



NEXT UP

Time to take action and vote absentee

Where am I living? In 2016, the Russians influenced our elections by manipulat...



As I See It

Let's make Frederick a pioneer of America's digital heartland

By Alan Feinberg, Frederick Apr 21, 2020  3



In 2016, a Washingtonian magazine article suggested that Frederick's changing demographic, including young professionals and immigrants, had launched an urban-entrepreneurial dynamic favoring "a mobile young workforce," positioning our city to become a workforce provider to D.C. and a model for Maryland's communities.

Journalist Miranda Spivack was silent on how to achieve this, least of all on terms acceptable to Frederick residents, but a pathway is now, arguably, emerging as an unexpected effect of COVID-19, which has shown that government and private sector continuity, productivity and security are well served by telework. Or, more accurately, telecommunity, a concept so far familiar mainly to scholars but which we're going to be hearing more about, with exciting implications for Frederick and small cities and towns like it.

Telecommunity isn't about isolated teleworkers. It's about employers like the feds partnering with local authorities to create neighborhoods of teleworkers who service a remote head office, in D.C. or elsewhere, while interacting face to face with co-employee neighbors, including a local manager. In contrast with America's national political polarization, which has tended to be mirrored in the political controversies of local community planning, telecommunity is a refreshingly unifying paradigm: it envisages healthy collaborations between local communities and, of all things, the federal government.



Much of the U.S. heartland likes a healthy distance from the feds. President Reagan's statement, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help" isn't exclusively Republican. Nineteenth century rural unease with the feds and national industrial expansion birthed the Democrats, also influencing the 20th century's smart growth land-use philosophy of small-community walkability, public transit, demographic diversity, mixed use and respect for distinctive local places as antidotes to sprawl. Later, new urbanism sought to align such priorities with stronger community participation. However, these movements have never delivered their hoped-for solutions.

Does this condemn our rural settlements to be bedroom communities or featureless expanses of sprawl? No. In 2005, researcher N.J. Slabbert published in *Urban Land* magazine a vision of digitally empowered Maryland communities as workforce powerhouses for D.C. which would retain their economic robustness and vitality as distinctive places. Slabbert elaborated on this in a book and has continued to research the idea.

He argues: "American placemaking's future lies in telecommunities: whole communities of locally-managed, technologically-linked neighbors. Such high-tech trans-urban workforces can effectively serve metropolitan head offices while invigorating the distinctive character of their host communities. Local quality of life helps productivity, which in turn incentivizes employers to cooperate with local authorities in developing these telecommunities. Rarely if ever has urban planning history seen such an opportunity for local leaders to negotiate with remote employers in crafting communities that will work democratically for all participants, economically, aesthetically and environmentally."

Telecommunity will help meet the pressures on federal agencies to improve their ability to maintain operational continuity during a terrorist attack, war or other crises, says Slabbert. He adds that federal agencies also face rising urban rental costs, urban congestion and physical-commuting productivity issues, so that, "massive historical forces are aligning to usher us into a telecommunity age, in which a distributed government infrastructure partners creatively with local authorities throughout the U.S. to create a digital heartland." New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has meanwhile reported on Matt Dunne, executive director of the Center on Rural Innovation, as pointing out that "building fiber infrastructure all across heartland America ensures that high-paying jobs can take place anywhere" and makes all of the U.S. "more resilient to future pandemics and climate change-related weather events that require children and workers to stay home."

Smart growth and new urbanism express nostalgia for fondly imagined times pre-dating today's technologically polluted, congested, frantic world, but the internet has ended the relevance of the kinds of insular cities, towns and villages that existed before telecommunications. Already, by the 1960s, scholar Marshall McLuhan observed that rural detachment had given way to a "global village" linked by electronic media. Futurist Alvin Toffler built on McLuhan's insights but erroneously expected urban decline, whereas cities have grown immensely in economic and cultural power. Slabbert's ideas recognize this enduring role of cities while showing how internet technology now empowers their synergy with neighborhoods across the nation. "Post-pandemic America," he says, "will be in a frontier era, and history teaches us that frontiers are dangerous but full of opportunity."

As a professional planner who's worked for the feds, cities and small towns, and loves my home town of Frederick, I concur. Let's start a telecommunity conversation in Frederick now!

A community planner, Feinberg is the founder of East Frederick Rising, the host of Frederick's Urban Design Meetup, the American Planning Association's Representative for Western Maryland, and heads up The FeinDesignTeam, a Benefit LLC.