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## Putting Livability First

*By Norman Wright, AICP*

Everyone in Columbia, Tennessee, knows there is a problem. Though the city is just 35 miles south of Nashville and within the state's epicenter of new growth and development, there have been precious few investments in recent decades.

Columbia has been passed over by many and left by a few more. In 2009, it lost 1,200 manufacturing jobs when General Motors went bankrupt. By 2011, it suffered 14.5 percent unemployment, the highest in the state. Population growth has stagnated to the third slowest rate statewide. And although the population is relatively stable at 34,600, middle-aged residents with families have fled the city since 2000. These are rarities for a Sun Belt city of Columbia's size but not uncommon in the nation at large.

The poor conditions are evident in the commercial heart of the city, a five-lane highway corridor known as James Campbell Boulevard, which is dotted with darkened storefronts and empty parking lots. The boulevard, which is such in name only, is the embodiment of the city's greatest disadvantage: the lack of livability. To create positive change, bring new jobs, and attract new families, Columbia must develop the livable environment it doesn't yet have.

As common sense as this sounds, the solution is a new idea here. The concept of livability was introduced only when the Partnership for Sustainable Communities — a collaboration of HUD, DOT, and EPA — selected Columbia in October 2010 as one of 62 cities to participate in the Community Challenge Planning Grant program. The program assumes that cities can develop in more sustainable ways by improving the livability of their most troubled areas. It was introduced in conjunction with the Regional Planning Grant, but provides funding for planning efforts on the community scale.

Columbia received \$250,000 to prepare a new highway corridor plan, which would become a blueprint for sprawl repair for the whole city. The planning department staff led the planning team; its share of the work accounted for the city's financial match. Designers, engineers, and economists from the consulting firm Town Planning & Urban Design Collaborative, which has an office in Nashville, made up the rest of the team.

The team moved very quickly after work began last June. Core analysis was completed that month. A seven-day charrette was held in July, with the refinement of preliminary designs and a final plan delivered in August. Throughout these months, the work was the central conversation for the entire community, and a weekly — sometimes daily — feature in the local newspaper.

At least 300 citizens, 50 business owners, and several state agencies took part in the conversation. Collaboration with fellow grantees — something the federal program encourages — from as far away as Burlington, Vermont, and as nearby as Knoxville was particularly helpful, since they face the same challenges and are considering some of the same solutions.

The completed plan, *The Boulevard 2050*, will help Columbia make a fundamental shift toward true sustainable development. The plan's most important element is the highway retrofit, aimed at transforming the roadway from a five-lane bypass to a multiway boulevard complete with pedestrian and cyclist facilities, street trees, narrowed lanes, and safer design.

An essential element is the redevelopment of the strip commercial area, which will change to a more nodal, or center-based, form. This is best seen in the plan's "catalytic development site," the enclosed shopping mall. Following the lead of Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Florida, and similar grayfield redevelopments, this neglected monolith is expected to become a vibrant lifestyle center with civic space, high density, mixed uses, and a unique design that respects Columbia's rich local character. Best of all, market analysis shows that this new center is feasible for construction today, even in Columbia's challenged economy.

But the real work still lies ahead. The Boulevard 2050 was approved unanimously by the planning commission and is expected to be adopted by the city council this month. The next step, implementation, will be the most daunting, but some success can already be claimed: A city that has been mired in crisis now has a way out. Columbia is now actively redeveloping its most important corridor into the livable, sustainable place that its residents deserve. And although the challenge will be great, the plan makes the solutions clear — and thus feasible.

Best of all, Columbia's is only one story of many. Sixty-one other communities participating in the Sustainable Communities initiative will complete their own plans in the coming year.

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