

STRONG TOWNS: A BOTTOM-UP REVOLUTION TO REBUILD AMERICAN PROSPERITY

*By: Chris Allen**

I. INTRODUCTION

I'm going to give a presentation about Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity. Someone told me it was a great title, and I will publicly own that I did not write it. What is Strong Towns and what are we here to do? The point of this symposium today is to talk about the cities of tomorrow. To talk about the cities of tomorrow, I am going to ask us to take a step back and talk first about the cities of yesterday.

What is Strong Towns? I promise I will get to the cities of tomorrow here in a moment. For those who do not know, Strong Towns is a nonprofit organization seeking to replace America's post-war pattern of development, which we call the suburban experiment, with a pattern of development that is financially strong and resilient. Our hypothesis is that the car-dependent suburbs and the suburban pattern of development that we have seen post-World War II is directly reflected in the balance sheets of our cities today. Many of the problems communities face today can be attributed to cities deciding to spread people out four, ten, twenty times farther than we have ever been spread out in human history. We have drastically increased the average feet of pipe, sidewalk, and street frontage per person that cities are required to maintain forever.

To further Mayor Lucas's point, we earnestly believe that local government is the highest level of collaboration for people working together in a place and not merely the lowest level of government. We believe that lasting change for actual people can be enacted at the city level. Our state and federal conversations around what we should or should not do has devolved into partisan attacks and sound bites that are not doing anything for anyone besides trying to help politicians win reelection.

Strong Towns believes that cities are where individuals can affect the most positive change for their communities. And as I am sure most of you are feeling right now, change is needed in many of our communities. To that end, Strong Towns has

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five core campaigns we believe will help us build prosperous cities. They are ending highway expansion, transparent local accounting, incremental housing, safe and productive streets, and ending all parking mandates and subsidies.

Much of what the previous speakers presented on today was ongoing attempts to fix the deep systemic damages of urban renewal. This brings us to the first Strong Towns campaign: ending highway expansion. In many cities, much of the damage that was done in redlined neighborhoods was not limited to restricted financing for home mortgages. Instead, cities all over America bulldozed homes and built highways over them in redlined areas. There are generations of minorities in this country who had systematically built wealth that cities stole when the cities bulldozed their homes and built highways in the middle of their communities.

Another one of our core campaigns is transparent local accounting. This is one of the conversations I end up having most frequently with communities. In most city budgets, streets are counted as assets instead of liabilities.¹ Road maintenance is one of a city's largest costs. When you combine roadway maintenance and sewer maintenance and repair, these liabilities are one of the largest ongoing expenses a city will have. And yet in most city budgets, roads are counted as assets instead of liabilities. We have completely thrown city finances out of whack. This is another example of a system that is built to obfuscate the truth so that we do not have to deal with the hard facts in our communities. The majority of our cities are insolvent, and we are spending ourselves into infinite debt.

Additionally, Strong Towns ardently supports incremental housing. We know that we are in a housing crisis here in America and the only solution to the housing crisis is to build more resilient housing. We earnestly argue that we have the data and experience to prove that infill incremental housing utilizing existing infrastructure is the most efficient and effective way for cities to improve housing choice and decrease housing costs. I will also say anecdotally that the only way communities can fight gentrification is by local ownership of those properties, which is almost exclusively done by incremental and infill developers.

Our fourth core campaign is safe and productive streets. Strong Towns believes that safe and productive streets are foundational to economic health in a community. Our organization has engaged with many anti-car groups and disability advocates. The Strong Towns position is not anti-car. Our position is pro-person and pro-community. The Safe Streets movement is no longer simply about enjoying walkable cities. We know that the math for walkable cities is unquestionably better than the math for cities that require you to drive your car to go shopping and meet basic human needs.²

¹ Charles Marohn, *Is a Street an Asset?*, STRONG TOWNS Aug. 19, 2014), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2014/8/19/is-a-street-an-asset.html#:~:text=Roads%2C%20streets%2C%20sewer%20and%20water,and%20debt%20in%20the%20latter> [https://perma.cc/2UUR-STG6] (“Roads, streets, sewer and water systems and other infrastructure are generally considered to be assets. When cities account for their assets and liabilities in their audits, infrastructure is counted in the former and debt in the latter.”).

² See Lisa Chamberlain, *Why Walkable Urban Areas are America's Efficient Economic Engines*, WORLD ECON. F. (March 1, 2023), <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/03/why-walkable-urban-areas-are-america-s-efficient-economic-engines/> [https://perma.cc/Y5UV-XYSE].

Last but not least, Strong Towns's fifth core campaign, and perhaps the easiest one to implement, is ending all parking mandates and subsidies. Parking mandates, also known as parking requirements or parking minimums, are regulations that dictate a specific number of parking spaces for developments, housing, and businesses. Parking mandates are one of the most pernicious limiting factors to growth that you will find in your community, and it is something no one talks about, or at least talks about enough. Removing parking requirements is a necessary step in allowing increased economic opportunity in every community.

