

Architectural event looks at layout of city

Wednesday, May 14, 2008 3:00 AM EDT

By Mary E. O'Leary

NEW HAVEN — If you ask Google for directions from Sovereign Bank on Church Street to the nearest Starbucks, you will get a map that tells you it is 1.2 vehicle miles away.

They are actually located diagonally across the street from one another at Church and Chapel streets in the heart of downtown New Haven.

It's one of many examples of the tyranny of one-way streets and other mistakes in urban planning that "create traffic where none exists," according to architect Robert Orr, problems that are being eliminated as more communities across the country take up the mantra of New Urbanism to guide development.

Orr, a national leader in the movement, was the speaker Tuesday in the latest installment of the "Wine, Dine, Design" series sponsored by the Town Green Downtown Special Services District, in which the public listens to lectures on design in local architect offices and then walks to a restaurant to continue the conversation.

In the past forty years, with the advent of cheap petroleum fuels, the automobile has spurred sprawl, with zoning laws now catering to speeding vehicles over walkability, and where traditional dense urban growth that mixed small-scale retail and residential construction has been abandoned.

After 25 years of refinement, however, New Urbanism models have taken root with more than 4,000 projects across the country, accompanied by Smart Code zoning, with Hamden vying with Jamestown, R.I., to be the first in New England to adopt the precepts.

Orr has been working with Hamden to change zoning along stretches of Whitney Avenue, State Street and Dixwell Avenue to mix residential and commercial growth that will calm traffic and hopefully spur development.

A study showed that if policy changes weren't enacted along these strips, residential property would be the only outlet for tax increases, further burdening homeowners, Orr said.

Orr said Smart Code changes made in Petaluma, Calif., spurred \$100 million worth of private development in four years, increasing tax revenue 300 percent and sales tax revenue 17 percent in a city that had experienced no downtown development in three decades.

He said it was a return to the kind of center around which cities used to grow organically. "It is trying to put people back in the picture," he said.

Orr answered a request for qualifications to develop the 4.5 acre former Veterans Memorial Coliseum site in the 9th Square in New Haven in partnership with the Related Companies.

He recommends a mixed-use, mixed-income community with buildings ranging from three to five-stories with an occasional one rising between six and ten stories with commercial and retail on the property.

As in his other projects, he would add to the street grid and replicate the traditional massing of buildings that already exist in

New Haven.

Orr Tuesday however, said Related could not make the numbers work for the project and has dropped out, along with Orr, in the competition to develop this prime piece of city property.

Going forward, Orr told the crowd he is convinced of the importance of the small urban farms that are cropping up around the country and is looking for a way to incorporate them into future New Urbanism projects.

The architect, who has developed successful communities around the country in the last three decades, said the abandoned factories and paved areas surrounding developed areas in New Haven could be good locations for urban farms that could satisfy the demand for sustainable food sources.

URL: http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2008/05/14/past_stories/19919426.prt

© 2008 nhregister.com, a **Journal Register** Property