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WEEK OF JULY 13-19, 2011

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SEASIDE



CELEBRATION

◀ Examples of New Urbanist design can be found throughout Florida.

NEW URBANISM

THE ANTI-SPRAWL MOVEMENT — WHERE SWFL IS HEADED

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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THIRTY YEARS AGO, A MAN FROM FLORIDA and his west coast colleague came to the realization they had a common enemy, explained urban design professor Ellen Dunham-Jones on a scratchy cell phone, while driving through Georgia last week.

The nemesis: Suburbia. Cue the creepy soundtrack. Images of residential sprawl and congested highways fill a movie screen. Fade to close-ups of early 1980s teenagers parked next to each other at a drive-thru diner. A girl rolls down her window and asks flirtatiously, "What exit are you from?"

The now gray superheroes in this version of the story are Miami architect and planner Andres Duany and his Berkeley, Calif., counterpart, Peter Calthorpe. They and like-minded town planners,

SEE URBANISM, A8 ▶

◀ A rendering of a New Urbanist town square that could become reality in Lee County.



Corey Kent inspires community, fellow veterans

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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War veteran Corey Kent flew home on a hot, humid Saturday. An escort of Army veterans led the stretch limo from the airport that carried him back home to Cape Coral. Hundreds packed an open-air bar in celebration of his heroism.

"Thank you, Corey! Thank you," someone shouted, and the shoulder-to-shoulder

crowd applauded and raised beers in a toast. Among them were many smiling faces, and also teary eyes, looks of amazement, and hard-set jaws, the expressions of an emotional day.

Last June, Pfc. Kent lost both legs and fingers from one hand in Afghanistan when a roadside bomb detonated. He spent the last year in rehab at Walter

SEE KENT, A13 ▶



COURTESY PHOTO

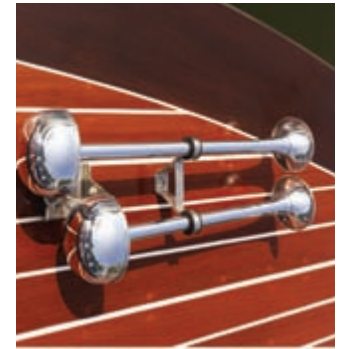
Army Pfc. Corey Kent shakes hands with one of hundreds of supporters who gathered at Leapin' Lizard Bar & Grill bar to celebrate his visit home.

INSIDE



It's in the book

Yellow pages more than just listings. C1 ▶



Best Buy does boats

A big-box retailer enters marine services field. B1 ▶



Finding the 'real Florida'

It's deep fried and unassuming. A6 ▶



Home of the silver king

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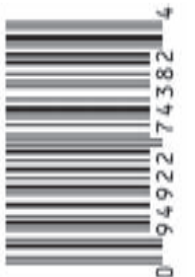


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ROGER WILLIAMS A2
OPINION A4
ANTIQUES A10
HEALTHY LIVING A26

BUSINESS B1
MONEY & INVESTING B2
NETWORKING B7
REAL ESTATE B9

ARTS C1
EVENTS C6 & 7
SOCIETY C23 & 25
CUISINE C27



URBANISM

From page 1

architects and industry professionals began a charge to rein in suburbia by encouraging a combination of mixed-use, downtown-like developments that mirror the principles of pre-World War II city planning, and a coherent public transportation system that lessens the need for cars.

South Florida spawned the first full-scale city of the movement in Seaside, and has remained filled with its supporters, from anti-sprawl politicians to city planners, developers and Realtors. Mr. Duany helped create a thriving nonprofit advocacy group, Congress for The New Urbanism.

Yet more than three decades after it began, evidence of the movement is lacking where it's needed most, said Bill Spikowski, a town planner based in Lee County. Most South Florida cities and coastlines remain defined by sprawl: strip malls and mega stores, perfect for a quick stop on your daily commute.

"We're in the odd situation where New Urbanism has become the accepted philosophy, but when you look on the ground, there's very little of it in Southwest Florida today, which is very peculiar," Mr. Spikowski said. "Southwest Florida is the worst — we're further behind every other area of Florida. Every other area has more New Urbanist developments than we do."

Tradition and nostalgia

There is still plenty of spotty evidence of the movement here: a half-block of row home-like townhomes on West First Street near downtown Fort Myers; colorful mixed-use buildings along San Carlos Boulevard on Fort Myers Beach; the village of Ave Maria in Collier County; downtown Punta Gorda's Sunloft Center. Original downtowns are natural New Urbanist examples because they were built before the rise of cars after World War II, and officials have poured millions into updating them. A bittersweet pang for buildings of yesteryear helps drive the movement.

That sometimes creates odd juxtapositions, such as Weston Town Center, a development in Brandon, Fla. It looks like an old downtown, yet is spanking new, and windows overlook a sprawling single-use residential subdivision.

"I really think why there's so much nostalgia associated with it is we have to look back 100 years to see how folks were doing things," said Joseph Kohl, a partner in Dover, Kohl & Partners, one of the nation's pre-eminent New Urbanist design firms, based in Coral Gables. "I also think there's a comfort level with things that are more traditional."