So how do cities begin to implement these campaigns? Strong Towns has advice that we are sharing through articles and podcasts, local conversations, our thriving membership program, and training programs for city staff and technical professionals. What started off with our founder Chuck Marohn's blog over ten years ago is now a movement that touches millions annually through our blogs, videos, and podcasts. We continue to be surprised at the reach and impact of our work.

II. THE TIME-TESTED PATTERN OF GROWTH



Figure 1: Photograph of Brainerd, Minnesota in 1870, in Daniel Herriges, *Neighborhoods Were Never Meant to be Unchanging*, STRONG TOWNS (June 23, 2022), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2022/6/23/neighborhoods-were-never-meant-to-be-unchanging> [<https://perma.cc/MK9S-VLQD>].

To understand Strong Towns's work and outreach, we will first talk about a city. This is Brainerd, Minnesota. This is where Chuck Marohn, our founder, was born and where his family has lived since almost 1870. What you see here is natural human habitat. This is how all our cities were constructed, how everyone lived through the entirety of human history. Some people found a clearing in the woods, or in this case, made a clearing in the woods, and they decided to plank boards from the trees they just cut down and throw up a main street with buildings on one side. You will see the actual people who built those buildings standing in front of them. This was at the junction of a rail line and the Mississippi River in Minnesota. But this is how all our cities started, it was some people with an idea, a supposition.

There were thousands of these all over America, and frankly all over the world, as people scratched out a version of life inside the human habitat that we call cities.



Figure 2: Photograph of Brainerd, Minnesota in 1905, in Daniel Herriges, *Neighborhoods Were Never Meant to be Unchanging*, STRONG TOWNS (June 23, 2022), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2022/6/23/neighborhoods-were-never-meant-to-be-unchanging> [<https://perma.cc/MK9S-VLQD>].

This is what Brainerd, Minnesota looked like in 1905. A gradual thickening up of a community. This is a photo of the same street just a few years later. You will see that there are cross streets now. The road surface is a little bit better. You will notice that some of the buildings are a little bit taller. They are a little bit longer and a little bit deeper. The buildings have more ornate fronts. You will notice they are all still made of wood—wood that was most likely all milled and cut there onsite. The city was productive, it had economic value, provided opportunity for people who came there and because of that, the land value rose and buildings improved.



Figure 3: Photograph of Brainerd, Minnesota in 1930, in Daniel Herriges, *Neighborhoods Were Never Meant to be Unchanging*, STRONG TOWNS (June 23, 2022), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2022/6/23/neighborhoods-were-never-meant-to-be-unchanging> [<https://perma.cc/MK9S-VLQD>].

Here is that same street in 1930. The economy has grown, more people were engaged in economic activity, and Brainerd became a successful place for people to be, work, and exist. You'll notice now instead of several cutout buildings, there are larger structures where the owners of the land underneath either came together or received outside investment and built larger buildings. These were almost all exclusively built out of brick and masonry.

You will notice now we have a paved street with a drain which means that water was going somewhere. So not only had they built these new structures, but following that, the community had gotten together and decided to provide some basic services like water removal, if not water treatment. Now normally during these conversations, people will come and say, "ah yeah it's fine. This is a town in the upper-Midwest. That's not really how it works. What about big cities?" We'll say, "Good thing you asked. We already did the homework."



Figure 4: Photograph of 47th Street and Broadway in New York City in 1878, in *Three Ways of Looking at Times Square*, EPHEMERAL N.Y. (Aug. 12, 2010), <https://ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com/2010/08/12/three-ways-of-looking-at-times-square/> [<https://perma.cc/Z92Q-DW5N>].

Turning toward large cities, this is a photo of one of its most popular streets. I think you will notice what it is quite quickly. Like our other street, you can see a growing successful main street, this time in a large American town in 1878. Not much is over three stories. You can see that they might have some early streetlights, but the roads are still only partially developed. They have got some infrastructure, but it is still one-story and two-story structures that are mostly made of wood.



Figure 5: Photograph of Times Square in New York City in 1898, in Daniel Herriges, *Neighborhoods Were Never Meant to be Unchanging*, STRONG TOWNS (June 23, 2022), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2022/6/23/neighborhoods-were-never-meant-to-be-unchanging> [<https://perma.cc/MK9S-VLQD>].

Next, you will notice, those of you who pay attention to sign ordinances, that they have yet to enforce one here much to, I am sure, the residents chagrin. But you will notice that these buildings have become a little larger and a little more ornate. Who knows what is going on behind those signs. We can see some larger three-story and four-story structures there in the back. You are going to start to notice what street I am talking about very soon.



