

THE BURNHAM BLOG

[Vision & Theme](#)

[About the Logo](#)

[Centennial Committee and Staff](#)

[Sponsors](#)

[Newsroom](#)

[News Coverage](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[E-News & Social Media](#)

[The Burnham Blog](#)

[Get Involved](#)

[Contact Us](#)

Walking in the land of cars

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri., 10/16/2009 –8:10 am.

First of two

In the Encyclopedia of Chicago, Orland Park is described as “a classic example of the American automobile-based suburb.” So “walkable” is a surprising word to hear from the mouth of village planning director Robert Sullivan.

As in: “We’ve started to create a more walkable village center.”

Not all that surprising, I guess, since, all throughout the Chicago region, suburbs are re-imagining themselves. The bland stereotype of huge tracts of single-family homes linked by traffic-clogged highways is evolving into something new, something a bit more complex.

Suburbs from Rolling Meadows to Aurora to Orland Park are beginning to take advantage of proximity to commuter train routes to create a different sort of neighborhood, called in urban planning jargon a “transit-oriented development.”

The idea is that people who live in this sort of area are able to use the commuter line and other public transit links to get to and from jobs so they don’t need to drive their cars as much. They can walk to the train.

And, if the development has enough other elements, they can walk to parks and to cafes and to shopping and to entertainment.

This means that a denser sort of community can be created. It’s possible to offer a greater variety of housing types, such as townhouses and apartments in multi-unit buildings. While nowhere near as crowded as a Chicago neighborhood such as Lakeview, this kind of community doesn’t sprawl across the landscape the way a single-family home subdivision does.

THE BURNHAM BLOG

Urban planning touches every part of your day to day life. Join the conversation that is shaping the region for the next 100 years.

→ [Register or Login to comment](#)

SUBSCRIBE VIA RSS



Use our RSS feed to track new blog posts.

ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It’s rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

prices --- and a much greater range of income levels among the families who settle there. This means that some of the people who live there are able to take lower-paying jobs in and around the community, and that means that they don't have to drive in from somewhere else, and further clog the roads.

There's also the identity thing.

"We're trying to promote an identity and an image," says Sullivan. So, for example, southwest suburban Orland Park goes out of its way to tap creative architects for its public buildings, such as Michael Barnes of Lohan Anderson whose public library building, opened in 2004, has won numerous awards.

A new (old) downtown

But even more important, he says, is the idea of creating a downtown that can give the village a new identity and focal point. For 34 years, that role has been served by the Orland Square Mall at 151st Street and LaGrange Road --- a shopping magnet that has been a commercial and tax boon for Orland Park but also an over-shadowing presence.

And it isn't as one-size-fits-all as those subdivisions.

Variety of housing, variety of people

Subdivisions tend to be defined by a fairly narrow range of sales price. The prices in one may be higher than those down the road. But, within the subdivision, each home costs just about the same as the one next door. As a result, the people who buy the homes tend to have the same income level. And, as a result, they tend to be pretty much like each other.

Because a transit-oriented development usually has a variety of housing types, there's a much greater range of

“The Mayor [Daniel J. McLaughlin] says he doesn’t want the kids in Orland Park to think of the Mall as the downtown,” Sullivan says.



The plan is to build a new downtown by using the old town center --- a small section of 143rd Street, just west of Southwest Highway and the rebuilt Metra train station --- as the centerpiece. To complement this historic area, the village is planning a \$100 million development on a three-sided

parcel east of the train station called the Main Street Triangle.

At least, it was developing this area until the housing market dried up completely and the nation’s finances went as sour as month-old milk.

“The infrastructure is all in,” Sullivan says. “It’s as ideal a location as you can get.”

“A place you’ll want to go”

So, once the economy bounces back, the stage is set for bringing in mixed-use buildings, outdoor cafes and mid-rise housing, some as tall as six-stories, with 240 units, around four new parks.

Have the young Orland Park residents begun to

think of the area as the village's downtown?

“No, not yet,” Sullivan says. “But, once all this is done, it’s going to be a place you’ll want to go.”

Next: Planning as a way of life