Sustainable Communities: Many people within the sustainability community point to the traditional patterns of land use and development patterns for residential housing projects as being "unsustainable" – even when they include energy efficient homes -- due to the energy required for transportation from housing located further and further from the workplaces, schools, and services families rely on every day. In fact, a DOE study shows that the energy consumed for transportation from these communities more than offsets gains made by the energy efficient homes built within them. This blog will explore the complex issues surrounding new visions for land use and planning and identify the hurdles that need to be cleared in order to apply innovative solutions to improve transportation, density, and affordability issues.

A Conversation with Christopher Leinberger

Sustainable Communities (Land Use, Planning, and Development)

Chris Leinberger, Visiting Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program, The Brookings Institution

As a Visiting Fellow at The Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, Mr. Leinberger is researching land use strategies that transform suburban downtowns and promote "walkable urbanism." He is the Director of the graduate Real Estate Program at University of Michigan, and a founding partner of Arcadia Land Company, a pioneering New Urbanism development firm.

What is sustainable community? A community that has zero impact on the planet, where there is no pollution created. That's my definition.

To achieve this, do we have to build new communities or retrofit existing ones for sustainability? We have to do both. For one, buildings wear out and they have to be repaired and updated, so we're going to have ample opportunity to retrofit, and then there's population growth, so we'll need new. But this is not the most important issue, the solution has two sides and unfortunately we focus on the least important one, buildings. Or the "efficient supply" side of green communities, such as added insulation, low consumption appliances, tighter homes, etc. The numbers just don't add up if you base achieving carbon neutrality by 2030 on improving the efficiency of new products alone—in fact, it can make things worse. We have to shift our focus on the other side, toward demand mitigation.

You mean human nature? When our cars and homes become more efficient, we drive further and leave the computer on all day. Supply side efficiency pushes the goal of lowering consumption further away; it evades us like a mirage. So yes, we have to manage human nature. Fortunately, change on the demand side has already started. Americans are driving less since 2005, and not because of rising fuel costs, the drop in vehicle miles driven began well before the oil shocks. It's been not proven yet, but the most likely source for this decline comes from structural social changes, such as the knowledge economy, which means more people work from home, and renewed demand for the dense, public-transportation-rich, culturally-rich, urban development. Nowadays buyers will pay a premium for downtown living; until just ten years ago they paid a premium for sprawl. Recent research shows that when you move a household from the suburbs to a more walkable, urban location you immediately achieve a 50-to-80% cut in greenhouse gas emissions. These are the kinds of numbers we need to reach meaningful greenhouse gas reductions.

What's the role of government, if any? Government sets the rules. They mark the boundaries of what's allowed. Within those boundaries anything goes, the free market finds solutions. California policy mandates that by 2050 the state has to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 80% below a 1990 baseline.

At the same time, the state mandates all metro areas must engage in scenario-based, regional planning, looking at future transportation and land use patterns to find alternatives that achieve the state emission goals, the carrot and stick come with the city transportation dollars they depend on. The cities get creative.

Are there any examples of sustainable, regional success stories? Utah. It's a fabulous, conservative state engaged in a large regional planning effort that started before the 2010 winter Olympics. The plan, Envision Utah, laid out three options: Continue the old pattern of low-density, drivable suburbs; build high density cities; or create higher density suburban hubs with excellent rail connections. After crunching the numbers, they opted for option three, the Goldilocks choice. But in making this decision, they also concluded that the option of higher density, self-contained hubs connected by rail was the least destructive environmental alternative. True Conservatism is not just fiscal, it also entails conservation, destroying the environment is anathema to the ideals of a religious conservative.

I note you have written for American Conservative Magazine and appeared on FOX, are you a Republican pundit? I am not a conservative theorist, but I have a lot of respect for true conservatives, I am a capitalist, I believe in the market, I believe the drive-everywhere lifestyle was and continues to be implemented and subsidized heavily by the federal government and that's anything but a conservative approach to transportation. If you want to paraphrase Glen Beck, you might even call our automobile culture the results of a "totalitarian" federal mandate. About 100 years ago we had the greatest transit system in the world and the crowning jewel of that system was Los Angeles. It had the longest, private-sector owned rail system in the world, until the federal government decided to put it out of business with a one-size- fits-all approach to transportation: cars and more cars. Paul Weyrich, who started the Heritage Foundation, sat on the Amtrak board and made this very argument, and that's why the American Conservative Magazine picked me up--I'm all about choice. Until recently, you could buy any house that you wanted, as long as it was a single family house, and you can shop anywhere, as long as you drove to the mall. The market used to be satisfied with this very limited offering, but now there's a new demand-equation to factor in, and that's where our environmental solutions will come from—the demand side.

You mention privately owned rail systems, how would the private financial sector make money today funding public infrastructure, such as privately owned railroads? That's a subject for our next conversation.

Looking forward it!

[End of blog post]