Figure 6: Photograph of Times Square in New York City in 1911, in Renato Grussu, *Times Square Seen Through the History of its Hotels From the Early 1900's to Today*, VYN LA VOCE DI N.Y. (Aug. 30, 2021), <https://lavocedinewyork.com/en/lifestyles/2021/08/30/times-square-seen-through-the-history-of-its-hotels-from-the-early-1900s-to-today/> [<https://perma.cc/RD9F-RTK8>].

This is that same street in 1911. You will notice now that some of these buildings are so big they cannot fit in the picture anymore. We have a large, more intensely developed road. There is now a curb. We also now have a streetcar. There is electricity as well. The underlying land values have risen because of the successful economic outputs in this community to support this level of development.



Figure 7: Irving Underhill, *Longacre Square, S. from 46th St., New York City* (photograph), LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (1919), <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002709405/?ref=untappedcities.com> [<https://perma.cc/B949-BXSQ>].

This is a photo of that same street in 1919. Again, we can see another gradual thickening up of the area. Larger buildings with more impressive and ornate facades. Increased public transit options. This city is thriving, and you can see the success of the community here in its development.



Figure 8: Photograph of Times Square, in Charles Marohn, *Why Building in San Francisco, D.C. and NYC Will Never Solve Our Housing Problem*, STRONG TOWNS (Jan. 13, 2025), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2025/1/13/why-building-in-san-francisco-dc-and-nyc-will-never-solve-our-housing-problem> [<https://perma.cc/BA5E-T2RX>].

Now, here is that same street today. This is how American cities were built regardless of size, because this is how human habitat was built since the beginning of human history. We have accumulated wisdom for millennia from our ancestors. There is not one right way to build cities that are healthy, vibrant, and as safe as they can be for everyone. No city is perfect. No one should come up here and say that they found the answer because they have not. But we do have an answer about the way that most cities look and the pattern of cities where people have a chance to be successful.

Our cities have a normal natural life cycle. We saw it in those pictures. Some people make a bet, they throw up some shacks, and they see what happens. There is a normal time-tested pattern of growth. Our cities have the exact same process and for some reason after World War II we thought we could skip steps, do it faster, build entire sections of our towns from a greenfield to fully completed state. And then we are continually surprised that our cities are anemic and unable to support the residents there.

Our cities are complex adaptive systems. Our cities are built after millennia of trial and error about what habitat for humans should look like. Much like a rainforest, stuff grows, stuff does not work, and trees fall. There are different ages and tiers of growth in a rainforest that all build on each other for an incredibly dynamic, complex system. Our cities are the same way. We can experience that in some very old American cities, but it is much easier to see it on the continent in Europe. Where, if there is a building code in any of those cities, I would struggle to see how they were going to be able to enforce a single one. And yet, those structures have stood for hundreds of years in many cases because this is a complex adaptive system. We do not build buildings for single uses in those complex adaptive systems. A building could be a home, it could be a business, it could be a bread-baking window.

Strong Towns's founder, Chuck, tells a story about his trip to Pompeii seeing the early Roman example of a fast-food window. There was a humble house that was in a block of houses at the edge of the city. They closed off the back door, turned the front door into a window, and put a hearth right in front. The family was baking bread in the front of their house and selling it out the window. The home was originally built with two rooms for a large extended family. And then, for whatever reason, they were able to acquire enough money to build the hearth in the front to start making bread and they did not have to ask for a single permit or sit in a board review for six years.

Our cities are complex adaptive systems, like the rainforest. If a fungus comes through and kills a lot of a specific kind of tree in the rainforest, the rainforest doesn't completely fall apart. Is it damaged? Absolutely. Does the stress placed on it produce outcomes we could not fathom? Yes. That is how we got to where we are now—because of complex adaptive systems.

Evolution puts strains and stressors on the rainforest and yet, the rainforest persists, much like cities built before 1950. Cities can have strains and stressors. They can change and morph. A warehouse can become a food hall, and a baseball training facility can become an office. However, this adaptability is impossible when the only thing you build is single-family tract homes. We have traded the eternal

wisdom of human experience in building human habitat for a car-dependent suburban pattern of development that is weak and ineffective.

Cities have traded complex systems for complicated systems.³ The juxtaposition here is a monoculture crop. Let's say it is Monsanto, which is not resilient. As soon as it has one external stressor, the entire ecosystem is decimated and there is no more corn because it is a complicated system.⁴ We have traded our complex systems for complicated systems. The houses you see in any city subdivision may have once felt like the "Great American Dream," but instead are the product of a system that is not resilient to change. Not only can the taxbase for these homes not support any of the infrastructure they are built on, but it is also illegal for one of these homes to become a hair salon. It is illegal for one of these homes to become a daycare center. By building to a complete and fixed state we have made it illegal and impractical for our cities to evolve. We have artificially engineered our cities to be unable to adapt, change, and meet the needs of its citizens. We have decided to do things this way.

Let's look at Brainerd, Minnesota again. Remember the images from the beginning of the presentation? Brainerd went through the normal thickening up process that all cities go through. As the series of small bets paid off, people made the next investment a little bit bigger, putting a little bit of their hard-earned money back into their community. And then, thanks to deliberate planning policies, and car-dependent infrastructure investments, this is what that same corner in Brainerd looks like today.



