

Editorial: Let's keep subsidies on the sidelines (11.25.07)

Contributed by Administrator
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Editorial: Let's keep subsidies on the sidelines Neighborhood should work as a private venture

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Green Bay has several stylish old neighborhoods where large homes built for the upper crust 100 years ago stand up the hill, or down the street, from smaller homes for working families. Now Brown County planning officials are studying a proposal to create a mixed-income neighborhood on the former County Farm property on Green Bay's far northeast side. It's an experiment worth pursuing; as a mostly private venture.

The concept of a Traditional Neighborhood Development, outlined on today's Perspective page, grows out of the idea of Smart Growth, popular in planning circles these days. Features include a grid pattern of narrow streets with sidewalks, homes built on smaller lots and an emphasis on community green space.

County planners envision about 257 free-standing single-family homes and 120 "attached" units, either townhouses or duplexes, over about 150 acres. Some of the houses would be higher-priced, prairie-style homes; most would be moderately priced.

A portion of the property would be developed as parkland, including a dog park. Much of the area is wetland that would remain undeveloped except for some nature trails. It does sound very much like a re-creation of the old urban neighborhoods that worked so well a century ago.

Chuck Lamine, the county planning director, admitted that for now there's no research suggesting such a development could succeed in Green Bay, but similar projects have done well in Madison and other communities across the nation. And trends suggest the time may be right for such an experiment.

The faith-based housing group JOSHUA recently brought in Washington, D.C., urban policy consultant David Rusk to talk about affordable housing, and he advocated for this kind of construction. As baby boomers retire, Rusk said, it's logical that many will gravitate toward a simpler life; smaller homes with less yard to tend. Such homes also make sense for singles and young families buying their first new homes, he added.

Rusk started to lose us a little bit when he insisted that public subsidies have to play a key role in the future of the housing market.

"Builders can only go just so low" in providing affordable housing, Rusk said. "Public subsidy must do the rest." That may be so in Washington, or even Madison, where housing costs are significantly higher. Could such a neighborhood be built in Green Bay without an infusion of tax dollars?

If the planners are correct, the County Farm could be converted into a traditional neighborhood that is a model for future development. The county certainly stands to gain financially from selling this land, which is considered surplus; the plan is to keep about 100 other acres for future needs of the local government. And it makes some sense, with such a large chunk of prime residential land available, to seek out a developer willing to build this kind of neighborhood.