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Virginia Municipal League



The distinctive city
Community appeal
drives economic prosperity

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About the cover

The Urban Land Institute's Edward T. McMahon, a keynote speaker at two VML annual conferences, offers suggestions for developing and maintaining vibrant cities in two stories this month. The articles begin on page 8 and page 10.

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Cities seeking the recipe for economic success in a rapidly changing global marketplace should remember that while change is inevitable, the destruction of a community's unique character and identity is not. Progress does not demand degraded surroundings. Communities can grow without destroying the things that people love.

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When it comes to land development, Americans famously dislike two things: too much sprawl and too much density. Over the past 50 years, the pendulum swung sharply in the direction of spread-out, single use, drive everywhere for everything, low density development. Now the pendulum is swinging back.

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2012 VML Annual Conference: Make plans to come to Williamsburg

Make plans now to attend the 2012 VML Annual Conference to be held Sunday through Tuesday, Sept. 23-25, at the Williamsburg Lodge in the Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg. Local government officials will find the two-and-a-half days of workshops, general sessions and roundtables invaluable as they chart the futures of their communities.



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Outdoor murals vs. sign ordinances

One question that regularly vexes local planning staffs and governing bodies is how to regulate murals painted on a building in which a business operates. Is the mural a sign that is subject to the size and location restrictions in the sign ordinance part of the zoning rules or is it public art?

By Mark K. Flynn

The distinctive city

Community appeal drives economic prosperity

AROUND THE WORLD, cities are seeking the recipe for economic success in a rapidly changing global marketplace. Indispensable assets in a post-industrial

By Edward T. McMahon

economy include: well-educated people, the ability to generate new ideas and to turn those ideas into commercial realities, connectivity to global markets, and multi-modal transportation infrastructure.

Another critical – but often forgotten – asset is community distinctiveness. If I have learned anything from my career in urban planning, it is this: a community's appeal drives economic prosperity. I have also learned that, while change is inevitable, the destruction of a community's unique character and identity is not. Progress does not demand degraded surroundings. Communities can grow without destroying the things that people love.

In 2010, the Knight Foundation teamed up with Gallup pollsters to survey 43,000 people in 26 cities (where Knight-Ridder had newspapers). The so-called "Soul of the Community Survey" was designed to answer questions such as: What makes residents love where they live? What attracts people to a place and keeps them there?

The study found that the most important factors that create emotional bonds between people and their community were not jobs and the economy, but rather "physical beauty, opportunities for socializing and a city's openness to all people." The Knight Foundation also found that communities with the highest levels of attachment also had the highest rates of gross domestic product growth and the strongest economies.

Place is more than just a location on a map. A sense of place is a unique collection of qualities and characteristics – visual, cultural, social, and environmental – that provide meaning to a location. Sense of place is what makes one city or town different from another, but sense of place is also what makes our physical surroundings worth caring about.

