

Smarter Growth For Greater Richmond

Tuesday, Sep 25, 2007 - 12:09 AM

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Growth has brought many benefits to the Richmond region, but it also has brought sprawling development, escalating traffic, and an affordable housing shortage. A new report by the Southern Environmental Law Center and the Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corp. shows how these challenges are linked and how they can be addressed more quickly and effectively. The stakes are increasing, with the region projected to need more than 125,000 new housing units between 2000 and 2030 to meet population growth.

The Richmond area faces a growing affordable housing crisis. The median value of owner-occupied housing rose from just under \$120,000 to more than \$180,000 between 2000 and 2005, jumping more than 50 percent in only five years. Sales prices have climbed even higher, even during the current market slowdown. Incomes have not kept pace, and today many people -- including an increasing percentage of the workforce and retirees on fixed incomes -- cannot afford to buy or rent in many parts of the region.

A lack of affordable housing greatly limits choices for many individuals and families of where to live and work. It can hurt economic competitiveness by making it difficult to attract and expand businesses and to attract and retain employees, and by concentrating poverty and accompanying social problems. Moreover, it can undermine communities by forcing essential employees such as teachers, police, and firefighters to live outside the area where they work.

IN RECENT decades, development has sprawled into previously rural areas, farther from central services, schools, shopping, and jobs. Almost 59,000 acres were developed in the area in just five years -- outpacing Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. At this rate, more land will be developed in the Richmond region in the next 20 years than in the previous 400. Localities increasingly recognize the high costs of extending services to scattered development.

Most housing is still being designed for individual families, offering limited choices to fit the needs of younger workers, single parents, senior citizens, and others in an increasingly diverse population. Few energy-efficient choices are available, and rising electricity and fuel bills are a particularly serious problem for low-income households.

As homes and businesses spread apart and people travel farther looking for affordable housing, we often have little choice but to drive everywhere -- and to drive longer distances. The Richmond region has the highest driving rate of any Virginia metro area. People in the region drive over 27 million miles daily. Increased driving means less time for families and community activities, more congestion, more energy consumption, and more air and water pollution. The average household spends more on transportation than on anything other than housing, and families moving farther out for affordable homes often spend more on transportation than they save on housing.

By the same token, the region's lack of transportation choices can be especially burdensome to individuals without a car or no longer able to drive, who all too often find it difficult to get or retain jobs

(particularly in suburban locations not served by transit), or to accomplish tasks many of us take for granted.

WE HAVE ample opportunities to change course, including:

- Reducing regulatory barriers to traditional neighborhoods and towns that mix residential and commercial uses and accommodate a range of housing styles, sizes, and prices;
- Promoting "infill" development, revitalizing existing communities, and redeveloping declining commercial areas;
- Reorienting spending and policies at the state, regional, and local level to provide alternatives to driving;
- Offering incentives for greener buildings to make new and existing structures healthier, cleaner, more energy efficient;
- Requiring -- or at least offering incentives to -- developers to include meaningful levels of affordable housing in projects, and providing additional funding for affordable housing;
- Guiding growth to designated areas and protecting rural and natural areas; and
- Promoting multi-jurisdictional cooperation and mechanisms, such as a regional housing coalition and regional housing trust fund.

These are just some approaches that would foster more sustainable long-term growth while offering greater housing and transportation choices; better integrating places where people live, work, and shop; protecting open spaces; strengthening communities; and safeguarding environmental and human health. We need to act now.

Frances Stanley is the research analyst for the Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corp. The report, released today, is available at www.SouthernEnvironment.org and www.virginialisc.org.

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