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EXCLUSIVE: Urban development expert calls former Blue Ash airport 'a gem'

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The team planning the transformation of the former Blue Ash airport into a large mixed-use development brought in one of the nation's leading experts on development, real estate and strategic planning for downtown and suburban centers to present on industry trends.

[Chris Leinberger](#), a land use strategist, developer, professor, researcher and author, gave a presentation to Blue Ash City Council on April 28 about what he's seeing in urban cores and suburban centers across the country.

[Dan Ruh](#), senior vice president of real estate development at [Al Neyer](#), said because the development team – led by Al Neyer – understands the importance of turning this property into a regional game-changer, they went to a true thought leader on real estate and walkable environments.

"We're trying to cherry pick the best practices not just in the Midwest, but across the country," Ruh told me after the presentation. "That led us to reach



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out to Chris, who has studied this all over the nation.”

Al Neyer is planning a large, mixed-use development on 98 acres of land that formerly served as the Blue Ash airport. The downtown development company [recently added another 11 acres with the purchase of the Sycamore Senior Center.](#)

The development team led by Al Neyer also includes [Vandercar Holdings](#) and landscape architecture, urban design and planning firm MKSK. [Clete Benken](#), principal with MKSK, introduced Leinberger.

“We’re in learning mode about how to best shape the future of the 98 acres adjacent to Summit Park,” Benken said.

Leinberger started his presentation by applauding the city of Blue Ash for transitioning from a bedroom community with an industrial base to an office park destination. But he said Blue Ash needs to be ready to change again.

“You’ve got another transition in front of you,” Leinberger told the council.

He went on to describe the success of different metro areas where the suburbs have been urbanized. What is becoming more popular, especially among the valued millennial talent pool, is a place that has a mix of uses where most of their daily needs can be met on foot.

“If you don’t give the market what it wants, it goes somewhere else,” Leinberger said.

His research showed the knowledge/experience economy in particular wants walkable urbanism. This is the pendulum swinging back from the 1980s where development focused on new suburbs where uses were kept separate.

“Business parks are either dead or dying,” Leinberger said during his presentation.

The opportunity for what Leinberger calls “edge cities” such as Blue Ash is to turn business parks into high-density, mixed-use places. The fact that Blue Ash has 98 acres of undeveloped land in its core is a bonus.

"This airport is a gem to have," Leinberger said.

A high-density mixed-use development on the airport land would make the surrounding office space and residential units more attractive, Leinberger said.

Before Leinberger's presentation to Blue Ash City Council, a resident expressed his interest in the plans for redeveloping the former airport land. [Patrick Quinn](#) wanted to get a better sense for the type and density of development planned for the site. He wants to see the type of walkable suburban center Leinberger described.

"How dense can we go?" Quinn asked.

Leinberger told council adding a suburban center doesn't mean Blue Ash has to change.

"It doesn't mean you have to become downtown," Leinberger said. "You can bring downtown to you."

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