

## Gas prices drive push to reinvent America's suburbs

By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

MARICOPA, Ariz. — Mayor Tony Smith proudly waves a thank-you letter from a major builder telling him that no city has ever reached out to him in his 30-year career the way Maricopa did.

**What Maricopa has been doing is unusual, especially for a distant suburb. This city about 35 miles south of Phoenix is asking builders not to develop just isolated subdivisions behind walls, but whole communities that encourage walking by including stores, schools and services nearby.**

"The people of Maricopa don't want to be a bedroom community, a city of rooftops," Smith says. "They want a self-sustained community."

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Especially today. As gas prices hover around \$4 a gallon, the nation's far-flung suburbs — which have boomed because they could provide larger homes at cheaper prices to those willing to drive farther — are losing their appeal.

Soaring energy costs and the foreclosure epidemic have jolted many Americans into realizing that their lifestyles are at risk. For many, ever-lengthening commutes in the search for affordable homes no longer make financial sense.

**In Maricopa and elsewhere, a movement is underway to transform suburbs from bedroom communities that sprang up during an era of cheap gasoline to lively, more cosmopolitan places that mix houses with jobs, shops, restaurants, colleges and entertainment.**

**Suburbs on the far edge of metro areas are turning aside strip malls and creating new downtowns and neighborhoods that favor pedestrians. They're trying to attract more employers and services such as hospitals, colleges and small airports.**

The appeal of urbanism is spreading to far suburbs such as Rancho Cucamonga, Calif. (about 42 miles east of Los Angeles), and Huntersville, N.C., about 16 miles north of Charlotte. Centers that combine residential, retail, office and entertainment are becoming popular far from urban centers.

Small historic towns on the edge of metropolitan areas such as Brighton, Colo., northeast of Denver, and Plainfield, Ill., southwest of Chicago, are emphasizing their Main Streets and history to provide a sense of community outside the walls of sprawling subdivisions.

**Mass transit is being embraced by towns that wouldn't have been born without the automobile. Here in Maricopa, the city introduced bus service to Phoenix and Tempe this year, providing the first mass transit alternative to residents, many of whom commute about 35 miles to Phoenix.**

**Such changes could have a profound effect on the way the nation develops as it prepares to absorb an estimated 100 million more people by about 2040.**

The scent of change is in the air in Maricopa, even in the way city officials talk. Words such as "bedroom community" have become dirty words. "Green," "sustainable," "walkable," "mass transit," "conservation," "open space" and "energy-efficient" punctuate the suburban dialogue.

"Absolutely, suburbs are not going to go away," says David Goldberg, spokesman for Smart Growth America, a national coalition of groups pushing for conservation and sustainable growth. "But the math is becoming very clear."

Until now, people were willing to drive increasingly far for a home they could afford. "Drive-till-you-qualify collapsed," Goldberg says. "It's done. It's not going to work as a housing strategy anymore."

**Living costs soar**

In the past year, as gas prices skyrocketed, the housing bubble burst and transit ridership soared, the cost of living farther out for many Americans went from manageable to pricey.

An analysis of real estate data by Fiserv Lending Solutions shows that home prices have fallen more in towns and neighborhoods far from urban centers than in close-in suburbs.

Developers traditionally have flocked to fields at the edge of metro areas to avoid the stricter zoning rules and higher fees they face in older, more densely populated communities. But that could be changing.

"The trends that pushed housing demand toward distant suburbs and rural areas were not sustainable," says David Stiff, chief economist at Fiserv. "The problem is that it can be two, three, four times as expensive to develop in close-in neighborhoods vs. outlying neighborhoods, if there's any space at all."

If gas prices continue to climb or government provides incentives to build more densely and closer in, development patterns should evolve, planners say.

"People respond to economic incentives," Stiff says. "Reducing commuting costs, trying to be more environmentally conscious and trying to find the cheapest housing affect decisions simultaneously."

"We're sort of stuck with retrofitting the suburbs," says Scott Bernstein, head of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, which for years has urged that transportation costs be a criterion for mortgage qualification. "That's not all that bad. ... There's nothing like a crisis to get people to try something."

Fresh ideas about development are spreading. A new website gives "walk" scores for more than 2,500 neighborhoods in the 40 largest cities (walkscore.com). Bernstein's group publishes a housing and transportation affordability index for 52 metropolitan areas (htaindex.cnt.org/).

Kenneth Himmel says now is "the perfect moment to be doing everything we're talking about."

The developer of the Reston Town Center in Virginia, the Time Warner Center in New York and City Place in West Palm Beach, Fla., says: "Some people will say, 'For \$300,000 to \$325,000, what are my options to live closer?' Maybe it's a smaller home. ... Do they want to drive or do they want to be five or 10 minutes from their office? People will make the trade."

## **The new reality**

The Phoenix area is legendary for sprawl. The city alone covers 517 square miles. Surrounding it is 14,000 square miles (twice the size of New Jersey) of desert dotted by seas of rooftops.

Foreclosures have hit the region hard — more than 5,500 the first six months of this year. Home construction permits have slowed by more than half in many communities. Still, building crews are grading tracts of land far from downtown.

Buckeye, more than 30 miles west of Phoenix, and Maricopa, a similar distance to the south, are the suburbs that have the highest number of new single-family home permits.

It's there that the seeds of change are taking root.

"We've got to get jobs to keep people from driving," says Buckeye Mayor Jackie Meck, who worries that gas "could easily go to \$8, \$10" a gallon.

Meck and town manager Jeanine Guy say Buckeye's goal was never to be a bedroom community but a gateway to California and the Pacific Rim. Already, developers of a master-planned community on 1,100 acres 30 miles beyond Buckeye — 60 miles from Phoenix — are rethinking their project because of fuel costs. They want to turn it into a distribution center that would cut gas costs for truckers from the West who are delivering goods to the Phoenix area.

In Maricopa, the city for the first time is encouraging builders to create sustainable communities that use alternative forms of energy or are near jobs, goods and services. Already, the city is home to Arizona's first ethanol plant and a facility that uses recycled water to flush toilets. And there are the commuter buses to downtown Phoenix and Tempe.

When gas prices inched toward \$4 a gallon, Donna Nance bemoaned her 40-mile, one-way commute to work her job as the court clerk in downtown Phoenix. Gas would now cost her \$60 a week, a blow for a single mom who had moved here to get a house at a better price.

She considered moving closer, at the risk of giving up her three-bedroom, single-family home and might have done it if Maricopa had not introduced Phoenix-bound commuter buses in April. Nance, 43, now drives 7 miles to the bus stop and enjoys the ride. Even if gas prices keep climbing, Nance says she has no reason to leave.

"We hit a sweet spot starting a transit program here," Mayor Smith says.

It's a reflection of how some suburbs are trying to replace their "middle of nowhere" image with a "there." "Maybe gas drops to \$3 a gallon and people will say we don't need to do this anymore," says Guy, the Buckeye town manager. "We do."

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**