

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN

Making Great Places: Think Globally, Act Locally



2006-07 SEASON: FORUM #6
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7, 2007
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On March 7, 2007, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities By Design" hosted its sixth presentation of the 2006-2007 Forum season. The presentation was given by former Pasadena Mayor and current City Manager of Ventura, CA, Rick Cole. Mr. Cole was also a former City Manager of Azusa, CA, which under his watch went from being known as the "caboose on the Foothill train" to being the "most improved city in the San Gabriel Valley." As City Manager of Ventura, Mr. Cole is successfully introducing form-based codes as one of the mechanisms in his efforts to create a vibrant, livable city. Mr. Cole has used stubborn optimism, community involvement and creative solutions to help transform cities into great places.

Thinking Globally

Mr. Cole minced no words by opening with the statement that "we are going through a time of *cataclysmic* global change!" He showed slides of flooded cities, dilapidated slums, and smoggy freeway-dominated metropolises, yet offered hope by saying we could reverse these catastrophic trends by stepping up to the plate and being catalytic leaders.

With America as its example, China has taken the lead as the world's largest oil consumer and has constructed an astounding 112,000 miles of highway. The world currently has 1 billion cars and 1 billion human beings living in slums. There are now more people living in the city than in rural areas - a fact forcing us to re-evaluate the way we think, design, build, and legislate within our communities.

The DNA of Sprawl

According to Mr. Cole, following the Industrial Revolution and World War II, Americans believed they deserved a better way of life. The notion of scenic, uncrowded, “green cities” inspired by Chicago’s World Fair in 1893, spread across the country like wildfire. Americans were simultaneously enamored with this suburban utopia and the newly mass produced automobile. The idea was to combine the car, freeway, and suburb into a dreamscape-like “autopia,” compliments of General Motors. Unfortunately cities formed too quickly in a makeshift manner and not at all like people had imagined. Americans rushed into the suburbs that were replicated endlessly across the country. Although the first model “greenbelt” towns were well-designed pastoral communities, in reality the new towns that popped up were left to engineers to *engineer*- which all too often involved putting more thought into how wide the road was rather than how livable the place would be.

Mr. Cole relates the places we live to a kit of parts connected only by freeways. These kits have single uses, like Legos piled together, or “crammed crap” as Mr. Cole puts it. The real problem exists in the law, states Mr. Cole; “Crayola” zoning where each land-use is isolated

“Everyone has these great aspirations. But the law has not changed.”

-Rick Cole

and assigned a color is *law!* It’s tempting, explains Mr. Cole, to use developers as scapegoats and blame sprawl solely on them, but the worst culprits in sprawl are cumbersome zoning codes. Zoning codes typically segregate and isolate the places where we work, play, pray, learn and live. These “Euclidean Zoning Codes” were created out of fear of mixing land uses – subsequently the American way of life is heavily reliant on cars to connect them to the places they have to go.

The Evolution of Sprawl

Americans have adapted to become a car-dependent society, traveling an average of twenty-five miles per day and resulting in the loss of our free time, impacts to our physical & mental health, and loss of open space to the almighty freeway. According to the Center for Disease Control, cites Mr. Cole, “There is increasing evidence that the way we design our communities discourages physical activity such as walking and cycling, contributes to air pollution and promotes pedestrian injuries and fatalities.” Some in the health community have begun to find strong connections between health and community design. As worded by former Forum speaker Dr. Richard Jackson, “We must be alert to the health benefits, including less stress, lower blood pressure and overall improved physical and mental health when people live and work in accessible, safe, well-designed, thoughtful structures and landscapes.”

We can’t serve people by serving cars, asserts Mr. Cole, and unfortunately the evolution of sprawl has left us with a bleak future. Citizens routinely voice their frustration at nasty, sometimes violent, community meetings. The prevailing “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) attitudes are inevitably combined with austere zoning codes resulting in a bitter elixir of godforsaken suburbs, according to Mr. Cole. Developments frequently apply phony details tacked onto houses in predictable patterns to make them “French country” or “Tuscan style,” and must go through design review, a process Mr. Cole calls “just lipstick on a pig.”

Altering the Code

Fundamentally changing the places we reside into livable habitats requires a zoning revolution of sorts. Mr. Cole looks to form-based codes and the historic approach of New Urbanism to jump-start this community coup. Principles that create great places include building cities around people, not

“Zoning is the DNA of sprawl. Form-based codes are the DNA of civilization.”

-Rick Cole

cars. Mr. Cole also advocates using the fine-grain concept where there's "a place for everything and everything in its place" with mixed uses and many options for navigating to these places. An important feature of form-based codes is that these codes annul the usual timely project-by-project scrimmage and predetermine the character of the project within its context.

Acting Locally

Mr. Cole accused many communities of using unimplemented empty rhetoric such as "mixed-use" and "sustainability" simply because these terms are en vogue. It takes more than trendy verbiage written into General Plans to reverse the momentum of sprawl. Mr. Cole learned first hand during his time in Azusa and Pasadena that community involvement and activism are the crucial ingredients for thriving communities. Cities can't allow developers and poor precedents to write the future. For example, accepting a narrow sidewalk along a busy street instead of demanding holistic pedestrian centered design is selling the community short.

"We have to engage people. It's a very messy process. It's called democracy."
-Rick Cole

The Ventura Story

Under Mr. Cole's leadership, the City of Ventura is working to translate a lofty vision statement into reality. Design charrettes, zoning reform, and putting the pedestrian into the leading role are helping to transform the City of Ventura. City officials (with tremendous help from active community members), are revitalizing Ventura into a more healthy, pedestrian friendly, and much more economically vital place - with distinct neighborhoods, districts, and paths. It is Mr. Cole's mantra to leave cities greater, better, and more beautiful than when you arrive. He achieves this by working to reclaim public space and reconnect the community both within itself and to its greater context. Successful change depends on collective personal and political willpower, and a commitment to "keep re-connecting with the vision."

Mr. Cole closed by reiterating the future cataclysmic global change we face. It is easy, he warns, to ignore or get overwhelmed with our massive problems. Yet Americans set the example whether we like it or not, for how the world will live. We must be catalytic leaders.

"The time is right to think about how we live in America in a broader framework."
-Rick Cole