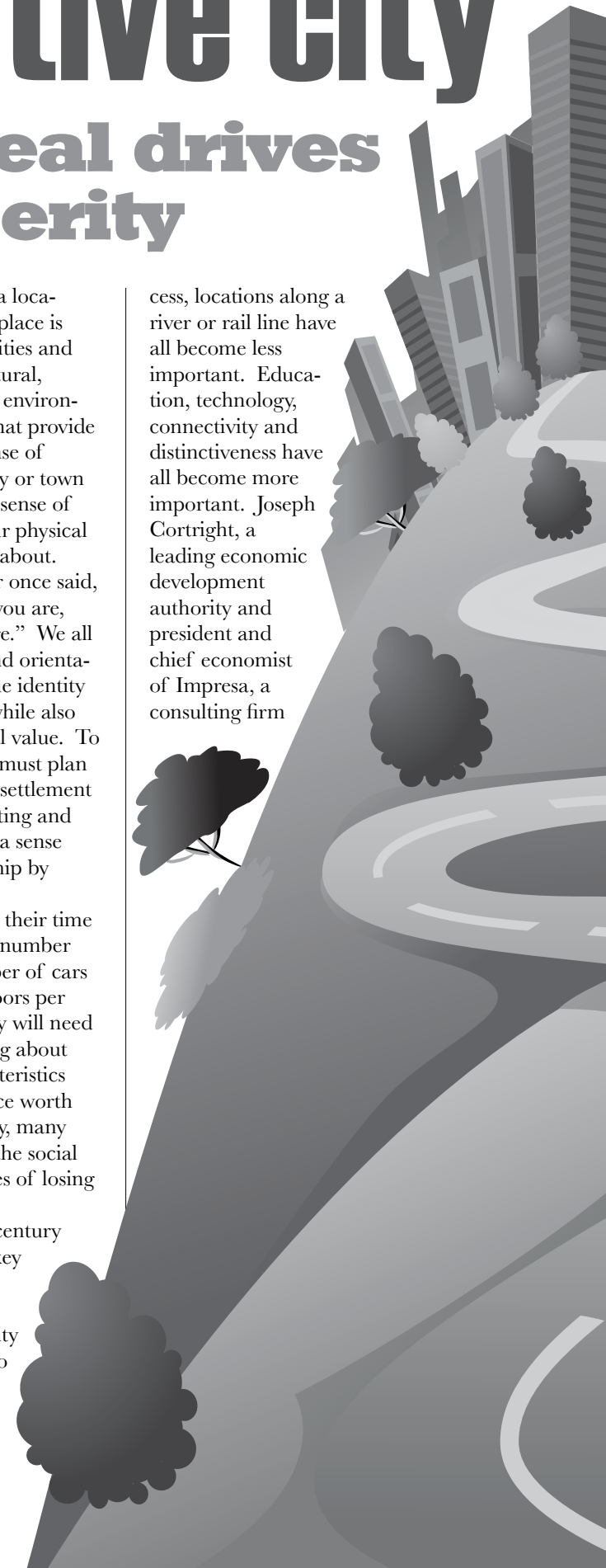
Author Wallace Stegner once said, "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are." We all need points of reference and orientation. A community's unique identity provides that orientation, while also adding economic and social value. To foster distinctiveness, cities must plan for built environments and settlement patterns that are both uplifting and memorable and that foster a sense of belonging and stewardship by residents.

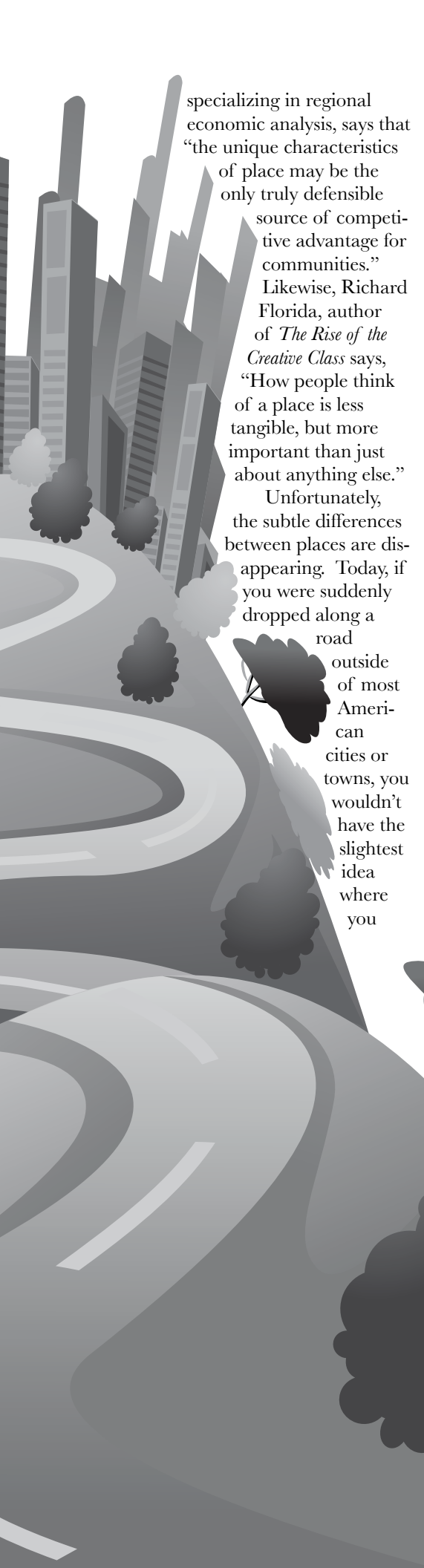
Planners spend most of their time focusing on numbers – the number of units per acre, the number of cars per hour, the number of floors per building. In the future, they will need to spend more time thinking about the values, customs, characteristics and quirks that make a place worth caring about. Unfortunately, many communities are suffering the social and economic consequences of losing their distinctiveness.

