The densification of cities may actually facilitate obesity

by Randy Bright http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5192

One of my sage-like friends once told me the real reason people buy treadmills: they're to be used once for exercise, and thereafter for hanging laundry. There's wisdom in his observation, trust me.

Several interesting articles caught my attention regarding the correlation of health, urban environments and the car. It is not surprising that the car is getting the blame for obesity, but what is refreshing is that I am seeing a more diverse set of opinions about that correlation.

Newgeography.com recently published an excellent article by Phil McDermott entitled Where Do the Children Play, in which he challenged the current thinking that densely developed cities are good for our health. He contested the conclusions of a study by the New Zealand Public Health Advisory that "cited four principles for healthy urban planning based on the density of development: urban regeneration, compact growth, focused decentralization and linear concentration. The aim is less time in cars and more use of active transport."

McDermott points out poor health in densely developed environments can be a result of "traffic volumes, strangers on the street and lack of outdoor play space" and that in those environments there are disadvantages that include, "insufficient space, internal noise, lack of natural light, lack of privacy, inadequate parking, inadequate indoor play space and the potentially hazardous nature of balconies." All of those disadvantages, by the way, are for the most part solved by less densely developed urban areas, the suburbs that are being blamed for unhealthy lifestyles.

The point of McDermott's article is that densely developed urban environments are not child-friendly, and that if they are not child-friendly, they are not family-friendly. This and the high cost of housing has also resulted in a high mobility rate among families, which means that they do not live long enough in one place to create a real community, and that they don't come out of their houses where their neighborhoods are unsafe.

Another article by Sarah Goodyear of Grist magazine, who wrote an article entitled Fat City: The Way Your Neighborhood is Built Could Be Killing You, cited a 3-year-long Canadian study by the Diabetes Atlas that included 140 Toronto neighborhoods.

It suggested that walking or exercising 30 minutes (per day, I assume) is enough to cut the risk of diabetes in half, but that some neighborhoods were so dangerous that it discouraged the activity. According to the study, this makes the neighborhood "obesogenic," that is, an area where residents are more likely to become obese.

Goodyear cites a report from the Centers for Disease Control that stated that there are now nine states in America where the obesity rate is more than 30 percent, and she also quotes from a

study written by University of Illinois researcher Sheldon Jacobson who concluded that cars correlated in the "99-percent range" with obesity.

Jacobson wrote, "If we drive more, we become heavier as a nation, and the cumulative lack of activity may eventually lead to, at the aggregate level, obesity".

Goodyear makes the argument that not only does "autocentric suburbs" correlate to obesity and diabetes, but that "residents of dense urban areas also suffer from high rates of obesity and diabetes, in part because of the lack of healthy food choices, in part because certain ethnic groups are more predisposed to diabetes, and in part because the streetscape is degraded and ignored." Her conclusion is that it is up to municipal officials to promote safety on school routes and at parks, provide transportation to these areas, design public places to promote exercise and to add more pedestrian and bicycle ways in streets.

The truth is that just as the poor have always been with us, and always will be, the obese have always been with us, and always will be. The reason is simple. There are two reasons why people are obese. One is that there is a medical reason. The other is that when they lack the discipline to maintain a healthy weight by proper diet and exercise, they choose to be obese. They've chosen to hang their laundry on the treadmill instead of using it.

Good city planning can enhance the quality of life, but it is no substitute for self-discipline. In a free society, no amount of parks, recreation centers, bike or pedestrian paths, is a means to reducing obesity. That can only be done by individuals who make a strong commitment to their own health, regardless of the environment in which they live.

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Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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