Highlands Garden Village: Smart Growth and Single Family Homes

Sunday's New York Times features a story by Shaila Dewan asking, "Is Suburban Sprawl on the Way Back?" Answer: not really, although highly compact urban development is hardly going to dominate, either. The best quote from the whole piece comes from Smart Growth America President Geoff Anderson, who correctly observed,

> The market isn't all for smart growth, nor is it all for sprawl, The thing for the last 50, 60 years has been that we've done nothing but sprawl.

Very true. And keep it in mind: despite the hysterics emanating from the fever swamps of the right, smart growth is a deregulatory, pro-market strategy. Smart growth advocates believe that if consumers actually get what they want, we will have a much smarter growth pattern than we have seen since the Second World War.

But Dewan does play into the Dumb Growth advocates' ideology by noting that although smart growth and compact development seems to be on the rise,

> Single-family homes still define the American dream and prospective home buyers overwhelmingly prefer them.

Assuming that this is true, this hardly undermines a smart growth strategy and might in fact enhance it. Going on 20 years now, urban planners and smart growth advocates have been busily building single-family homes. They are simply a different single-family home footprint than we are used to.

Consider the massive front lawn characteristic of traditional suburban sprawl. The front lawn is typically the most wasted space in a house — few families really use it — and in any event, reflects a demographic pattern more characteristic of the Eisenhower years than the present. That pattern was the one-earner family: husband works, wife stays home with the kids, presumably supervising them on the front lawn. Now, families look very different, and even if they are traditional two-parent families, both parents are working, with the kids in child care.

You can actually get pretty high density in a single-family neighborhood if you get rid of the front lawns. And if you combine that with shared backyards, such as featured in the Backyardigans cartoon series for children, you can get even more density *while losing very little usable space.* An example of this is Highlands Garden Village, as designed by new urbanist Peter Calthorpe: lots of single family houses, with lots of open space, but in a more compact pattern. It's smart growth and single family houses and there is no contradiction there.

Planners have known this for years. In a celebrated 1996-7 debate between Reid Ewing and Peter Gordon in the *Journal of the American Planning Association,* Ewing pointed out that Gordon's entire critique of smart growth, viz. that people like single-family homes, rests upon an assumption that is demonstrably false, viz. that smart growth rejects the single family home. It doesn't, Ewing pointed out: it simply advocates 1) for the market to guide choices (with appropriate pricing for environmental degradation and other damage caused by sprawl); and 2) for single-family homes to reflect the far more compact character that would come from accurate pricing.

This may be what eventually develops, as Dewan points out: a town centers concept where people can live close to their individual town center but in a single-family house. This is a smart growth strategy, and also will reduce VMT: the majority of VMT are for in-town trips, not commutes, so bringing houses closer to town centers would have a positive climate impact.

Single family homes are a smart growth strategy as long they are planned and developed, well, smartly. One can't help but wonder if smart growth critics ignore this because they don't understand it, or because they do.