When it comes to 21st century economic development, a key concept is community differentiation. If you can't differentiate your community from any other, you have no competitive advantage.

Capital is footloose in a global economy. Natural resources, highway ac-

cess, locations along a river or rail line have all become less important. Education, technology, connectivity and distinctiveness have all become more important. Joseph Cortright, a leading economic development authority and president and chief economist of Impresa, a consulting firm





specializing in regional economic analysis, says that “the unique characteristics of place may be the only truly defensible

source of competitive advantage for communities.” Likewise, Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* says, “How people think of a place is less tangible, but more important than just about anything else.”

Unfortunately, the subtle differences between places are disappearing. Today, if you were suddenly dropped along a road outside of most American cities or towns, you wouldn’t have the slightest idea where you

were because it all looks the same, including the building materials, the architectural styles, the chain stores, and the outdoor advertising. Technology and the global economy make it easy for building plans drawn up at a corporate office in New Jersey to be applied over and over again in Portland, Phoenix, Philadelphia or a thousand other communities. Over the past 50 years many of the world’s cityscapes and townscapes have gone from the unique to the uniform, from the stylized to the standardized.

In recent months, there have been several surveys published, such as Zipcar’s *Future Metropolis Index* and Fast Company’s *Most Innovative Cities* list, ranking cities based on sustainability, innovation and efficiency. Some of the factors that were evaluated included the number of green buildings, the percentage of hybrid cars and the number of patents issued. These are all important, but sustainability is about more than new technologies. At its most basic, “sustainable” means enduring. A sustainable community is a place of enduring value. Doug Kelbaugh, the dean of the University of Michigan School of Architecture, put it this way, “If a building, a landscape or a city is not beautiful, it will not be loved; if it is not loved, it won’t be maintained and improved. In short, it won’t be sustained.”


Distinctiveness involves streetscapes, architecture and historic preservation, but as Cortright points out, it also involves cultural events and facilities, restaurants and food, parks and open space and many other factors. “Keep Austin Weird” is more than a slogan; it is a recipe for economic success. A distinctive city is a city that the young and well-educated want to live in, that boomers want to retire to, and most certainly a city that people want to visit.

According

to The World Bank and the World Travel and Tourism Council, tourism is the largest industry in the world. Tourism is about visiting places that are different, unusual and unique. The more one city comes to look and feel just like every other city, the less reason there is to visit. On the other hand, the more a city does to enhance its uniqueness, whether that is cultural, natural or architectural, the more people will want to visit. It is no accident that Paris – a city that looks and feels different – gets 27 million visitors per year, more than any city on the planet, according to Lonely Planet.

Arthur Frommer, one of the world’s leading travel experts and founder of the well-known travel guide company, says that among cities and towns with no recreational appeal, those that preserve their past continue to enjoy tourism. Those that haven’t, receive almost no tourism at all. Frommer has been quoted as saying, “Tourists simply won’t go to a city that has lost its soul.”

In the future, planners will have to help communities adapt to change while maintaining or enhancing the things that they value most. Lyman Orton, the principal of the Orton Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization that supports community development, calls this “heart and soul planning.” It is both a process and a philosophy. The process seeks to engage as many people as possible in community decision making. The philosophy recognizes that special places, characteristics and customs have value.

Given all of this, I believe that one of the big questions for cities in the future will be: Do you want the character of your city to shape the new development, or do you want the new development to shape the character of the city? 

About the author

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Embracing density without high-rises is possible

WHEN IT COMES to land development, Americans famously dislike two things: too much sprawl and too much density. Over the past 50 years, the pendulum swung sharply in the direction of spread-

By Edward T. McMahon

out, single use, drive everywhere for everything, low density development.

Now the pendulum is swinging back. High energy prices, smart growth, transit oriented development, new urbanism, infill development, sustainability concerns: are all coalescing to foster more compact, walkable, mixed use and higher density development.

The pendulum swing is both necessary and long overdue. Additionally, there is a growing demand for higher density housing because of demographic and lifestyle preference changes among boomers and young adults. The problem is that many developers and urban planners have decided that density requires high



rises: the taller, the better. To oppose a high-rise building is to run the risk of being labeled a NIMBY, a dumb growth advocate, a Luddite – or worse.

