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A (Radical) Way to Fix Suburban Sprawl

By Lisa Selin Davis / Tysons Corner

There's something deeply wrong with Tysons Corner. For starters, Virginia's bustling commercial district — the 12th biggest employment center in the nation — has more parking spaces than jobs or residents. What was a quaint intersection of two country roads 50 years ago is now a two-tiered interchange with 10 lanes of traffic-choked hell; try to cross it on foot, and you're taking your life into your hands. Located about 14 miles west of downtown Washington, the nearly 1,700-acre area is home to fortresses of unfriendly buildings surrounded by oceans of parking lots, as well as single-story car dealerships, strip malls, fast-food joints, highways and a big toll road. Pedestrians are personae non gratae here. What few sidewalks exist often abruptly end.

The overgrown office park — which sprang up around Tysons Corner Center, the ninth largest indoor mall in the U.S. — has become the opposite of a bedroom community. Some 120,000 people work in Tysons, but only 17,000 live here. "Every morning, 110,000 cars arrive, and they all leave at 5," says Clark Tyler, a former federal transportation official and the chairman of a task force whose ambitious goal is to help transform Tysons into a full-fledged city — where people live and work and play 24 hours a day. ([See pictures of Americans in their homes.](#))

The blueprint, which has been four years in the making and calls for a dense, walkable green city, is a model of public-private partnership and the largest such undertaking in the country. The implications of this redevelopment project stretch far beyond Fairfax County, as suburbs and exurbs across the country look for ways to repair the damage from five decades of outward, rather than upward, expansion. There are scores of so-called edge cities that have popped up near urban centers, suburbs on steroids that often grew around a giant mall — like King of Prussia, Pa. (outside Philadelphia), and Schaumburg, Ill. (Chicago). "If Tysons can be retrofitted, then there's great hope for a lot of others," says June Williamson, an associate professor of architecture at the City College of New York and a co-author of *Retrofitting Suburbia*.

The impetus for unsprawling Tysons is a 23-mile extension of the Metro line that will connect Washington proper to Dulles International Airport, with four stops in Tysons along the way. The U.S. Department of Transportation agreed in March to cut a \$900 million check for the rail line. But a simple park-and-ride project this is not. To help more people live closer to their jobs, the proposed land-use plan, which the county is expected to adopt in October, calls for adding as much as six times the number of existing housing units, bringing the total to 50,000. And to encourage the use of mass transit, the plan envisions a Tysons Corner where 95% of its land will be within half a mile of a train station or within 600 ft. of shuttle routes designed to ferry passengers to Metro stops and neighboring suburbs. Money from an increase on the Dulles toll road and special tax districts will help Uncle Sam pay for the rail stations. Funds for bicycle paths, schools, police stations and storm-water management systems will likely come from the county, property owners and developers — who will be asked to pay extra for the privilege of helping Tysons build toward a goal of doubling or even tripling its density.

Whoa — triple the density? Isn't the goal to ease traffic, not to add to it? What can be hardest for people to wrap their minds around is that to undo sprawl — and the traffic and smog and environmental waste that come with it — we might have to build a lot more on top of it. Right now, nearly half the land in Tysons is either roadway or parking. The new incarnation will be less car- and more people-oriented. So instead of there being stores and offices set back from the road, with parking in between, new mixed-use buildings will hug the sidewalk, with retail on the first floor to accommodate passersby. Buildings will be squeezed together, Manhattan-style. "The new plan? It's basically known as urbanism," says Fairfax County planning commissioner Walter Alcorn.

Or, rather, it is the 21st century version of slum clearance, with parking lots and strip malls getting razed and superblocks — long stretches uninterrupted by cross streets — getting chopped up to create short, walkable city blocks.

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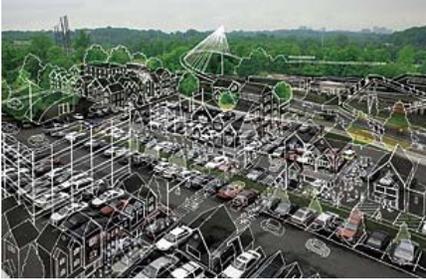
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But whereas slum clearance was enforced by local governments, which used and in some cases abused eminent domain to reinvent neighborhoods, the Tysons retrofit almost entirely depends on 150 or



Some 120,000 people work in Tysons Corner, Va., but only 17,000 live there. To transform this hotbed of suburban gridlock into a green, walkable city, a soon-to-be-adopted plan—as envisioned by our artist—calls for as much as tripling the current square footage by expanding upward, with the tallest buildings located next to four new train stations, which should be completed by 2013.

