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Older Suburbs Are Facing Survival Squeeze

Newer towns are taking shopping and taxpayers away from older suburbs, and city woes beset them as well, but they're fighting back

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By Carol Jouzaitis

PARK FOREST, ILL. -- Fifty years ago, they symbolized the American dream. Today, they're having a mid-life crisis.

Like the inner cities before them, the nation's inner suburbs are becoming rundown, unfashionable and obsolete. Shopping centers are boarded up. The aluminum-sided houses seem worn and cramped. Factories have closed, and businesses and people have moved farther out to burgeoning "edge cities" with their bigger houses, wider yards, fancier malls and glistening office parks.

Older suburbs that ring Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Seattle, Miami, San Francisco and other big cities are struggling to retain their vitality. But a growing number of leaders from the inner suburbs are refusing to succumb to the forces that blighted inner cities. They're forming coalitions, sometimes with urban counterparts to bolster their political clout. They're lobbying for a bigger share of government subsidies for highways and economic renewal to relieve the stress on municipal budgets. They're drawing up plans to revive dead commercial strips. And they're pushing for "smart growth" laws that steer development back to established communities.

In their heyday, when Baby Boomers were growing up, these inner suburbs were seen as refuges for the middle class. Some of them, those with prime locations and better housing stock, have held up well. But the aging process has been difficult for Park Forest, Ill., and other communities like it, especially those with small homes built with cheap materials.

"Yuppies don't want to fix up these houses," says Myron Orfield, author of *Metropolitics*, which traces the plight of inner suburbs across the nation. "There are no hardwood floors to restore, no beautiful old cabinets."

Camelot in Illinois

In the years after World War II, Park Forest was built on farm fields south of Chicago to provide housing for returning GIs and their families. Its cookie-cutter houses sold as fast as they were built. Everything was fresh and shiny, from the town's schools and parks to its

shopping center, one of the nation's first regional malls.

Park Forest quickly became a haven for rising executives. In suburban terms, says longtime resident and former mayor Henry Dietch, "It was Camelot."

Now, fast forward to the 1990s.

The upwardly mobile have gone in search of a better life, leaving behind a population that is older and poorer. It's smaller as well: During the 1980s, Park Forest's population shrank by 14% to under 25,000. And median household income fell by 3% to \$37,000 annually, adjusted for inflation, while nationally, income rose by 7%.

There are signs that the social fabric is beginning to fray. One in five families, for example, are now headed by a single mother. Gangs, racial tensions and other social problems have surfaced as new families have moved out from the cities.

At Aunt Martha's Youth Service Center, which provides family counseling in Park Forest and neighboring towns, social workers say they are seeing more youths using drugs and involved with sex and violence than they did 15 years ago.

The town's infrastructure is showing signs of wear, too. Residents have watched helplessly as their property taxes have jumped while the commercial tax base has dwindled. The result: cracked sidewalks, shabby parks and a constant struggle to maintain schools and other municipal services.

The shopping center is being bulldozed, having lost its luster years ago after three flashier malls opened within a 12-mile radius.

About 2,400 jobs have fled town in the last 20 years. Dietch now has to go to neighboring suburbs to eat out, shop or get a haircut. Soon, his synagogue will be forced to close because of a shrinking congregation.

"Park Forest is not what it used to be," he says. "It's sad."

Following the crowd

Upscale home buyers, demanding safer streets and more green space, have migrated from inner suburbs around the country to outlying areas -- the so-called exurbs -- where land is cheaper and highways foster development. Businesses have moved from cities and inner suburbs to edge-city office parks, lured by financial incentives from local officials eager to build their tax bases.

"It's the same phenomenon that brought down central cities," says Thomas Bier, urbanologist at Cleveland State University. Suburbanites "never dreamed it could catch up to them."

Not only did the problems catch up, they also seemed to intensify when they hit the suburbs, overwhelming social workers and smaller police departments.

Dan Strick, Aunt Martha's general manager, says, "Services are more fragmented in the suburbs. Park Forest may try to address a certain youth problem but if the suburb next door

doesn't do something, it doesn't have much impact. The kids all go to the same schools."

For a long time, suburban leaders were reluctant to talk publicly about their problems, fearing that such talk would hasten the downward slide. And there were fewer solutions to offer.

Big cities have been staging an economic comeback by capitalizing on their big-name hospitals and universities, their downtown and their pop-culture attractions. But bedroom communities typically have no such resources and little land to build on.