Figure 9: Photograph of Downtown Brainerd, 2010s, in Daniel Herriges, *But Where Will I Park?*, STRONG TOWNS (June 10, 2020), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/6/9/but-where-will-i-park> [<https://perma.cc/MT88-GRWR>].

³ John Pattison, *Cities are Complex. So why do We Treat Them Like They're Merely Complicated?*, STRONG TOWNS (Oct. 2, 2020), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/10/2/cities-are-complex-so-why-do-we-treat-them-like-theyre-merely-complicated> [<https://perma.cc/EG3H-M8FJ>].

⁴ *Eight Ways Monsanto Fails at Sustainable Agriculture*, CORNUCOPIA INST. (Oct. 29, 2014), <https://www.cornucopia.org/2012/02/eight-ways-monsanto-fails-at-sustainable-agriculture/#:~:text=%234:%20Expanding%20Monoculture,pesticide%20use%20and%20fertilizer%20pollution> [<https://perma.cc/R3QR-PL44>].

The natural life cycle of Brainerd as a city has been absolutely destroyed. In modern day Brainerd, there are service parking lots providing no taxable value to the community and no economic opportunity for the residents of that city. Vacant lots represent money being taken from that community and its descendants. Almost all these buildings were pushed over.

The systemic hollowing out of our cities is a choice that our communities have made. We have decided to do this. Unlike so many other crises we face now as a country, which we may not have had the power to prevent, this hollowing out crisis is a direct result of the choices we made. This means that we have the power here. Most of these laws, exclusionary single-family zoning, car-dependent suburban development, are all laws and regulations that we could change in one vote at city council.

These choices all have real costs. The choice to build in this development pattern has pipes, pumps, curbs and gutters, and they all add up. Here is an example of these costs highlighted by one of our partners at Urban3, a built environment data science firm out of Asheville, North Carolina led by Joe Minicozii. Much of the data that Strong Towns uses comes directly from their team.

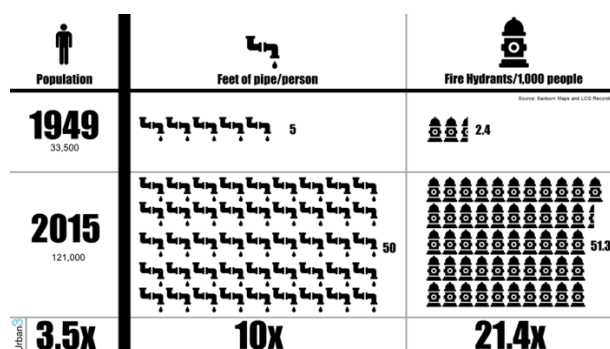


Table 1: Charles Marohn, *Lafayette Pipes and Hydrants* fig. 1, STRONG TOWNS (Sept. 14, 2015), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2015/9/14/lafayette-pipes-and-hydrants> [<https://perma.cc/K6P4-YCTQ>].

This is from Lafayette, Louisiana, a town with a population of 33,000 people, in 1949.⁵ In 2015, the city's population was 121,000, which is 3.5 times greater than the population in 1949.⁶ This increase is fairly standard for American population growth. While the population grew reasonably, the infrastructure to support that population exploded rapidly. The feet of pipe per person in the city went from five feet to fifty feet.⁷ The amount of fire hydrants per person increased from

⁵ Charles Marohn, *Lafayette Pipes and Hydrants* fig. 1, STRONG TOWNS (Sept. 14, 2015), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2015/9/14/lafayette-pipes-and-hydrants> [<https://perma.cc/K6P4-YCTQ>].

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

2.4 fire hydrants per 1,000 people to 51.3 fire hydrants per 1,000 people.⁸ That is not only saddling that community with the installation cost of actual hard goods in the ground but the deferred maintenance, which can often exceed even the initial installation cost.⁹ The city is saddling their children and grandchildren with a debt burden that they will be unable to pay.



Figures 10 & 11: Old and Blighted (photograph), in Daniel Herriges, *But Rich People Live Here, So We Can't Be Broke*, STRONG TOWNS (Sept. 5, 2018), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/9/5/but-rich-people-live-here-so-we-cant-be-going-broke> [<https://perma.cc/HU7F-EP2E>]; Shiny and New (photograph), in Daniel Herriges, *But Rich People Live Here, So We Can't Be Broke*, STRONG TOWNS (Sept. 5, 2018), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/9/5/but-rich-people-live-here-so-we-cant-be-going-broke> [<https://perma.cc/HU7F-EP2E>].