David S. Holloway / Reportage / Getty for TIME; Illustration by Chris Dent for TIME



To help turn this overgrown office park into a real city, Tysons' redevelopment task force wants to add as much as six times the number of existing housing units—bringing the total to 50,000—so more people can live closer to where they work. Key challenges include getting private landowners to create a grid of streets and ensuring that development doesn't outpace the infrastructure to support the proposed 85,000 new residents

David S. Holloway / Reportage / Getty for TIME; Illustration by Chris Dent for TIME



Tysons wants to be a truly livable city where people not only work but also play. That's why the land-use plan calls for nearly a tenth of the city's 1,700 acres to be turned into parks and other public spaces. Developers who want to build would help foot the bill for community projects.

David S. Holloway / Reportage / Getty for TIME; Illustration by Chris Dent for TIME

so private landowners. (Aside from a fire station, a school and a few public watersheds, Tysons has almost no public land. Like most other places in Fairfax County, Tysons is unincorporated and is overseen at the county level.) The government won't mandate these changes. Rather, property owners will apply individually to increase the scale or density of their holdings, to tear down or add to what is already standing, and work together to hammer out a grid of streets to replace the maddening squiggles of private, dead-end roads — a grid that Alcorn says is as important as the Metrorail in battling congestion.

If all that sounds like a tremendous amount of faith in the private sector, it is. But the draw of Tysons — its plum location between Washington and Dulles, the major highways cutting through it — has made it endlessly marketable to businesses despite the suburban gridlock. Unlike abandoned subdivisions and flailing inner cities, Tysons thrives (hence the traffic). The Hilton Corp. plans to move its headquarters here from Beverly Hills, Calif. Volkswagen and Gannett already call Tysons home. ([See TIME's Pictures of the Week.](#))

Striking a Balance

Property owners big and small have been drooling over the development possibilities. For instance, the Georgelas Group is planning to scrap the car dealership and other low-rise buildings sitting on the 20 or so acres it owns in Tysons to create a mixed-use development near a soon-to-be-built train station. Aaron Georgelas, the group's managing partner, is happy to donate land to the street grid, since the county will allow him to build higher because of it. He also knows that tearing down revenue-generating buildings to put up new ones — even if they're three times as large — is a gamble, particularly in the current economic climate. "You very well could be handing that property over to a bank," he says.

Residents of McLean, Va., and other single-family enclaves near Tysons are more risk-averse. Members of the 95-year-old McLean Citizens Association (MCA) say they genuinely support Tysons' growth and realize its inevitability — but where, they ask, will the proposed 85,000 new residents play soccer, go to school or seek police protection? "We don't want to see it grow faster than the infrastructure to take care of it," says MCA president Rob Jackson. The task force agrees and wants the county to build a tit-for-tat system into the redevelopment plan to ensure that private development moves in lockstep with the public amenities needed to support it.

The other fear: that Metrorail or not, more people will equal more car traffic. Urban-design experts like Williamson insist that adding homes reduces traffic, as long as things like mass transit, supermarkets and dry cleaners are within walking distance. "It's not so much about how many people have cars," she says. "It's about how they use them."

But in February, Cambridge Systematics, a transportation consulting firm in Massachusetts, released a traffic study based on the land-use plan and concluded that despite the mass-transit options, the proposed influx of residents, plus an expected 100,000 new jobs, will result in more congestion. "Maybe," responds task-force chairman Tyler. "But it will have a lot less traffic than if Tysons keeps developing the way it is."

The plan doesn't call for narrowing major traffic arteries — a futile endeavor that Tyler likens to "unfrying an egg" — but it doesn't call for widening them either. Creating bike lanes and crosswalks will help make the area less inhospitable to nondrivers. But what happens if Tysons doesn't bulk up enough to wipe out the sprawl? That won't happen, says Sharon Bulova, chairwoman of the Fairfax County board of supervisors. Enough landowners have already detailed their visions and are simply waiting for the official go-ahead in October to start submitting rezoning applications. And if the economy slows down the redevelopment? "Then it waits," says Bulova. "You don't adopt a new plan and, boom, there's a new city. This transformation will happen over 30, 40, 50 years." After all, it took developers 45 years to make Tysons this big of a mess. It's going to take them some time to fix it.

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