**Urban Planning**Smart growth in shrinking communities

Urban planners are people who direct the development of cities and towns. Urban planners are sometimes called city planners. Many urban planners work for local government, although some advise nonprofit and community groups on ways to best grow and develop their cities.

Most cities, however, are not growing. Urban areas are losing population. The 2010 U.S. Census showed population growth slowed in 14 of the 15 largest urban centers. The challenge for many urban planners has become not how to plan for growth, but what should be done with vacant city land left behind when people or businesses move away.

Urban planning got its start in the U.S. in the late 19th century. At the time, many cities were dirty, overcrowded places. Illnesses such as cholera, yellow fever, typhoid, and influenza spread rapidly. City planners at the time thought spreading people as far away as they could from industry, with its foul odors and air pollution, would make them healthier. City governments created laws called zoning ordinances to keep people, business, and industry separate from one another.

Moving farther away from their jobs meant people relied more heavily on cars to get where they needed to go. Starting in the 1920s, increased dependency on cars led to more traffic and air pollution. Walking to do daily errands became more difficult when neighborhoods and shops were spread too far apart to visit in one trip.

“Several recent studies have linked city planning to issues of obesity and public health,” said Jason Satori of Integrated Planning Consultants. “When we design cities in ways that require people to drive rather than walk, and when we design streets that make biking dangerous, we discourage people from engaging in physical activity.”

**Making Cities Bike-Friendly**

Today, cities around the world are making their streets friendlier to bikes and pedestrians by passing laws restricting car travel. Vienna, Austria; Munich, Germany; and Copenhagen, Denmark, are closing entire streets to car traffic. Barcelona, Spain, and Paris, France, have dedicated more of their streets to bike traffic. Drivers in London, England, and Stockholm, Sweden, pay a feewhen they drive into the city. Making cities less friendly to cars makes people more likely to walk, ride a bicycle, or use public transportation.

Chicago, Illinois, is one U.S. city that’s on its way to becoming more bike-friendly.
•    The city is opening its first protected bike lane (on Kinzie Avenue). It will have soft plastic posts and a special lane to protect cyclists from heavy downtown traffic.
•    Alderman Proco "Joe" Moreno, who represents Chicago’s First Ward, has proposed removing one lane of car traffic and devoting it to bike travel.
•    The city's Bloomingdale Trail is transforming an abandoned rail line into a park and bike trail that will be ready for use by 2014.
•    Mayor Rahm Emanuel has pledged to build 25 miles of bike lanes for each year he's in office.

“We need to recognize that streets are public spaces too, and not merely channels for moving as many vehicles as quickly as possible,” said Tom Vanderbilt, the author of*Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do*. “The car will continue to exist, but should be treated as a ‘renter’ of the city, not its landlord.”

**Mixed-Use Communities**

Other cities are reducing the amount of time spent in cars by creating a mixture of shops, housing, and public transportation in the same neighborhood. These communities, called mixed-use communities, enable residents to live, work, and shop with less reliance on an automobile.

The Civano project in Tucson, Arizona, and the resort village of Loreto Bay in Baja California Sur, Mexico, are planned neighborhoods designed to use city space more wisely and reduce sprawl.

 Joanna Trotter is the community development director for the Metropolitan Planning Council, a nonprofit organization dedicated to shaping a more sustainable andprosperous Chicago region. She grew up in a mixed-use community in Portland, Oregon.

“My mother never owned a car,” she says. “We used public transportation to get where we needed to go and lived in a neighborhood where people of different incomes lived on the same block. When I moved away from home, to Atlanta [Georgia], Los Angeles [California], and finally Chicago, I began to see how not typical my city was compared to the rest of the country.”

Today, Trotter helps manage the Gary and Region Investment Project (GRIP), which works with communities in the greater Chicago area. Cities like Gary, Indiana, and Flint and Detroit, Michigan, “all were planned to be bigger than they actually were,” says Trotter. “Gary, Indiana, was originally planned for 200,000 people. The closest the city ever got to that number was in 1950 when it had 178,320 people. Today, Gary has 80,000 people—less than it did in 1930.