Next, I am going to show you part of a city block in Brainerd, Minnesota. Figure 10 is our traditional pattern development.¹⁰ It is a lot of little stores. They are all stacked up on each other. There are places like this in almost every American city. Many have been blighted and torn down. Figure 10 is the normal old shops you see dotting the landscape and, you know, “urban-ish” centers. Figure 11 shows a Taco Johns.¹¹

But the block in Figure 10, which is traditional pattern of development in main streets all across America, has been bulldozed almost everywhere. And the reason is that it is blighted, it does not produce jobs, and no one cares about it. The block in Figure 11 sees growth that seems progress. They pushed all those buildings down and we got a Taco John's. We got a drive through, guys. We can drive through and get our mediocre tacos. This is seen as growth. This is maturation. This is going to provide jobs. This is what it looks like. We have all seen those places like Figure 10 get knocked over and turned into the places seen in Figure 11.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *What is Deferred Maintenance? [New Guide for 2024]*, OPENGOV, <https://opengov.com/deferred-maintenance/#risks> [<https://perma.cc/AGJ7-W9Q5>] (“Delaying maintenance can increase future costs for the same work, in some cases by as much as 600%.”).

¹⁰ See *supra* Figure 10.

¹¹ See *supra* Figure 11.

The taxable value per acre of the buildings in Figure 19 is \$1.1 million.¹² The taxable value per acre of the Taco John's in Figure 20 is \$618,000.¹³ We nearly halved the taxable value of this land for the city, essentially stealing wealth from that city's future generations for no reason. Taco John's does not employ local accountants to do their books. They don't have local staff to come in and help mow. This is happening in city after city in North America, and it is simply a choice.

III. A CITY'S WEALTH IS NOT WHERE YOU THINK

I am going to show more graphs we got from our team in Urban3 that are going to illustrate value-per-acre. I know it can be a little gnarly to get through, but we are going to talk about value-per-acre and I promise you are going to enjoy it. And if not, it was a free ticket to come so you cannot get a refund. You are going to see spikes here. These are not density spikes. They are taxable value-per-acre spikes. This is publicly available data that is showing the actual tax value of these places in the city.



Figure 12: Urban3, Presentation to the City of Buffalo, New York, Taxable Value Per Acre (2014).

Anything you see in red or purple is where the city makes money. Anything you see in green is where the city loses money by providing basic services to these places. If you go back, I think you can clearly tell which parts of the town are beneficial to the economics of the city and which parts of town are, frankly, on government welfare to subsidize their part of the city existing. And this was actually Buffalo, New York. And we are like, "oh my gosh, that is just because it is in the

¹² Old and Blighted (photograph), in Daniel Herriges, *But Rich People Live Here, So We Can't Be Broke*, STRONG TOWNS (Sept. 5, 2018), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/9/5/but-rich-people-live-here-so-we-cant-be-going-broke> [<https://perma.cc/HU7F-EP2E>].

¹³ Shiny and New (photograph), in Daniel Herriges, *But Rich People Live Here, So We Can't Be Broke*, STRONG TOWNS (Sept. 5, 2018), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/9/5/but-rich-people-live-here-so-we-cant-be-going-broke> [<https://perma.cc/HU7F-EP2E>].

Northeast and it is old and it is in rust belt.” “Nope. Here is mid-South.” Guess what? Exact same graph.

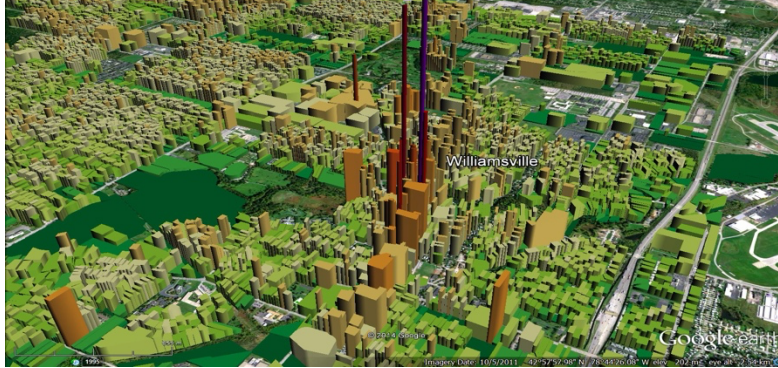


Figure 13: UB Reg'l Inst., *The Dollars Sense of Development Patterns*, BUFFALO NIAGRA REG'L REP. at 7 figs. 2 & 3, <https://regional-institute.buffalo.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/155/2021/07/Dollars-and-Sense-Buffalo-Niagara.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/XDG2-35HR>].

The residents and tenants of the downtown properties are the ones paying taxes, whereas the suburbs are on welfare from the city. Those houses on giant lots in the suburbs are taking money away. They are being subsidized by the rest of town.

