

Policies that built first-ring suburbs in 1950s now foster their decline



MinnPost photo by Steve Berg

By Steve Berg | Friday, April 1, 2011

There are two ways to think about the decline and impending decay of the inner suburbs, a hot topic around the country.

One is to consider it part of a natural progression. Just as older Northeastern and Midwestern cities began their downward spiral in the 1950s, losing both population and relative wealth, now it's the turn of their first-ring suburbs.

Responding to evidence in recent Census reports, a gloomy audience at the Bloomington Arts Center on Wednesday night watched clips from two

films by Andrea Torrice depicting the decline of 1950s-era suburbs near Philadelphia and Cincinnati. Panelists then lamented some of the same trends in Brooklyn Park, Richfield, Robbinsdale and other first-ring Twin Cities communities. Increasing poverty, crumbling infrastructure, struggling schools and abandoned strip malls were all part of the discussion, as were reductions in population, tax base and political influence.

Everyone seemed to agree that shifting racial patterns complicate the picture. As the new Census results show, African-Americans, Hispanics and East African immigrants are moving to the inner suburbs in large numbers, not only here but across the country. Their hopes for better schools and jobs, safer streets and tolerant attitudes aren't always realized, however.

Back to the future

Panelists Ahmed Adam Jama, a Somali-born businessman, and Melissa Krull, superintendent of Eden Prairie schools, discussed a bitter dispute over school boundaries that placed immigrants and some white families on opposite sides. It echoed the kinds of fights common in major cities 40 years ago.

"We know that education is the way out for us," Jama said.

Another panelist, Steven Devich, Richfield's city manager, eloquently described the broader dilemma facing inner suburbs. Because the towns went up so rapidly after the Second World War, their infrastructures are crumbling all at once, he said. Taxes must rise in order to fix streets, parks and schools and to maintain police, trash pickup and other services. But if taxes rise, middle-class residents move farther out. As middle-class residents move, businesses and jobs follow. Ghost malls, weedy parking lots and rental houses appear. The tax base falls farther and decline becomes inevitable, especially as government budgets shrink to the bone and political clout shifts to the outer edge.

Decline as government policy

But there's another way to think about first-ring decline — and to imagine a solution.

Back in the 1950s, the decline and decay of older cities wasn't really an inevitable consequence of market forces, as most believe, but a product of deliberate federal policy. Congress authorized mortgage loans (GI and FHA) aimed at subsidizing returning servicemen and their families. The government also secured sources of cheap foreign oil and undertook the largest public works project in history — the Interstate highway system. The result was a massive social engineering project that encouraged middle-class whites to abandon cities and move to what became first-ring suburbs.

I'm not saying that Washington set out to punish older cities. Nor am I suggesting that no middle-class flight would have happened if not for federal subsidy. I am suggesting that federal policy aided and abetted the process. Those same policies remain in place today, along with zoning, taxing, lending and design practices that encourage developers to abandon old property and build on new ground farther out. Relatively cheap gasoline (by world standards) also plays a huge role. In other words, the same rules that built the first suburbs in the 1950s are now hastening their demise.

There's another factor that exacerbates the current trend. Back in the 1950s, working-class families in new suburban digs could expect to move up the income ladder. Not so today. With income and wealth increasingly sequestered in fewer hands and good jobs harder to find and keep, the pathway to a middle class life is harder to achieve.

How to restore balance

If nothing else, the Census' confirmation of inner suburban decline seems to have set off alarms about imbalanced growth. Myron Orfield's infamous maps look more and more real. (The University of Minnesota law professor is a national expert — and something of a prophet — on the problems facing inner suburbs.) On Wednesday night in Bloomington, Orfield started what turned out to be a prescriptive agenda for facing and solving the dilemma.

"The Twin Cities is one place," he said. It's a profound thought and vital to any solution. The metro region competes, succeeds and fails as one unit. If Minneapolis or St. Paul or the inner suburbs crash and burn, everyone suffers. Woodbury, Lakeville and Maple Grove can't maximize their potential if the metro core hollows out.

Susan Haigh, chair of the Metropolitan Council, set out another cornerstone. "Everything is connected," she said, meaning that the issues of housing, transit, jobs and economic development cannot be separated from one another. They are intertwined. "The region will be most successful when we have balance," she said, adding that one of her priorities will be to discover and repair the impediments to infill development that could restore balance to the region.

Winners and losers

Suburbs losing population in the 2010 census include: Anoka, Arden Hills, Coon Rapids, Corcoran, Dayton, Deephaven, Falcon Heights, Mendota Heights, Minnetonka, Mounds View, New Brighton, Orono, Roseville, Shoreview, Shorewood, Spring Lake Park, Wayzata, Vadnais Heights.

Suburbs that lost population in the 2010 and 2000 counts include: Bloomington, Crystal, Fridley, Mound, New Hope, Newport, Robbinsdale, White Bear Lake.

Suburbs gaining population in the 2010 census include: Shakopee, Woodbury, Maple Grove, Lakeville, Blaine, Elko-New Market, Mayer, Rockford, Carver, Rogers, Hugo, Farmington, Rosemount, Prior Lake, Chaska.

Sources: 2010 Census, Metropolitan Council