

Rediscovering joys of walking in the city

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Chester Smolski

"They're gonna stay in the city," is the way a major Providence developer and landowner stated it. A forecast that urbanists have been making for the past several years is now reaching fruition, and when it comes from businessmen whose property investments depend on their perception of the future, there can be little question that its time has come.

The energy crisis has caused people to rethink their means of transportation and, what is more serious, their ability to keep warm in the winter. Because transportation most often involves a journey from home to work, people are starting to reconsider the location of that home relative to their place of employment. In addition, the location of a home relative to shopping, entertainment, and services also must be considered as one contemplates the necessarily lessened use of the automobile to satisfy these needs and desires.

As the gasoline shortage worsens, it seems likely that suburban residents and couples starting new households will look to the city as the place which offers the greatest concentration of jobs and services, yet requires the least use of the automobile to reach them.

For those of us who already live and work in the city, the gasoline crunch has already manifested itself in less busy streets and reduced levels of car noise. Both factors have contributed to a more pleasant urban environment.

More than just the rediscovered joy of fewer cars on the streets, though, it is the convenience of services readily available on foot that makes one realize the virtues of the city. On a recent weekend it was possible to walk to three different shopping areas, each within a 15-minute walk from home — one for purchases at the supermarket, one for entertainment, and one for banking and pharmaceutical services. This choice, available within a short walking distance, is a major strength of the city that will influence decisions on where to locate in a gasoline-short society.

Contrast the availability of city services by foot with the necessity to use a car in our suburbs where the isolated barber-shop, doctor's office, bank, bakery, and so on require miles of driving to be reached. And even if one could walk to such suburban services, the lack of sidewalks and hazardous walking conditions reduce any incentive to try such a venture.

The change from scattered suburban development to concentrated urban revitalization will be slow and may cause problems of adjustment. After having be-

come accustomed to a lifestyle based upon individual houses set on large lots and inexpensive fuel to easily move us about, we have come to expect these as some God-given, inalienable American rights. Yet it has been dramatically brought to our attention that our vast resources can be depleted and that our country does not hold a monopoly on their availability.

Even the city dweller must make adjustments to the greater use of feet rather than the car. When supermarket shopping, for instance, one takes shopping bags with handles to carry one's food supply more easily; and one shops more frequently because fewer items can be carried. One is reminded of Europe, for this is the common way that shopping is done there as well as in most other parts of the world.

Attitudes toward time will also change. One can rush to a shop by car but how does one rush (run?) to do the shopping if on foot?

Although the pace of life will slow — a day at Roger Williams Park may replace a weekend trip to New Hampshire — we are not really going back to a "rocking-chair-on-the-porch" type of existence. But it does mean that walking will become more common, and if one walks several miles each day then there is little need for jogging. As Edward Payson Weston, one of America's most renowned walkers, once stated, walking is "like a perfect massage. It will ease and relax the muscles. But unlike massage it will also strengthen them."

A return to city living may be one of the major gains from a lessened use of the car. More walking in our cities can mean less crime on the streets, because more people will be on the streets rather than passing by in anonymous cars; it will mean more exercise for more of us; it will mean a return to the city of the better educated and more affluent offspring of those who fled the city for the suburbs. It also will mean a slower pace of living based upon feet rather than car. It will mean a beautification of our cities by reducing traffic and causing planners to think in terms of pedestrian needs rather than traffic circulation and dead storage space for cars. And it will mean that we will live in smaller units located in compact and energy-efficient housing complexes.

Yes, there will be problems of adjustment to a reduced use of the automobile but, given the right attitudes, we could very well end up with a richer and fuller life, one that brings us closer together as neighbors with a sense of community, which is something the automobile destroys.

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Chester E. Smolski is director of urban studies, Rhode Island College.