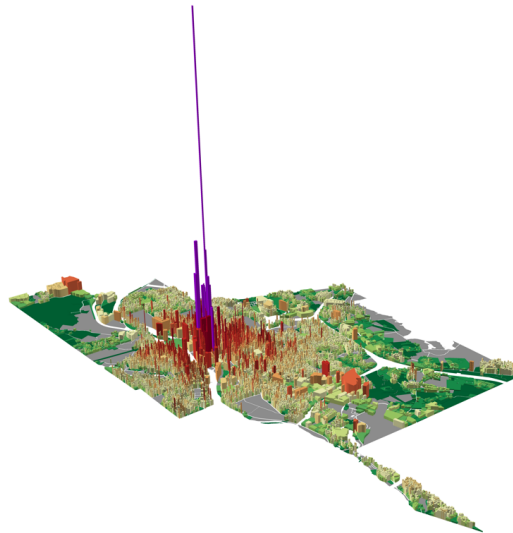


Figure 14: Urban3, Presentation to the City of Manchester, New Hampshire, Taxable Value Per Acre (2018).

Manchester, New Hampshire. Guess what guys? Same story all over again. Those peak spikes in the middle are the downtown area, the part that people say they feel unsafe in, the part that people are worried about their kids going to after dark, that is where the entire economic activity of all of the city is located.

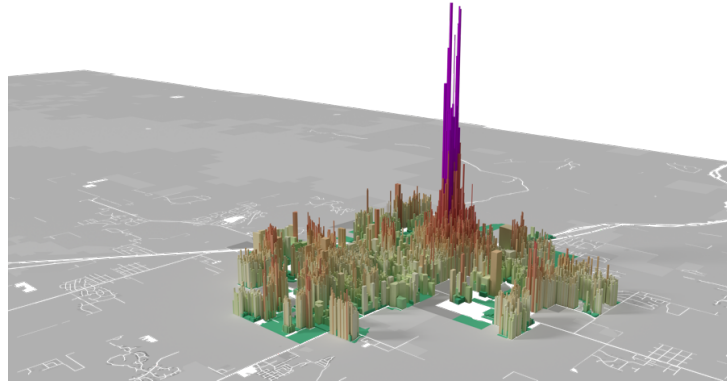


Figure 15: City of Bozeman, *Urban3: Dollars and Sense of Land Use for Bozeman/Gallatin County*, YOUTUBE (July 13, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_O_XamHuo4 [<https://perma.cc/2UBL-TKZA>] (citing the slide at 40:14).

Guess what guys? Even a frontier town in the high-West, Bozeman, Montana, looks exactly the same. The suburbs are stealing money from the city in goods and services, and we just decided to let them.

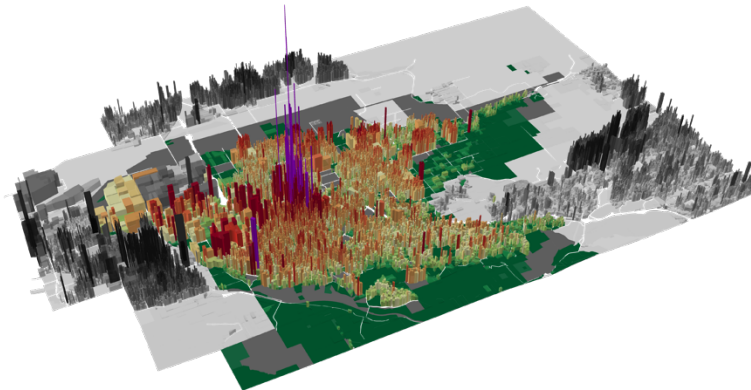


Figure 16: Rachel Quednau, *Why Walkable Streets are More Economically Productive* fig. 5, STRONG TOWNS (Jan. 18, 2018), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/1/16/why-walkable-streets-are-more-economically-productive> [<https://perma.cc/6UZV-4SLP>].

Redlands, California a high-West new city. Shockingly, this town has the exact same results.

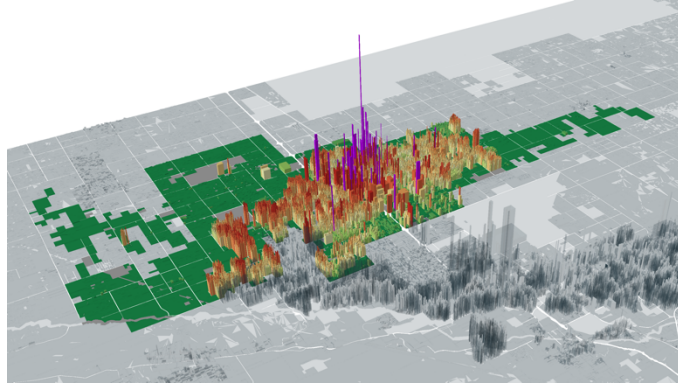


Figure 17: Urban3, Presentation to the City of Lancaster, California, Taxable Value Per Acre (2014).

Lancaster, California, pictured above, has even more of this subsidizing occurring.