Too, there are modern New Urbanist buildings.

"We do see modern projects getting built under the same principles," Mr. Kohl said. "A lot of buildings in cities like New York and Chicago and Miami are very modern buildings if you classify it as a style — yet it's still meeting the street at the sidewalk, it still has storefront windows and people living above them."

One of Mr. Kohl's subcontractors, Mr. Spikowski of Lee County, agreed.

"The truth is they come in every style — all the way from hamlets in the middle of an urban area to dense downtown," he said. "There's not really one classic type of New Urbanist development."

Coconut Point mall in Estero and the Mercato in Naples are mixed use, with some second-story condominiums, but they're also surrounded by giant



COURTESY PHOTO

New Urbanist planners maintain that developments such as the Mercato in Naples and Coconut Point mall in Estero may be more shopping malls than mixed-use communities.

parking lots, which planners such as Mr. Spikowski and Mr. Kohl advocate against.

Disney's city, Celebration, is one of the best-known New Urbanist developments. But it's expensive and the movement's ultimate aim is to provide housing for all. To that end, Bradenton Village is a low-income federal housing project, which was guided by New Urbanist code, with two and three-story townhomes.

"It's really nice," Mr. Spikowski said. "You go in there and say 'I want to live here' and then realize — 'I probably make too much money to live here.'"

Other mixed-use developments, because they're relatively new, are often too expensive for most young professionals, Mr. Spikowski said. So who is attracted to the urban life?

"It tends to be the fairly young and the older: people who are retiring and they've raised their family and they no longer need the big home, and they'd like to see a movie and see other people and go to a coffee shop, and especially as they get older and start worrying about losing the ability to drive," Mr. Spikowski said.

He doesn't see a problem with those two age groups co-existing, but concedes that it's "a legitimate issue." He also pointed out that's the way multi-family living has gone on in urbanist paradises like Manhattan for years.

Sprawl still rules

The ultimate goal, to end sprawl, faces serious headwinds. Those include the need for expensive, new transportation systems and the real-estate market, where consumers in Southwest Florida still favor traditional post-war developments.

"I think (new urbanism) is going to have some acceptance here, but not to the point where it will be all over the place in 20 years," said Phil Wood, president of John R. Wood Realtors in Naples. "A lot of people come down here but like the single-family home, the yard with the place where the kids can play. They gravitate to condos on the beach, bay, or on the golf course — those are the three most popular selling condominiums. So I think those will always have an advantage in some people's minds than those located in a more commercial-type setting."

It also depends on where the buyers are from, Mr. Wood added. "If they're moving from downtown Chicago or

New York or Boston, it's like, 'Wow, this is great' — to those people (new urbanism) is not a surprise at all. To those who view Florida as a water-view condominium, it's a little bit different. People from the rural Midwest might look at that and think it's a bit of a different concept."

Former Lee County Commissioner Charlie Bigelow, who held office in the 1980s when New Urbanism was beginning (he first remembers hearing the term in the '90s), said he's discouraged by the county's efforts to contain sprawl. "We failed miserably at it, but it's been the policy," he said.

While he held office, one plan aimed to draw a boundary between urban and rural areas, so that developers couldn't reach the rural lands. But it wasn't adhered to, Mr. Bigelow said.

Local governments in states such as Colorado and Oregon "have established such urban boundaries and stick rigidly to them," he said. "Here we just drew the hell out of the boundaries. We amended it routinely based on who was asking for what where. So it served hardly any purpose whatsoever in terms of containing sprawl. I don't think we anticipated the lack of political commitment that might exist to contain growth."

City planners have experienced similar frustration with political leadership as well as developers. For instance, Mr. Kohl said his firm designed a development in an Orlando suburb in the 1990s for mixed use — but was later disappointed when builders made the second floor of buildings artificial instead of real living spaces.

"Unfortunately, it seems to be the nature of our work sometimes," he said. "We work on big scale plans, and then government changes. Depending on how imbedded the plan is in the community, it may or may not survive a change in administration."

Mr. Duany has been famously tight-lipped about how officials have implanted his plans, including in downtown Fort Myers, where condo heights reached far above his original specifications. Mr. Duany seems to prefer instead to leave his work as a blueprint, not a set of inflexible rules. He didn't respond to a request for comments for this story.

Whatever the movement's shortcomings, it is the only lasting, integrated effort to combat sprawl. In a fortuitous twist, its goals have aligned with the

times in ways sometimes trendy, others pragmatic. The Complete Streets movement, The Green Movement, the Local Foods movement and Smart Growth all dovetail with New Urbanism. Too, it is advocated as a political salve for backlash from the economic crisis (many foreclosed homes dot suburbia) and as a solution to pain at the gas pump.

What about transportation?

A lack of public transportation might be the greatest failing of New Urbanist developments in Florida, and one of the most difficult and expensive problems to fix.

The upscale CityPlace in West Palm Beach is considered one of the most successful examples, a bright retail-based city with its own Publix supermarket, an office building — and perhaps just as importantly, a trolley for its residents to get around.