More recently, however, officials in older communities have begun fighting back. Some of their tactics:

Outside Cleveland, mayors from Shaker Heights, Cleveland Heights, Euclid and five other towns have formed the First Ring Suburbs Consortium. They've pressed the Ohio Legislature for a bigger slice of the state highway budget. They also have protested several exurban highway expansions, including a \$46 million widening of Interstate 90 west of Cleveland, and tax breaks that speed the transformation of farm land into subdivisions.

"Our older neighborhoods shouldn't be treated like disposable commodities," says Euclid Mayor Paul Oyaski.

In Minnesota, the law now requires more affluent towns in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to share tax revenues with needier ones. About \$500 million is pooled and redistributed every year among 187 towns to even out economic disparities.

The plan has been a godsend, says Elwyn Tinklenberg, former mayor of Blaine, Minnesota, and inner suburb north of Minneapolis where crime has been a problem. It boosted Blaine's municipal budget by about \$1 million last year, enabling it to improve public services while holding down taxes.

After years of bitter feuding, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and suburban leaders held an unprecedented regional summit recently to discuss a metropolitan-wide approach to economic development.

The Chicago area has been losing jobs to Wisconsin and Indiana, says Daley aide Rita Athas. "Our initiatives have to be more regionwide."

Regional Strategies

Such collaboration is a first step toward regional strategies to save older neighborhoods. And the Chicago area isn't the only place where regional leaders are trying to cooperate more. In Louisville, city and suburban officials have signed an agreement not to raid one another's employers.

The effort to save inner suburbs also has energized the movement against sprawl, a

campaign traditionally fought by environmentalists and farm-land preservation groups.

Now suburban leaders are joining the anti-sprawl cause. And so are some governors, sensing voters' frustration with suburban traffic congestion and disappearing open space.

"Smart growth," the movement's latest slogan, espouses the philosophy that older neighborhoods should be maintained and redeveloped before new growth eats up vacant parcels at the metropolitan edge.

Maryland's Gov. Parris Glendening, a Democrat, says his state can't afford to keep building highways to transport people to new communities while social problems fester in older, abandoned ones.

"Don't expect taxpayers to keep subsidizing sprawl," says Glendening, who led the push for Maryland's Smart Growth plan, adopted by the state Legislature last fall. The plan confines state funding for new highways to designated growth areas and targets economic development tax credits at ailing neighborhoods.

The plan won't stop sprawl, Maryland officials say. But it will require developers, and ultimately homebuyers, in growth areas to shoulder more of the cost of new infrastructure in their areas.

Anti-sprawl initiatives are long-term propositions and won't show effects for years, experts say. But unless action is taken to save ailing suburbs, "they're on their way to becoming the next slums," urbanologist Bier predicts. "Urban problems will continue taking down suburb after suburb in a domino fashion."

As big cities revitalize their downtowns, the metropolitan landscape may turn increasingly polarized, urban experts say. Older suburbs stand to become slums sandwiched between dynamic inner cities and booming edge cities.

"It's a big national problem," author Orfield says. He notes that between one-quarter and one-third of all residents in major metropolitan areas live in older suburbs.

"As many people live in economically troubled suburbs as in thriving, affluent ones," Orfield says.

In Chicago's south suburbs, the domino effect has been evident as the metropolitan edge has moved farther westward with each new ring of suburbs. When Park Forest's mall opened in 1949, it killed the thriving downtown of the suburb to the east, Chicago Heights. Today, Chicago Heights is plagued by abandoned properties, prostitution and gangs.

In the 1970s, a new suburb to the east, Matteson, stole Park Forest's glitter, building a more spacious, enclosed mall just 1 1/2 miles away.

Now the action has moved even farther out to a newer suburb, Orland Park, which has a regional mall.

Park Forest officials say they're determined to keep the community stable. The suburb has helped prop up home values by ticketing home owners who don't fix peeling paint.

One of the first towns in the area to organize a human rights commission, Park Forest has managed to avoid the white flight experienced by neighboring towns. Its professional theater troupe and local arts center offer a cultural life unmatched by many suburbs.

And the suburb is turning the bankrupt mall into an old-fashioned Main Street, with delis, a dry cleaner, travel agency and the like. Nearby, a surplus school is being razed to make room for a pricey condominium and town-house project.

City manager Janet Muchnik says she hopes the new condos will draw more upscale residents back to Park Forest. And the new Main Street, she predicts, will provide commercial services the suburb now lacks.

"We've had to face some dramatic changes," Muchnik says. But eventually, richer suburbs will too, she warns.

"You better look over your shoulder, because there's always a new highway, another intersection and a bigger, glitzier community waiting to become the hot spot."

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