

The Wave of the Future May Be the Past

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The importance of preserving a community's "sense of place" and the ways to accomplish this worthy goal were the central themes of Edward T. McMahon's presentation at the Rice Theater at Highland School's Center for the Arts on May 11. "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are," said McMahon, referring to the increasing homogenization of American townscapes and residential subdivisions. "There is a connection between the people and the land ... a sense of place is what makes us different, and what makes our surroundings worth caring about."

McMahon, a resident of Takoma Park, Md., and Senior Fellow at the Urban Land Institute, spoke on the "Dollars and Sense of Preserving Character" to a receptive and appreciative audience.

Development is not "an either-or thing," McMahon said. He believes that progress -- growth -- does not demand our surroundings be degraded. However, this requires a jurisdiction to have a long-range conservation plan, and also requires that development takes place in areas where it makes sense. Realizing that growth will occur, but that the impacts will be predictable, is an important element in getting people to work together, McMahon went on. "If people think that all the land is up for grabs, they will oppose everything that comes along," he said.

Residential development

The "how" of development is as important as the "where." McMahon presented a series of slides showing thoughtful residential development -- where trees are spared or replaced, and asphalt used sparingly -- and asked audience members where they would prefer to live. Surprisingly, the most attractive projects -- with narrower streets, varying architecture and, of course, trees -- were also the most affordable and safe for their residents. "According to a survey by the National Association of Realtors, the surrounding environment is the most important factor affecting market value for a house," said McMahon.

In addressing issues affecting the Piedmont, McMahon was critical of the "golf course communities" and large-lot subdivisions being built. He noted that many of the golf course communities -- with homes clustered on small lots along the course -- had failed nationally, since very few residents played golf and supported the clubs. As a result, some courses are being converted back to open space for wildlife and outdoor enjoyment.

Locally, the large-lot subdivision is laying the groundwork for future problems, according to McMahon. "All that large-lot subdivisions do is increase the rate at which

land is consumed," he said. "About 20 percent of the lots are consuming 80 percent of the land."

When surveyed, more than 70 percent of the people considering moving into an area preferred "living in a nice neighborhood" to having a large lot around their house. As an example, McMahon described the development of a 200-acre farm. Under the first scenario, the farm was divided into 200 one-acre lots, scattered throughout the property and connected by a network of roads. The second scenario -- clearly better for a variety of reasons -- showed the same lands divided into 200 half-acre lots, with the homes clustered in several "neighborhoods," and the remaining 100 acres kept in open space.

Value what is 'old'

"The image of a community is fundamental to its vitality and quality of life," said McMahon. "The more Warrenton becomes like everywhere else, the less reason people have to come here." Older towns like Warrenton have an added advantage. "Historic preservation saves the heart and soul of a community, linking people to their past," he said.

Noting the importance of tourism -- already the biggest industry in 37 of the 50 states -- McMahon told the gathering, "You've got to protect what is unique about your community; that's your competitive edge." Using a series of slides, he showed before-and-after views of towns that had decided to preserve and re-use their unique, old structures, saving downtown areas and reversing blight. After years of decline, many cities are reusing structures, often converting vacant warehouses and factories to apartments and condominiums. "Housing in downtown areas is the hottest real estate now," he said.

Over the past several years, Warrenton builder Malcolm Alls has bought and renovated a number of old structures in the county, which he either improves or rebuilds and converts to other uses. His crews are currently working on five single-family homes on East Shirley Avenue that he purchased in need of repair, and which will become rental properties when completed. Alls said, "When you preserve something from the past, it is a yardstick for what you do in the future."

'Just ask for it'

While most towns want new commercial development, they should not settle for structures that don't enhance the existing townscape. "Sameness is not a plus, it's a minus," McMahon remarked. "Don't accept corporate cookie-cutter design ... insist on something that fits into your community." Again using slides, McMahon showed several examples of McDonald's restaurants that were custom-designed to fit into existing streetscapes in New England, the South and Midwest. "Most corporations will do what is required to get into a good market," he advised. "Just ask for it!"

The same is true when an existing structure is up for remodeling. "Your town can get better, one project at a time, if people have raised their expectations," he added. One way local officials can get what they want from developers is what McMahon calls "leverage" through "voluntary compliance-mandatory review." He cited an example where owners of a fast-food restaurant were willing to alter the design of their building -- which they didn't have to do -- when they had to get a special exception from the town for a drive-through window.

For the future

According to McMahon, the day of the commercial strip mall -- with its undisguised ugliness and traffic congestion -- is near its end. According to McMahon, more than 3,000 strip malls in the U.S. are vacant today. "The future belongs to town centers and Main streets," said McMahon. "These are places that attract peoples' affection and encourage them to stay longer and spend money." One important aspect of both is the availability of mixed uses: having retail stores on the ground level and residential units above.

He pointed to Arlington as an example of a community that has worked successfully over the past 30 years to create a vital, attractive town center -- and prospered accordingly.

According to McMahon, when a town decides it wants to improve its surroundings or make improvements, it should start with two questions. "The first question is, 'What should we do?' The second question should be, 'How much is this going to cost?' When there is a will and a vision, money can be found for most projects."

In closing, McMahon urged those present to participate in efforts to preserve the uniqueness of their communities -- for spiritual as well as aesthetic and financial reasons. "When we lose our past, we lose our sense of identity, our well-being, our sense of security and our cultural continuity," he said. "Get involved, and talk with people who might disagree with you -- and listen to them."