In general, there is fundamental dissatisfaction and alarm with the direction that urban development in this country has taken in the second half of this century. Despite the rise of property rights, there seems to be fairly broad consensus that we cannot continue to sprawl endlessly across the countryside in auto-dependent patterns of development. Although much of the public is against rapacious development, it is at the same time bothered by density and overregulation. That ambivalence leaves society in a difficult dilemma, one that is political in nature and that needs to be addressed by policy makers, civic leaders, and citizens as well as designers and planners. It cannot be left to government technocrats or to the vicissitudes of the marketplace. We need to work to create and maintain more livable, affordable, and sustainable communities through public policy. The following are some incremental steps that can be taken to further those goals:

Growth Management. Infill and redevelopment of existing urban centers and towns should be made a higher priority than new suburban development. Investment in suburbs often has meant a disinvestment in cities. Retaining, reusing, and revitalizing existing towns and cities should be a top local, state, and national priority. Maintaining existing communities should be given higher priority than building new communities because their social, physical, and institutional infrastructures already are in place. Maintaining or rebuilding good K-12 public educational systems in existing communities is probably the most critical priority for neighborhood stability and health.

Tight urban growth boundaries should be maintained around all towns and cities. Ample open space and a well-defined edge of agricultural land and interconnected riparian and wildlife corridors should be protected in perpetuity as greenways and nature preserves. A network of pedestrian and bike paths should link existing population centers as much as possible. Urban villages, transit-oriented development (TOD)—also known as pedestrian pockets—and traditional neighborhood design (TND) should be used within existing urbanized areas to reduce sprawl on the urban fringe and to save open space. The experience with design charrettes has shown that it is easier to reach consensus for new development and growth in underused parts of towns and cities than in existing neighborhoods. Accordingly, the least-used sites should be used first, reducing the political turmoil and complexity of inserting new development into existing, more mature neighborhoods.

The Automobile. Prices should be raised, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) should be lowered, and use of automobiles no longer should be subsidized. New and more robust regulations and taxes that will make market prices more commensurate with true and total costs should be adopted. The car and sprawl have been bankrolled by taxpayers for decades, with money thrown in for transit as a palliative. Society's ends—such as education, the arts, parks, and housing—are more deserving of tax dollars. Pocketbook issues often are the most critical ones in a secular, consumerist society, where it has been shown repeatedly that even widely accepted social or environmental imperatives will not change behavior without economic incentives or penalties. Being politically correct is not enough.

A much higher gas tax would be an effective step toward reducing VMT and would do much to simultaneously reduce sprawl, fuel consumption, traffic congestion, and air pollution. Secondary economic measures, such as congestion pricing and pay-as-you-drive auto insurance, would reward vehicle owners who drive less. Home mortgage policies could provide homebuyers with credits for owning fewer automobiles and using them less. Lenders should be made to recognize that households in certain neighborhoods depend less on automobiles and, accordingly, have greater discretionary income to devote to mortgages. The mortgage policy could be administered by statistically rating neighborhoods according to transit availability and proximity to workplaces and could also extend discounts for energy-efficient housing and for home offices, both of which can reduce monthly expenses.

In addition to economic policies, several regulatory policies could help. Low and zero-emission vehicle re
requirements could be adopted for a percentage of the automobile fleet in the region and state. Fuel standards could be increased and shuttle vans and taxis could be deregulated.

Last, technological policies could be adopted that would encourage the development of hypercars, station cars, automated highways, and biospheres. Such vehicles are likely to be far more efficient and cleaner than conventional automobiles.

Transit. A comprehensive regional transit system—walking, bicycling, van pools, community vans, jitneys, local buses, express buses, HOV lanes, trolleybuses, light rail, commuter rail, and high-speed intercity rail—should be developed. Rail systems could be implemented incrementally but should be built quickly enough to reduce automobile traffic and to shape a new-higher-density development pattern to complement the sprawl. It should be recognized that automobile ownership and use will remain high in the foreseeable future, but an array of viable alternatives should be supported while subsidies for automobile use are reduced. When evaluating the costs, it needs to be kept in mind just how high the total true cost of automobile use is—typically about $500 per month to buy, maintain, park, and operate a privately owned car, plus the public costs of right-of-way land, bridges, roads, police, gasoline subsidies, congestion, pollution, and highway deaths.

