the case all over the nation, said Chris Leinberger, a visiting fellow with the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program, one of a number of speakers on the first day of the fifth annual Smart Growth Summit.

The summit, put on by the Center for Planning Excellence, continues today at the Shaw Center for the Arts downtown.

Leinberger, who is also a developer and director of the University of Michigan's real estate graduate program, asked the audience of planners, students, business leaders and elected officials whether they really thought the gasoline tax paid for all of those roads and infrastructure that have made sprawl possible.

He said that one study, measuring only four of 11 development cost factors — drainage, public safety, parks and local roads — found that it costs \$1,000 to build the next house in a walkable urban environment compared with \$20,000 on the fringe.

"If that was priced into the house in the drivable suburban (environment), people would make different decisions," Leinberger said.

All domestic policy, he said, is social engineering, and it's important to look at the outcomes that policies create.

Another example, he said, is the federal mortgage tax deduction, which provides a

\$300 billion annual subsidy for areas dominated by single-family homes, as opposed to urban centers that have a higher percentage of renters.

Infrastructure, he said, is priced evenly across the board, even though it is far more efficient to provide dense, infill development with infrastructure than a suburban development on the outskirts with a home every 2 acres.

Leinberger said that in the overwhelming majority of developable land in and around metro areas, “it is only legal to do drivable suburban” developments.

Of his nine developments, “every single one of those projects have been illegal.” He said this nation’s de facto affordable housing strategy is one of “drive until you qualify.”

Leinberger went on to say that the housing bubble and the resulting crash were caused by the unwise overdevelopment of the “drivable fringe,” noting the heaviest declines in value came from this segment of development.

“The bailout of the banking system was the bailout of sprawl,” he said.

Leinberger said the creation of walkable communities — whether it’s through infill development of a city’s urban core or the redevelopment of dying regional malls and suburbs that are threatening to become the next slums — is the key to getting out of the recession.

To be sure, Baton Rouge’s suburbs aren’t poised to become slums anytime soon, but Leinberger pointed out the real estate markets hammered by the housing bubble are seeing declines in value so steep their structures are unlikely to regain anytime soon the value they had at the bubble’s peak.

And when the market value of a home or commercial building falls below replacement value, repairs and upkeep can never be financially recouped, and you’ve got yourself a slum.

The nation has about 10,000 dead or dying strip and regional malls, Leinberger said, although developers in cities such as Denver are showing how those can be redeveloped more densely, creating the walkable communities they sought to replace decades ago.

The good news for the smart growth movement, he said, is that studies consistently show that a third of metro area populations want walkable urban living, and currently only about 2 percent of the built environment provides that.

Catching up with that demand will take about a generation, he said.

He said cities need to begin planning their transportation strategies and make a commitment to affordable housing to complete the transformation and ensure the viability of walkable urban communities.

“Plan for your walkable future,” he said. “Economic development will follow.”