Buildings 20, 40, 60 even 100 stories tall are being proposed and built

in low and mid-rise neighborhoods all over the world. All of these projects are justified with the explanation that if density is good, even more density is better. Washington, D.C. is just the

latest low or mid-rise city to face demands for taller buildings. Yet Washington is one of the world's most singularly beautiful cities for several big reasons: first, the abundance of parks and open spaces, second, the relative lack of outdoor advertising (which has over commercialized so many other cities), and third a limit on the height of new buildings.



I will acknowledge that the “Buck Rogers”-like skylines of cities like Shanghai and Dubai can be thrilling – at a distance. But at street level they are often dreadful. The glass and steel towers may be functional, but they seldom move the soul or the traffic as well as more human scale, fine-grained neighborhoods. Yes, we do need more compact, walkable higher density communities. But no we do not need to build thousands of look-a-like glass and steel skyscrapers to accomplish the goals of smart growth or sustainable development.

In truth, many of America's

finest and most valuable neighborhoods achieve density without high rises. Georgetown in Washington, Park Slope in Brooklyn, the Fan in Richmond, and the French Quarter in New Orleans are all compact, walkable, charming – and low rise. Yet, they are also dense: the French Quarter has a net density of 38 units per acre, Georgetown 22 units per acre.

Julie Campoli and Alex MacLean's book *Visualizing Density* vividly illustrates that we can achieve tremendous density without high-rises. They point out that before elevators were

invented, two- to four- story “walk-ups” were common in cities and towns throughout America. Constructing a block of these type of buildings could achieve a density of anywhere from 20 to 80 units an acre.

Mid-rise buildings ranging from 5 to 12 stories can create even higher density neighborhoods in urban settings, where buildings cover most of the block.

Campoli and McLean point to Seattle where mid-rise buildings achieve densities ranging from 50 to 100 units per acre, extraordinarily high by U.S. standards.

Today, density is being pursued as an end in itself, rather than as one means to building better cities. According to research by the Preservation Green Lab, fine grained urban fabric – for example of a type found on Washington’s Capitol Hill, the U Street Corridor, NOMA and similar neighborhoods – is much more likely to foster local entrepreneurship and the creative economy than monolithic office blocks and apartment towers. Perhaps cities like Washington, should consider measuring density differently. Instead of looking at just the quantity of space, they should also consider the 24/7 intensity of use. By this measure, one block of an older neighborhood might include a community theatre, a coffee shop, an art gallery, two restaurants, a bicycle shop, 10 music rehearsal studios, a church, 20 apartments and a couple of bars, and all with much more 24/7 activity and intensity of use than one block of (much taller) office buildings on K Street.

In addition to Washington, St. Petersburg, Russia; Basel, Switzerland; Edinburgh, Scotland and Paris, France are just a few of the hundreds of cities around the world where giant out-of-scale skyscrapers have been recently proposed in formerly low or mid-rise historic settings. The issue of tall buildings in historic cities is not a small one. City after city has seen fights between those who want to preserve neighborhood integrity and those who want Trump towers and “starchitect” skyscrapers. Prince Charles, for example recently criticized the “high-rise free for all” in London which he said has left the city with a “pockmarked skyline and a degraded public realm.” Today, skyscrapers called the “Shard” and the “Gherkin” loom over the Tower of London, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and other famous landmarks. Whatever one thinks of Prince Charles, there’s no question that he has raised some important issues about the future of the built environment. These include:

1. Does density always require high rises?
2. Are historic neighborhoods adequately protected from incompatible new construction?
3. What is more important – the

ability of tall buildings to make an architectural statement, or the need for new buildings to fit into existing neighborhoods?

4. Should new development shape the character of our cities – or should the character of our cities shape the new development?

I love the skylines of New York, Chicago and many other high-rise cities. But I also love the skylines of Washington, Charleston, Savannah, Prague, Edinburgh, Rome and other historic mid- and low-rise cities. It would be a tragedy to turn all of these

remarkable places into tower cities. Density does not always demand high-rises. Skyscrapers are a dime a dozen in today’s world. Once a low rise city or town succumbs to high-rise mania, many more towers will follow, until the city becomes a carbon-copy of every other city in a “geography of nowhere.” **VTC**

About the author

Edward T. McMahon is a Senior Resident Fellow at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C. The opinions expressed are his own. Courtesy of Citizwire.net.



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