Sustaining Smart Growth and Active Living: A Greenbelt Town and its Village Center, 70 Years Later

By Sherry Ahrentzen

The Story
They call themselves “Pioneers”—nearly a dozen people who moved to Greendale, Wisconsin when it was founded in 1938. And they continue to live there today.

As the new residents of one of the three federally-sponsored greenbelt towns, they were embarking on a new frontier. Greendale's development, which was part of FDR's New Deal Greenbelt Towns Program, reflected remarkable physical, economic, and social innovations in community building. The program created affordable towns that fostered engagement with green space and recreational facilities. While the contemporary term “active living” was not in the vocabulary of Greendale’s planners, the quality of life they encouraged was very much the same.

Today, the town, near metropolitan Milwaukee, is one in which one out of three households has a resident over 62 years of age; some live alone, some live with others. While Greendale’s demographics have changed, it remains a community responsive to active health needs, with walkable neighborhoods, foot trails, woods, parks, and a vital village center with civic, retail and service establishments frequented regularly by residents.

And residents do, indeed, walk: more than 80% of the 700 seniors surveyed said they walk in Greendale for exercise or health reasons, often in the parks, along the high school grounds, or on the foot trails. One of their favorite destinations, they said, is the village center.

The story of Greendale is a story of how a planning policy instituted nearly 70 years ago has been sustained and adapted so that Greendale’s physical qualities continue to enhance active living among residents even today.

Lessons Learned
A recent threat to Greendale’s garden city viability was the slow demise of the village center, which is the heart of the community—historically, civically, physically, and emotionally. Weather permitting, many residents walked there on sidewalks and ubiquitous foot trails.

In the 1970s, retail market changes brought the state’s largest shopping mall—and the subsequent proliferation of big box stores—to the edge of Greendale. This economic development aided the city’s tax base, but it left the village center in disarray. The grocery store, hardware store, and others pulled out; by the early 1990s, only 7 of the center’s 29 business spaces were occupied. A particular confluence of conditions and events aligned, however, to regenerate the village center in a manner in keeping with the original planning principles and scale.

Roy Reiman, a resident millionaire businessman, saved the village center by establishing a foundation for its redevelopment—and accommodating his own business expansion needs. Some of Reiman’s efforts included refurbishing all of the storefronts, interiors, and public walkways; instituting an aggressive marketing campaign to attract non-chain retailers and services; creating direct access to walking trails; and establishing a visitor’s center sponsored by his business.

Reiman Publishing, to anchor the village center.

As shown by this current GIS map of parcels and building footprints in Greendale, WI, open space is still a priority in the community.

The Pioneers, local business owners, public officials, and Reiman worked together to ensure the village center’s survival. They demonstrated that entrenched community attachment and a sense of uniqueness—cultivated originally among the Pioneers but passed along by subsequent community generations—play a vital role in establishing the grounds for regeneration.

Replicating Change
Over the decades, Greendale faced a number of challenges that threatened the viability of the greenbelt principles and their implications for active living.

Consider walkability—a defining characteristic of the original town with its myriad off-road walking trails, sidewalks, and site design situated so that residents of any home could reach the village center without having to cross more than one street. This layout was distinctive for its time; it continues to be distinctive today. As development surrounding the original settlement grew, easy and safe walking from the newer outlying neighborhoods to the village center came under threat. But while today one has to cross several streets to reach the village center from the outskirts of the town, each neighborhood—new and old—established their own network of walking trails through wooded areas, along the river, and other natural settings.

These efforts largely came about because residents and politicians identify strongly with the walkable history of their town and have endeavored to keep that distinction visible and current. The community identity resulting from Greendale’s historical uniqueness has informed and inspired efforts to sustain that distinctive quality.

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