

Designing for people, not cars

In the 1950s, Ithaca high school, Ithaca College and the Greyhound bus station were all downtown. Lately, while the local population has grown slowly, development outside of the city has spread far into the countryside.

A major reason for this trend is that American cities and towns — including those in Tompkins County — are designed around automobiles. While cars are indispensable, they also contribute to the big issues that make communities unsustainable.

These issues include global effects like our warming climate and dependence on non-renewable resources like petroleum, plus local impacts like pollution and suburban sprawl that alters the natural landscape, isolates people and burdens public services.

By all accounts, local land development is far outpacing population growth. The U.S. Bureau of the Census shows the Tompkins County population grew by 25.5 percent between 1970 and 2000.

Between 1969 and 1999, the amount of developed land in Tompkins County more than doubled, according to statistics based on aerial surveys supplied by the Tompkins County Planning Department. In 1969, fully 11,821 acres of land were used for residential, industrial, commercial, institutional and transportation uses. In 1999, this figure rose to 27,493 acres, an increase of 132 percent.

This kind of land use pattern reduces the county's open

KRISHNA RAMANUJAN/GUEST COLUMNIST



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space and burdens limited financial resources for maintaining existing infrastructure, according to Katherine Borgella, principal planner, Tompkins County Planning Department.

Buses that need to travel more miles with fewer riders and commuters from outside of population centers put stress on the road network, which leads to more traffic congestion and deterioration of our roads.

Rob Steuteville, editor and publisher of New Urban News, pointed out that in the 1950s and 1960s, the suburban model became the cutting edge planning design. In suburbia, single-family homes are lined up in residential neighborhoods linked to distant shopping centers by roads and highways. That pattern was encoded into zoning and continues to dominate the way our communities are built — though our needs are changing.

Sometimes, outdated codes also hinder redevelopment in the city. For example, the site of the polluted former Ithaca Gun factory is zoned for

industrial uses only. At the same time, when a developer recently offered to clean up the grounds and convert the building into condominiums, he was forced to appeal the zoning codes and eventually left. While it is debatable whether condominiums in that area were the best use of the facility, outdated codes restrict new use of that space, Steuteville said.

Promoting growth in central, already built areas can conserve resources, build the tax base and provide people with easy access to the things they need. And this may help provide a new template for growth that keeps sprawl in check.

"When more people live where they can know each other and work together, the community becomes stronger," said John Schroeder, a former city alderman.

Condensed development near urban centers can help promote a more sustainable transportation system, said Fernando de Aragon, director of the Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council.

Buses, cars, bikes and pedestrians must all be part of the mix to accommodate everyone. By creating a transportation system with many options for travel, congestion is reduced.

A 5-percent reduction in traffic volumes may cause a 10 to 30 percent increase in average vehicle speeds, according to the Victoria Policy Transport Institute, a transportation research organization based in Canada.

While plans for including bicycle lanes throughout town have existed for 10 years, they have yet to be realized. "People didn't want to lose the parking space in front of their house," said de Aragon of the last attempt to implement the plan.

For these reasons and more, public involvement, understanding and cooperation are necessary, not just within communities but between communities.

"The citizens have to be part of it, and they have to have a chance to see what the county is becoming," Steuteville said.

In an effort to foster dia-

logue and understanding about these issues and others related to sustainability, the public is invited to join in ongoing "sustainability salons" taking place in meeting places around the county.

This week's topic will be "Designing sustainable communities." The salons are a project of Sustainable Tompkins, which has gained the support of Ithaca College, Park Foundation, Cornell University and various local businesses and organizations. For more information click on the "Sustainability" link at www.ithaca.edu.

Ramaniujan lives in Ecovillage at Ithaca.

Sustainability salons

- 5:30-7 p.m. today at Rogues Harbor, 2079 E. Shore Drive, Lansing.
- 5:30-7 p.m. Tuesday, April 27 at Gimmel Coffee, 506 W. State St., Ithaca.
- 5-6:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 28 at Juna's Cafe on The Commons in downtown Ithaca.
- 7-8:30 p.m. Thursday, April 29 at WowNet Digital Cafe, 111 N. Aurora St., Ithaca.
- 7:30-9 p.m. on Thursday, April 29 at Simply Red Bistro, 53 E. Main St., Trumansburg