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Q4: Christopher Leinberger, Brookings Institution visiting fellow

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Q: You have been selected as one of the "Top 100 Urban Thinkers" in the nation. What will be the focus of your talk, "The New American Dream," for the Rochester Regional Community Design Center's Reshaping Rochester event on Jan. 26?

A: The U.S. and the developed world are in the middle of a structural change of how we build the built environment. The built environment-real estate and the infrastructure that supports real estate-is over 35 percent of the asset base of the economy, the largest asset class. It is the cause of two of the past three recessions and the reason the economy is so lackluster today; this 35 percent of the country's assets are on the sidelines. The reason for this structural change is the changing nature of the economy, since the built environment is a reflection of the underlying economy. The industrial economy resulted in the drivable suburban development patterns of the past 60 years. As we heard the ad jingle, "See the USA in your Chevrolet," we were making ourselves wealthy driving to our suburban home from the new low-rise business park. Today the rising knowledge economy is demanding a different form of the American Dream, one that includes the option of both drivable suburban and the other choice, walkable urban. Metropolitan Rochester has an oversupply of drivable suburban housing and commercial inventory. It has an extreme shortage of walkable urban development. Without offering the market what it is demanding, you and your economy will be bypassed. Those companies and families demanding a walkable urban way of life and business will look elsewhere.

Q: Your book "The Option of Urbanism" looks at government policies and how they have been tilted toward the "drivable suburb." How do you see those policies shifting?

A: The country has been massively subsidizing drivable suburban development for two generations. This includes water and sewer lines, electric power lines, public safety and roads. (If you believe the gas tax pays for your highways, I would guess you also believe in the Easter Bunny.) One study based on a southwest U.S. metro area showed drivable suburban infrastructure costs are over 20 times per house what walkable urban development costs are-but each paid the same to hook up to the various infrastructure sys-tems. The federal government spends or allows tax deductions and credits worth over $500 billion annually for real estate, and the vast majority of it goes to drivable suburban development (the largest program being the mortgage tax deduction).

Plus, over 90 percent of the land in metropolitan America is mandated to be only drivable suburban development; it is illegal to build walkable urban development. Many cities and counties are putting in place walkable urban-friendly zoning, such as form-based codes, Complete Streets policies, overlay zoning codes and transit-oriented development zoning, making walkable urban development legal. There are many examples of development impact fees being placed on new projects so infrastructure costs are charged what it costs to install, making walkable urban development more competitive, since its infrastructure costs less. Perhaps most importantly, since transportation drives development in real estate development, voters have approved about 70 percent of all bond initiatives, raising their taxes, for rail transit systems over the last seven years across the country. Metro areas one would not expect would raise taxes, much less for rail transit, include Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, St. Louis, Seattle and Salt Lake City. If St. Louis can approve a half-cent sales tax increase to build out its light rail system by 62 percent of the voters in 2010, during the recession and the local government funding crisis, Rochester should at least start thinking about becoming competitive. If you do not, you will be lapped by the competition.

Q: What is driving this shift?

A: The market wants it. That is especially being driven by the rising millenials (teenagers and those in their 20s) and the downsizing baby boomers. Together these two generations represent well over 50 percent of all households in the country, and the majority of them want walkable urban places to live and work-but there is not enough supply. The result is predictable: Metro areas that today have walkable urban places find that it is the most expensive housing and commercial space in the region on a price-per-square-foot basis. That was not the case 10 to 20 years ago when the executive housing concentrations and business parks in the suburbs were the most expensive. And this trend is not just about the redevelopment of the center city; research shows it is possibly even more about the transformation of the suburbs into walkable urban places.

Q: Are there a couple of key things a community can do if it wants to help create a city that reflects a "walkable urbanism"?

A: There are a number of things: Determine where the walkable urban places could be developed; around current or future rail transit stations, for example, adjacent to higher education campuses and medical facilities, in 19th-century suburban town centers that have a grid layout of streets and historic buildings and, of course, in the downtown but also the adjacent places surrounding downtown.

Plan for and invest in rail transit. Experience shows that real estate developers will invest billions around rail transit stations, but to date almost no investment has been made at a bus stop.

Visit great walkable urban metropolitan areas about your own size and with the same industrial history. That could include Chattanooga, Nashville, Providence, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Milwaukee. Others that have a slightly different history could also teach you lessons, like Portland, Seattle, Phoenix and Dallas.

The biggest challenge is to not be convinced by the naysayers who believe that Rochester cannot afford anything but a gradual economic decline. There are many metros which have faced equally daunting challenges and have turned the corner to be competitive in the knowledge economy. But you must give the market what it wants to be competitive. Today, you are not.