“Planning includes better housing and transportation, as well as parks and rivers that are clean and available for use by the public,” says Trotter. “We are preparing Gary not for growth, but for stabilization. We were working with the city to find projects that will attract businesses and strengthen the urban core.”

At a 2010 GRIP event, Northwest Indiana residents met to vote on a series of projects they feel would help the community the most. Expansion of the Gary/Chicago International Airport received the most votes. Another project high on the list was improvements along Gary’smetro rail stop.

“Airports and train stations bring in a lot of people,” explains Trotter. “They also bring restaurants, hotels,cargo, and shipping companies. These are jobs not directly connected to airports or railroads but would come about because people need those services.”

**Community Gardens**

City planners are increasingly looking at growing food within city limits as a way to use vacant land. Urban agriculture and community gardens have gained popularity in recent years as people want to purchase food that's grown closer to where they live. Places like Flint and Chicago are leading the way in buying land that would normally be purchased by private owners.

In the Haddington neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a nonprofit called the Urban Tree Connection bought two-thirds of an acre of derelict land in the 1990s. Today, the Neighborhood Food Central Production Farm grows potatoes, bok choy, collards, and cabbage.

Growing Power Inc. has urban gardens in Chicago and in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. NeighborSpace works in partnership with the city of Chicago to allow community groups to grow gardens in the city.

Kathy Dickhut is head of Chicago's Sustainable Development Division and a NeighborSpace board member. The Sustainable Development Division provides assistance to Chicago residents who want to grow plants and fish in hoop houses.

Hoop houses are mini-greenhouses that protect plants from the elements. Plastic sheets cover half-circle hoops of metal or plastic tubing. The practice of raising fish and plants in a hoop house or greenhouse is calledaquaponics.

"In hoop houses, crops like kale can be grown 10 months out of the year, even in a Chicago climate," Dickhut says.

Chicago Mayor Emanuel recently proposed an ordinance that would allow the city's 14,000 empty lots to be used in urban agriculture. The new ordinance would allow community gardens to expand to half an acre, would relax strict fencing and parking rules around urban gardens, and would allow food to be sold that was grown in an aquaponic environment.

Some urban farming practices use even less land, allowing shrinking cities to be sustainable. Vertical farmingis the practice of growing food in high-rise buildings. Dickson Despommier is a professor of environmental sciences and microbiology at Columbia University and an advocate of vertical farming.

“By growing food hydroponically, or off the land grid, largetracts of farmland can then be abandoned, allowing them to revert to their ecological purpose,” he says.

Hardwood forests would return, and high-rise buildings would take over the job of feeding the city, he says.

**Your Ticket to Ride Really Pays Off!** People who take public transit can save an average of $9,330 every year, or $778 per month. That's money they don't have to spend on gasoline or parking fees.

**Public Transit's Top 10**The top 10 urban areas that use public transportation the most, in order:

* New York-Newark
* San Francisco-Oakland
* Washington, D.C.
* Boston
* Chicago
* Seattle
* Portland
* Philadelphia
* Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana
* Baltimore

**Becoming an Urban Planner** Employment for urban planners is projected to grow 19 percent, which is faster than the national average. Most new jobs will require a master's degree with additional skills in GIS or mapping. More information is at the[Occupational Outlook Handbook](http://www.bls.gov/ooh/Life-Physical-and-Social-Science/Urban-and-regional-planners.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

**Getting the GIS of It**
Knowledge of geography is essential for an urban planner. With GIS, map data is coded in a variety of ways. Residential, commercial, or industrial parcels of land are assigned their own special code. The codes can be subdivided into more specific categories to show the city's physical features. Layers of information can be created with GIS, enabling city planners to find everything they need on one computerized map.

For example, say a city wants to plan a community garden in an urban neighborhood. The city planner uses GIS to locate all residential property in the city. Next, the city planner decides to see only residential property next to vacant lots. The vacant lots must be at least a half-acre or larger. With GIS, city planners can click through layers of map data to find the areas they are looking for.

**Article review**

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