



Metro Detroit

Urbanizing Metro Detroit's Suburbia

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Kristi Trevarrow-Executive Director Rochester DDA

David Lewinski Photography



Sub-urb noun \sub-burb\ a: An outlying part of a city or town; b: A smaller community adjacent to or within commuting distance of a city.

That's what Merriam-Webster has to say about suburbs, but Metro Detroiters don't really need it spelled out, do we? The definition of a suburb is etched into the tablets of Southeast Michigan's history. Here, what it means to be a suburb is as much an episode in our collective narrative as it is a description of the places where roughly 85 percent of the region's population lives. The suburbs, as we know them, are defined both by what they are, and by what they are not: Detroit.

But the definition of suburb is changing. In fact, it's disappearing completely.

"The concept of city versus suburbs: drop it. It's obsolete," says Christopher Leinberger, non-resident senior fellow at The Brookings Institution and former professor and founder of University of Michigan's graduate real estate development program. "We need a new lexicon."

That new lexicon, Leinberger says, includes the term "Walkable Urban Places," or WalkUPs. Any pedestrian-friendly area where people are able to have urbanized lifestyles are WalkUPs. Ann Arbor is a WalkUP, as is Birmingham. Royal Oak and Ferndale are WalkUPs. And so is downtown Detroit.

Though the trend is national — Leinberger has studied examples from Washington D.C. to Atlanta, and names Detroit among the last metro regions in the country to catch on — the cultural implications of the fading lines between urban and suburban may not be as dramatic anywhere as they are in Metro Detroit. If the urbanization of Ferndale and Royal Oak feel neither surprising nor groundbreaking, consider the fact that Rochester ranks seventh on Leinberger's list of eleven Metro Detroit WalkUPs.

"Let's be clear, Rochester is never going to be the urban mecca of Michigan, but we are trying to add more things that makes us feel more like a city," says Rochester Downtown Development Authority Executive Director Kristi Trevarrow.

Twenty years ago, Rochester was a suburb in the purest form. The bedroom community's downtown had a 38 percent vacancy rate and no nightlife. Today, demand to live in the walkable city center is evidenced by two forthcoming residential projects, a 65-apartment building and 131-townhouse development, which will nearly triple the number of downtown residential units.

"There's absolutely no doubt that the demand is there," Trevarrow says. "Millennials and baby boomers have a lot of the same wants and needs. We're attracting two different markets."

Why are those demographics eyeing the urbanizing suburbs? While urban living is attracting a widening audience, that doesn't mean some aspects of "suburbia" don't still sound nice. Say, a yard. The formerly suburban WalkUPs offer both.

"All those little single family houses close to downtown Birmingham are now the most expensive in the region," says Leinberger. "It's because they have the best of two worlds. Live in suburbia and walk to everything downtown."

That trend is a reality in Rochester as well. A local contractor shared with Trevarrow that he currently had 28 small, near-downtown bungalows under renovation.

"His phone is blowing up," Trevarrow says. "It's people who want that downtown living experience."

What does the evolution from suburb to WalkUP mean for Detroit? An area long conditioned to pit the burbs against the city, it would be no wonder if the urbanization of the suburbs tempts people to pick sides. If revitalization efforts are being invested in urban spaces, shouldn't they be concentrated in the city? And if someone's need for an urban experience is met by living in Rochester, is he dis-incentivized to venture into Detroit?

"If they love this experience, they're going to love Royal Oak," says Trevarrow. "They're going to love Ferndale, and it's the same with Detroit. There are so many amazing offerings in Detroit. I don't think people are circulating any less between urbanized areas."

That's not just cheery, economic development thinking. According to Leinberger, it's a well-studied conclusion. He compares the Metro Detroit region to a baseball team. Rochester may be in left field and downtown Detroit may be the pitcher, but they're on the same side.

"The idea that if Northville prospers it will hurt downtown Detroit, it's counter-productive," he says. "You're wasting energy. There will be the occasional pop balls that either the shortstop or the pitcher could get, but you need to offer both kinds of products for the team to succeed."

"You'd never field a baseball team with just a pitcher."

How's this for a direct benefit to Detroit? Growing demand for a carless lifestyle in Rochester, Ann Arbor, Birmingham and Ferndale translates directly into demand for better regional transit, a one-time pipe dream that would deliver residents from throughout the region to Detroit's doorstep. Talk about a culture shift.

If Metro Detroit is the Tigers, learning how to play as a team won't just have the benefit of economic growth, but will also help close the scoring gap between us and the Red Sox. And the Nationals. And the Braves. And 21 other teams.

"You're so far behind," says Leinberger. "You are ranked twenty-fifth out of the most urban metros. But you're moving in the right direction."

And for the first time, "direction" doesn't mean what it used to in Metro Detroit either. Today, no one is stuck with the options of moving toward suburbia and away from Detroit, or vice versa. Moving toward more and better Walkable Urban Places means we're all headed in the same direction, which is toward a more vibrant and successful metro region, from Rochester's Main Street to the heart of downtown Detroit.

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