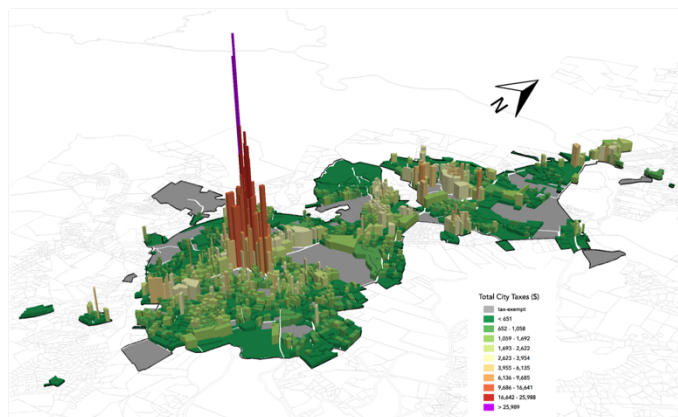


Figure 18: Urban3, Presentation to the City of Brevard, North Carolina, Taxable Value Per Acre (2016).

Here is Brevard, North Carolina another growing city in the mid-South. This image shows the same trend.

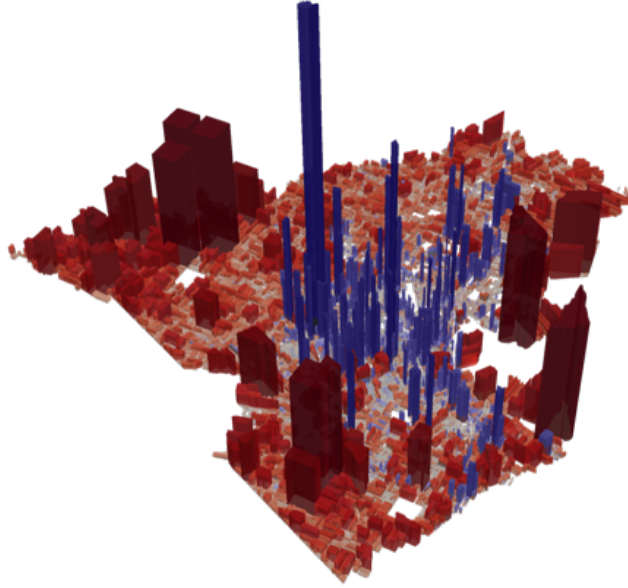


Figure 19: Lafayette, Louisiana, in N.D. Dep't of Commerce, *2021 Main Street Summit Keynote: Strong Towns with Charles Marohn*, YOUTUBE (Oct. 15, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm2duuL4KSY> [<https://perma.cc/D48X-JSSA>] (citing the slide at 9:26).



Figures 20 & 21: Photograph of a strip mall, in Charles Marohn, *Your City's Wealth Isn't Where You Think*, STRONG TOWNS (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/11/11/poor-neighborhoods-make-the-best-investments-md2020> [<https://perma.cc/7PJY-ZWMR>]; Photograph of a suburban neighborhood, in Charles Marohn, *Your City's Wealth Isn't Where You Think*, STRONG TOWNS (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/11/11/poor-neighborhoods-make-the-best-investments-md2020> [<https://perma.cc/7PJY-ZWMR>].



Figures 22 & 23: Photograph of downtown business district in Lafayette, Louisiana, in Charles Marohn, *Your City's Wealth Isn't Where You Think*, STRONG TOWNS (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/11/11/poor-neighborhoods-make-the-best-investments-md2020> [<https://perma.cc/7PJY-ZWMR>]; Photograph of a downtown residential neighborhood in Lafayette, Louisiana, in Charles Marohn, *Your City's Wealth Isn't Where You Think*, STRONG TOWNS (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/11/11/poor-neighborhoods-make-the-best-investments-md2020> [<https://perma.cc/7PJY-ZWMR>].

This is one of the starkest examples of the outcomes of the suburban experiment. In Figures 20 and 21, you have a development pattern that feels like success, right?¹⁴ We have got strip malls and big houses that lots of people feel really good about having. In Figures 22 and 23, we have the part of town that people do not like. The part of town people want to condemn and push over. These blue spikes from Figure 19 are all the places like those in Figures 22 and 23. The red spikes in Figure 19's data set,¹⁵ which represents what is costing the city a lot of money, is for all the places like those in Figures 20 and 21. We have tricked ourselves into believing this leach on our cities and on our communities is actually growth and health. So, when you find that pothole, when you see that rundown section of street, when you are wondering why the up time on water, sewer, electricity, trash pickup, school district bus maintenance or bus times are struggling, think of these photos and know that unsustainable suburban sprawl is to blame. That is why your cities are going broke.

IV. SOLUTIONS: STRONG TOWNS FIVE CORE CAMPAIGNS

In Strong Towns, we have five core campaigns, and we believe that these campaigns can help cities reverse the damage of suburban sprawl that has been done. The first thing cities can and should do is increase incremental housing, meaning allow basically anything by any right. And I know how scary and insane that sounds. I promise I do. But the only way we are going to reverse this trend is by building

¹⁴ See *supra* Figures 20 & 21.