The Northwest Environmental Watch estimates the cost for all monetary and nonmonetary costs to the driver and society at $1.05 per mile. Investing in transit can buy a four-fold reduction in transportation costs; it can buy a land use pattern that can structure a region in more livable, affordable, and sustainable ways and that can import a greater regional consciousness and common identity to a complicated quilt of local jurisdictions. Walking, which begins and ends every transit trip, is the cheapest, healthiest, and cleanest way to move around. It may be the single best barometer of a healthy city—when people walk, other things tend to be right.

Planning. Urban design guidelines should be developed for all parts of the region to codify in clear and simple terms the new urbanist design principles espoused here and those generated in the community. These principles include, but are not limited to, concepts such as mixed-use zoning, walkability and bikeability, compact site design, and community plans; infill housing; neighborhood schools and places of worship; main streets instead of shopping malls; zero lot line housing; accessory units; alleys; recyclable and reusable building materials; regional architectural and building types; and community empowerment. Municipalities also should adopt neighborhood plans—also referred to as specific area plans or sub-area plans—as an overlay to existing zoning ordinances and comprehensive plans. Together with the comprehensive plans often required by the state, urban design guidelines and neighborhood plans form a three-legged base for stable and effective planning.

The community should be given the opportunity and encouraged to play an active role in generating and adopting these guidelines and plans. Public participation can be viewed as only a practical means of defusing obstructionism, but the best and most potent ideas often come from citizens. The design charrette in particular can be an effective way to involve citizens in developing neighborhood plans. Similar guidelines and plans should be developed for rural areas beyond the urban growth boundary to help ensure that low-density development also is environmentally, socially, and economically sound and sustainable.

Granny Flats. Single-family homes owners should be permitted to add accessory apartments within or attached to their homes or garages. Municipalities should allow and encourage garage apartments and other detached accessory units, which probably are the single most cost-effective and quickest way to provide affordable housing units. These granny flats also known as home offices, studios, and teen cars—are large as well as private, and they allow an additional income stream that can make the primary dwelling more affordable.

Funding. Allocation of government funds for transportation, energy, clean air, clean water, housing, neighborhoods, and public works should be tied to local land use, transportation, and development policies that synergistically nurture compact, affordable, and more pedestrian-, bike-, and transit-oriented communities. Criteria should be established that require localities to achieve a more balanced use of transportation modes, such as more transit, bicycling, walking, and carpooling. Funding should be provided for model and pilot projects, as well as fast-track processing for development projects that exhibit these principles and policies.

Governance. Government should be reconfigured to empower both the region and the neighborhood to a greater extent. These are more appropriate and effective levels of governance than the municipality, which can be an arbitrary and awkward unit for planning and operations. More power could be shifted down to the neighborhood. With its homes, schools, stores, community center, library, firehouse, and places of worship, the neighborhood is the optimum social and physical unit for building community. At the same time, power should be shifted up to a new regional unit of government. Shifting power to the county is not optimum, because counties, like municipalities, have outdated and arbitrary boundaries. Also, counties in some parts of the country simultaneously act as both competitor and referee to municipalities on matters such as planning, sewage, and transportation when an unincorporated area competes with an incorporated area. What is needed in a more regional government now that corresponds to the region’s populated area, transit system, watersheds, and urban growth boundaries. The boundaries and names of existing cities and towns should be retained and appropriate decision making should be shifted from the increasingly obsolete mosaic of municipalities up to a regional unit and down to neighborhood units.

Undertaking these initiatives could have a salutary effect on community making in any metropolitan region, improving it at the macro and the micro level. Many of these initiatives could be implemented at the regional level. Others would require the state to act, and some, like the gas tax, are fair and effective only if enacted at the national level. Some will run head into property rights, an issue that soon could shake this country to its constitutional roots, much as civil rights and gender issues did in previous decades. Although they are recommended as incremental steps that can work within the existing system, that alone in concert they could constitute a revolution in the way government helps to make communities and to solve their problems.

Town making and city making can become the local government and society’s central mission, within which other issues facing society are confronted, such as employment, housing, health, care, education, crime, energy, pollution, and growth management. There is neither the time nor the money to solve these problems one at a time. Comprehensive, place-specific solutions are needed for such chronic and interdependent problems. This strategy is not a 180-degree turnabout, but it is a 90-degree shift that adds roads, streets, public open space, public lighting and utilities to the project. In the key, nodes and gate for the conurbation in the city, the charter of the Congress for the New Urbanism. However, on balance, new urbanism offers an infinitely more promising future than does business as usual. The time to start building better towns and cities is now, before all the outstanding issues can be resolved and before sprawl has soured the land, depleted natural resources, sapped urban centers, and defeated people’s hopes and resolve—both in North America and in other areas throughout the world that may be complicated, or short-lived enough, to follow us into the abyss.