On First Suburban Revitalization

Academic research in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s began to analyze the policy challenges unique to America’s first suburbs, communities generally developed between the end of World War II and 1960. The research demonstrated that many of these first suburbs—intentionally set apart from the central city of the region when first built—were beginning to face central city-like challenges such as depopulation, aging housing stock, deindustrialization, increasing poverty, and disinvestment. In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, many first suburbs around the country banded together to advocate about their unique challenges to state and federal policy makers. First instance, the Northeast First Suburbs Consortium around Cleveland was established in 1996 and the First Suburbs Consortium of Southwest Ohio’s was created in 2003.

The United States has experienced a shrinking of its middle class in the last generation. It stands to reason that as the size of the American middle class shrinks, so too will the number of middle class communities. Communities that used to be home to auto workers and machine toolmakers are now filled with call center phone operators, hotel and restaurant employees, and home-health aids. Low-income people have dispersed to suburbia to such a degree that there are now more Americans below the poverty line living in suburbia than in big cities or rural America (Kneebone and Berube, 2013). Suburban poor people are not evenly distributed, however, and often have found a home in a mass produced ranch or Cape Cod built right after World War II in a first suburb.

There is thus a recent and growing divergence among suburbs, both in Ohio and around the nation. Some inner-ring suburbs are thriving, attracting middle class or wealthy residents and corporations that pay hefty earnings taxes. These communities have challenges, to be sure, and need great local government managers to remain vibrant. Other Ohio first suburbs have a bleaker future caused by macroeconomic and societal trends beyond anyone’s ability to control or stop. Local governments did not bring about this decline, and the sparse set of policy options offered in the public policy arena involve changes at the state or federal levels that lack real champions. Today’s first suburban challenges are not even on the periphery of the periphery of federal and state policy makers.

Accordingly, no cavalry will be coming to rescue first suburbs. The revitalization of Ohio’s (and America’s) first suburbs are up to city managers to bring about.

We are all on our own, together. We must work together to find ways to reverse decline and manage the best we can. This will require new thinking and judicious risk taking. We as first suburban leaders must avoid “the Halberstam Trap.” Pulitzer-prize winning author David Halberstam said in The Best and the Brightest, “In government it is always easier to go forward with a program that does not work than to stop it altogether and admit failure.” Halberstam points to the essential first suburban challenge: how can an inner-ring suburb reverse decline with the same governing approaches that failed to prevent it in the first place? The short answer is we cannot.

Some first suburbs are offering insights and best practices. Mount Healthy (Bill Kocher) has a growing home-school network that gets around the challenges Mount Healthy faces with an
underperforming school district. Cleveland Heights (Tanisha Briley) has a pro-active rental property inspection program that helps reduce rental property decline. Blue Ash (David Waltz) has had a targeted community reinvestment area tax abatement that since its inception in mid-2014, has had 60 projects and $23.4 million in new investment in a particularly first suburban neighborhood of Blue Ash. Silverton (Tom Carroll) literally moved out of its 1951-built city hall so it could become a craft brewery and restaurant, converting an abandoned funeral home into its new Town Hall. Ohio has many city managers and local government leaders who are doing great things to bring about revitalization inside Ohio’s beltways.

The International City/County Management Association has funded a research fellowship to assemble best practices for revitalizing first suburbs. To learn more or to offer your own suggestions or ideas, email Tom Carroll at T.Carroll@Silvertonohio.us.

Also, stay tuned for a point/counter-point discussion to follow. Please send your comments to Tom Carroll at T.Carroll@Silvertonohio.us.