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Saving The Inner Suburbs

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SAVING THE INNER SUBURBS by Michael Lewyn

A couple of times a month, I go to the Mt. Carmel Gardens home for the elderly on University Boulevard near I-95, to help Congregation Etz Chaim raise funds through its bingo games. When I go there, I see a stereotypical 1960s suburb: a neighborhood which, like my own Mandarin neighborhood, is built around the automobile, the strip mall, and the single-family home.

Yet this stretch of University Boulevard is hardly my idea of the American Dream. In fact, it appears to be a declining neighborhood: not a slum, but an area just scruffy enough that I probably wouldn't want to live there if I could afford to live somewhere else. In the census tract just north of this part of University Boulevard, about 40 percent of the children under 5 live in single-parent homes, and the median family income of $39,000 is a bit below the citywide average. This area isn't the only middle-aged Jacksonville suburb facing aging pains. Streets like Beach Boulevard and Phillips Highway appear to be packed with poverty, and even parts of Mandarin are becoming a bit blighted.

While some Jacksonville suburbs are deteriorating, intown Jacksonville is blossoming: downtown Jacksonville is beginning to become a neighborhood again, while houses in Springfield are selling for prices that I could never afford to pay. The outer edge of Jacksonville is even more prosperous: outer suburbs both inside and outside Duval County are becoming wealthier. But the in-between neighborhoods, the suburban neighborhoods built in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, are beginning to experience the social problems of poverty and crime traditionally associated with cities.

Jacksonville is not atypical. In the book Tomorrow's Cities, Tomorrow's Suburbs, two University of Virginia professors, William Lucy and David Phillips, describe the results of a survey conducted in six metro areas (Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Washington, DC and Richmond). Of these regions, Richmond is probably the most similar to Jacksonville: a mid-sized, spread out, automobile-oriented region. And in Richmond, the oldest and the newest neighborhoods did well in the 1990s. Among census tracts (areas with a few thousand people, comparable to small neighborhoods) with unusually high levels of housing built before 1940, relative family income increased in 40.9%- that is, in 40.9% of such neighborhoods, family income increased by a greater extent than in the rest of metropolitan Richmond. And among neighborhoods dominated by housing built since 1990, 44.6% enjoyed income gains exceeding the regional average.

But Richmond's middle-aged neighborhoods were less prosperous: only 14.8% of 1960s neighborhoods, and 10.4% of 1970s neighborhoods, experienced income gains faster than the regional average. Lucy and Phillips found that Richmond's experience was typical: in all six metro areas surveyed, family income grew faster than the regional average in 49.7% of the pre-1940 neighborhoods and 56.8% of the post-1990 neighborhoods, but by much lower levels in the neighborhoods built between 1940 and 1990 (and in particular, by only 20.6% in the census tracts dominated by 1960s housing). In each of the six regions surveyed, the census tract category experiencing the most rapid income growth were either the pre-1940 census tracts or the post-1990 census tracts.
How come? Both the oldest and the newest neighborhoods have advantages that cannot be

matched by Jacksonville's middle-aged neighborhoods. Downtown, Springfield, San Marco and Riverside boast proxmity to downtown and walkability: you can get around your neighborhood without crossing an eight-lane highway, and if you work downtown you can get there in just a few minutes. And if you live in one of Jacksonville's "outer counties" (like Clay or St. Johns), you may have a rougher commute and live in an unwalkable neighborhood, but you can get a new house larger than you would get in most of Jacksonville's 1960s neighborhoods.

But in an automobile-dependent middle-aged neighborhood, you get the worst of both worlds: a house smaller than you would get in St. Johns County, in a scruffier neighborhood, combined with the automobile dependence of an outer suburb. So naturally, affluent people are leaving these neighborhoods: singles moving north towards downtown, families mostly moving south to big-house exurbs.

How can Jacksonville's middle-aged neighborhoods be saved? A few cheap, noncontroversial measures could help: governments could give guidance on home renovations, subsidize attempts to enlarge homes in 1960s neighborhoods, or make these neighborhoods more pedestrian-friendly by narrowing streets and building sidewalks. But such modest steps may not be enough to stop the tidal wave of suburban decay.

A bolder policy could follow one of two directions - or perhaps mix elements of both. On the one hand, Jacksonville could opt for trusting the market. For example, Jacksonville could turn its more troubled neighborhoods into "property rights zones" without the usual zoning and subdivision regulations. In these zones, the prospect of minimal restrictions on development could attract a flood of builders seeking to avoid government bureaucracy. On the other hand, new development typically attracts a flood of angry neighbors.

Another market-oriented strategy would be to stop building and widening roads in outer suburbs. Suburban roads make it easier and easier to commute farther and farther, thus using taxpayer dollars to shift development away from older neighborhoods.

By contrast, a more regulation-minded policy could use land use regulation to stop sprawling outer suburban development. Government could refuse to allow additional homes to be built in newer areas, forcing developers to turn inward to our older suburbs. However, much of the region's new development is in our region's outer counties- so regulatory intervention would require the cooperation of several counties, not always an easy thing.

In sum, we may be able to solve the problems of our inner suburbs- but there may be a gap between what works and what is politically feasible.