

The Flip Side

by craig piechura



Last-chance diet for developers

More serious than the paunch many of us carry around is the physical condition into which we have allowed our cities and township to fall.

We can't keep leaving old neighborhoods behind like they were a used Impala with a blown transmission. The last chance diet for runaway development may be some type of strict growth control program that preserves open land and keeps small towns intact.

We've seen whites trek farther westward and northward every year. New subdivisions to the west are bumping into Ypsilanti and they're running smack up against Kensington Metro Park in the north.

Once agricultural lands are now sprouting split-level ranches.

This is happening because home buyers have been convinced that they are not living in a house; they are residing, "for the time being," in an investment. And residential developers are only making money when they're building new houses.

WILLIAM SERRIN, former Detroit Free Press labor writer, is presently at work on a book about American housing development. Judging from his remarks in a recent New York Times, developers will not fare well in his final assessment of the housing industry.

Serrin makes the point that while legislators, columnists, and back-fence philosophers cluck-click about the nation's "urban problem," they ignore the larger issue.

"We have a settlement problem," Serrin writes. "We do not need an urban policy. It is wrong to say the nation has an urban problem."

"Development works like this: We build cities. We then construct in undeveloped areas—suburbs, small towns, woodlands, farm areas—without restraint. These areas become new cities with everything the old cities offered: jobs, stores, symphonies, colleges, cemeteries.

"Periodically, between wars, following riots, when unemployment rises, pressures build to aid cities. Laws are passed. Public housing. Urban renewal. Model cities. Community development. An unemployment act. All miss the point. The problem is not the cities. The problem is what we call the suburbs."

That's us gang. You can run but you can't hide. If we are truly sincere when we say we want to save the cities, Mr. Serrin believes we must enact a national development policy that preserves open land and forces development back into cities where there are existing sewers, streets and services.

That doesn't mean that the federal government should cart everyone back behind the confines of Eight Mile or Telegraph. It means that people living in small towns and on family farms will not be forced to sell their land to a developer when the next subdivision and Taco Bell comes through. Because it won't be going through unless the project demonstrates civic responsibility.

Canton Township is currently spending tens of thousands of dollars just to study the concept of

buying up farmers' development rights in an effort to save farmland.

In Commerce Township, near Walled Lake in Oakland County, a group of citizens who defeated the M-275 highway project is pushing for a growth limitation ordinance.

I don't know if either plan goes far enough. But it's a start.

The best measure of their potential effectiveness is the howl either proposal evokes from developers. They scream that either approach infringes on a person's right to do whatever he chooses with his property.

Serrin answers the developers with blunt language:

"Developers blackmail us.

As open areas are developed, the developers play township against township, county against county, state against state to gain tax concessions for housing developments, shopping centers, factories. Asked to return to cities, they blackmail us again, saying they need government incentives—in criminal cases this is called a bribe—to develop in cities.

"Government plays the role of conspirator. Incentives are authorized. The people who destroyed us are supposed to save us."

Think about that the next time the word "progress" is used interchangeably with new development.

Skittish horse bolts, does flip and floats

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink... or swim in it.

Dan's Count, a 2,000-pound, 7-year-old thoroughbred, got an unexpected dip in his owner's pool, and it took a Westland fire department rescue unit two hours to get him out.

It all began when Dan's Count was in the fenced backyard of his owner's home. The horse, who normally stays in a boarding stable, was visiting his owner, Lacy Lopez, 15.

The horse was nibbling on a few blades of grass when one of his reins dropped to the ground. He stepped on the rein, made a complete flip and plunged into the family's nearby, in-ground swimming pool.

He bobbed around in the water, frightened, and tried to get out. He couldn't make it.

"It was a catastrophe," said Lona Lopez, Lacy's mother. "I ran into the house and called the fire department."

Firefighters and neighbors scouted two hours for a ramp to place on the diving board for the horse to use as an escape route. A tow truck waited nearby, in case the horse had to be hoisted from the pool.

Lacy, meanwhile, stayed in the pool the entire time, walking Dan's Count to keep him from becoming stiff.

Finally, firefighters located an aluminum ramp, placed it on the diving board and coaxed the horse out of the pool.

Firefighter Gilbert Eldridge said it was a most unusual rescue run, surpassed only by one in which he "rescued a fat woman stuck in a bathtub."

Lucy later walked her scraped but otherwise unharmed horse back to the boarding stable on Wildwood, where he now is reported to be "stiff but in good condition."

Mrs. Lopez expressed her thanks to the many neighbors who also helped in the rescue effort.

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