¹⁵ See *supra* Figure 19.

sustainable housing. Housing that is built in the suburban post-war development pattern at the edge of a city is not sustainable. You are cursing those communities and the people there into a downward cycle of wealth theft in addition to leaching your cities dry with that growth. I know that is harsh. It is true.

Do we need more housing? Absolutely. Should we let housing be built? Absolutely. Should we prefer housing that is incremental infill development on infrastructure that we have already paid for? Ten times out of ten, yes. And again, incremental infill development is going to be done by the people who are already living in your community. The reason that suburban developments on the edge of town are oftentimes the only kind of developments that can work in a city is because they can be built by an external developer that has five lawyers on in-house counsel who have dealt with all the eccentricities and laws that all our cities have piled on to development. Fix that. That is the first thing we need to do.

The next thing we need to do is focus on building safe and productive streets. We must stop prioritizing automotive throughput. We have to prioritize the safety of all people using our streets as opposed to optimizing our road design for letting cars go as fast as possible. We do not have to talk about plane crash versus car crash numbers anymore. This is another choice we are making. We have intentionally made our roads as wide as possible so people can drive as fast as possible, so that the engineering organizations across North America, who guess what, shockingly, have an incentive to get more roads built.

Just a side rant on that, if you ever see numbers about how highway expansion or road expansion is going to increase economic productivity, it is the biggest lie ever. What they do is they will say, "okay, this road is going to save each person thirty seconds on their commute. One hundred million people go through it. So that is 300 million minutes. That many minutes is this many hours, and that many hours at the prevailing wage rate in our community is this." Then, increased demand comes along, and it is the exact same travel time. Highway expansion is theft.

Next, our cities must end parking mandates and subsidies. My favorite bar in my hometown of Fayetteville, Arkansas, is in a building that sat empty for forty years because you could not find parking by the building. It had six spots out front. It is now the hardest restaurant reservation to get in our town. And they have opened three more restaurants employing dozens of people because we simply repealed our parking mandates. We changed literally nothing else in the business or tax code.

So, what do we need to do? We need to maintain a low bar of entry. Let people try things. Let people open a hair braiding studio in their garage. Let them take that abandoned warehouse front downtown and turn it into something. Let people build starter homes or as they used to be called, homes. In most of our cities, you cannot build homes under 1,200 square feet. For the entirety of human history that was just a house. That is the house we all lived and grew up in. That is the house every one of our parents and grandparents was born and raised in. When you needed an extra room, you added it. You did not have to start off with seven bedrooms and a four-car garage. And you could do it on tiny, tiny lots.

Allow businesses to start with the shipping businesses. We have worked with several communities to get shacks from Home Depot and put them in an abandoned parking lot and create an expedited business license process so that people can try something new. The people that grow out of those incubators will

occupy the vacant space in your community. They will take those empty storefronts that are not producing any tax income or jobs, and they will turn them into productive businesses.

Respond to how people actually use the city. These are called desire paths, and you need to recognize desire paths. These are really easy to see and why we use them as an example, but there are probably desire paths in the business license office in your city, too. These business desire paths exist where people are trying to do the best they can and the process itself is stopping them. Again, it is functioning the exact way that it was meant to by making it hard for people that we did not like at some point to get something done. So, find those desire paths in your community and fix them as quickly as you can.

Here at Strong Towns, we believe that there is a pretty straightforward path in trying this, much like our ancestors did. Observe where people in the community struggle. What is the thing that you can do? Is it really hard to get a business permit? Is it really hard to get a building permit? Simplify that process. Give people a chance to try something new.

Then, once we find out what the next smallest thing is, do that thing right away. Just do it. This is where we actually have control. And this is one of the things that I think is so important in the kinds of conversations we are going to be finding ourselves in for the next however many years. We have to take control where we can take control. And this can be at the municipal level, at the county level, or anywhere within your local jurisdiction. Find what you can do next and do it. Do what you can do in your community.

So again, our cities do not need to go from incubation all the way to finished state. They need to be allowed to change and grow. We can do this. We have the control. This is why we believe that local government is actually the highest form of government that can be active because we can make these changes. Every single thing I talked about today is a thing that citizens in Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, or any other state, could go to city council and change. These are all things that we have the power to change.

Next, no one is coming to save you. No one is going to come save your community. The only people who can do that are you. But what a wonderful, amazing opportunity because we can do this. We have seen a change in community after community where there were enough people who cared enough to get something done.

If you want more from Strong Towns, we have books, and you can go check out strongtowns.org. What I find most encouraging about this work is that, while policy change can often take years—and that work is important and necessary—some of the most impactful changes can happen right away. We can change parking mandates in our cities tomorrow. We can reform exclusionary single-family zoning in our communities tomorrow. And I know this is possible because it is already happening. We have done it before. Thank you all so much.