Private developers funded streetcars in the early 20th century, said Professor Dunham-Jones. But private or public investment in infrastructure of the kind found in the boom following the second world war may be hard to come by, as it was in the wake of the Great Depression.

"The whole financial system, the whole lending system, is designed to build a residential, or a commercial, or a retail development," Mr. Spikowski said, "and New Urbanists always mix those. So it's harder. On the other hand, the value that's created is much higher."

Ultimately, building mixed developments connected by public transportation may become a matter of survival if the cost of oil and commutes keeps rising. "We learn very slowly," Mr. Bigelow said. "This devastating recession we had, we like to think it was because they gave mortgages to people who couldn't pay for them. But really what happened was the price of going to your job became as expensive as paying for the house you were living in."

Mr. Spikowski is trying to solve that problem with Transportation Oriented Design, which is aligned with New Urbanism. Its ambitions include a combination freight and passenger rail line connecting Southwest Florida.

"Not everybody in the group, but a lot of us, are convinced that the existing rail line that runs from Bonita Springs to downtown Fort Myers would be a great rail system



COURTESY IMAGES
 1) At the top, artist renderings from Dover, Kohl & Partners show the existing Corkscrew Country Store in southeastern Lee County. 2) Below it, the firm's rendering of a self-sustaining community built around the store, and 3) below that an overhead view. 4) In June, Lee County commissioners approved five such developments in southeastern Lee's DR/GR conservation area, shown at bottom right. The area makes up about one-fifth of Lee's land.

that would connect the most important areas," he said. "At each stop along that rail line, there's an opportunity for transit-oriented development to build within a half mile of those stops."

Next year, the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization plans to undertake a \$265,000 feasibility study for rail plans that would integrate freight and passenger rail with compact building codes associated with New Urbanism, said MPO director Don Scott. It will look at where such a rail line might go, either along the Seminole Gulf Railway line, or by Interstate 75.

"The buildout of the master plan for Interstate 75 identifies six multi-use and four express or other lanes, and in the center, enough room for either a train or busway," Mr. Scott said.

But a region so routed in sprawl may take awhile to change.

"How far how fast?" Mr. Scott asked. "It would be easier to say years ago that it would have been faster than it is now. I think we'll have incremental changes in transportation that responds to that."

Zoning for friends and gardens

Professor Dunham-Jones was still talking on the cell phone, which was as scratchy and spotty as her theories were clearly defined. The resort community of Seaside, Fla., she explained, was designed by Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and her husband, Mr. Duany, in



the early '80s and is New Urbanism's "poster child — the oldest, the original, and still a very good example." One of Seaside's original zoning requirements was to build front porches not more than 8 feet from the sidewalk — judged the ideal distance from which neighbors could offer a friendly wave.

"They were deliberately encouraging people to be sociable," she said.

It's not unlike new zoning codes adopted in a short list of South Florida locales. That includes the one Lee County commissioners approved in June, an all-purpose kit for streets,



small apartments over retail shops to larger townhomes with yards, wider sidewalks and bicycle paths, even urban gardens.

"You take an area and cut it up into plats and let the city growers farm on them," explained Paul O' Connor, Lee's

director of planning.

That type of gardening was a hot issue at the annual meeting of Congress for The New Urbanism, said Professor Dunham-Jones, vice chair of the organization's board and author of "Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs."

"One of the big ones is urban agriculture and the integration of literally growing local food in developments of all kinds," she said.

Mr. Spikowski was the chief writer of Lee's Compact Code. The hope is that builders will use it to transform sprawl-tainted areas such as Lehigh Acres, by adding downtown-like nodes. Dover, Kohl & Partners contracted with Mr. Spikowski also used it to create designs for parts of the Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource area, more than 80,000 acres in southeastern Lee County.

"What we ended up proposing was a series of mixed-use communities, five of them, compact walkable communities, that would be on the outer edge of the DR/GR," Mr. Spikowski said. "The rights to build a house on 10 acres would be moved to the edges, out near Lehigh Acres and Estero. That's the county's official adopted plan in the DR/GR. Of course, with this economy no one's holding their breath for anything to happen."

An incentive for builders to use the code, said Mr. O'Connor, is a streamlined process; they undergo no public hearing if they build within these guidelines in pre-approved areas of the county. "It would hopefully stop some of the sprawling development pattern over the last 20 years and start making more compact urban areas where (there is not) total dependency on the automobile."

Such new zoning rules counter 50 years of car-centric buildout, said Professor Dunham-Jones. "It's really trying to recover some of those older development patterns which are more urban, and more sustainable, economically, environmentally and socially."

Mr. Kohl, also a CNU member, clarified the movement is not "anti car."

"Often people involved in the CNU get accused of saying we're trying to get rid of their cars and I think that's kind of misunderstood," he said. "It's not that we're trying to get ride of cars — we're trying to reduce the usage. In some communities, you're stuck. The only way you can get a quart of milk is to get in your car and drive to the store."

New Urbanism wants to be viewed, maybe, as more of a friendly goodbye wave to the past and a firm embrace of the future. ■

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