

BAYLOR: Livin' for the city

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Local Columnist

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— From the beginning of his life to within weeks of its end, my father lived in rural Floyd County. For much of that time, the landscape genuinely embodied the attractiveness of the American countryside prior to the invasiveness of postwar sprawl. Perhaps that's why he seldom had anything positive to say about "city life," which to him was a phenomenon endured by unfortunate people who were crowded more closely together than could possibly be healthy — with far too much traffic and far too little room to breathe.

When I was a boy, my family vacationed almost exclusively in the great outdoors of the western United States. It was my father's preference, and of course proved a valuable education for me. I wouldn't trade those experiences for anything, but as I grew older, my personal and academic interests inexorably began pointing eastward, back toward the "Old World." As noted previously, it wasn't my fault that the stork was toiling pre-GPS.

The precise moment of my divergence from the anti-urban household party line cannot be pinpointed, although by the conclusion of my first European backpacking expedition in 1985, the deal was probably sealed.

Europe's cities were revelatory. Suddenly, the bountiful possibilities of the urban ethos were revealed: art, music and culture; parks, history and architecture; restaurants, clubs and pubs; and vast, comprehensive and affordable public transportation networks tying them together.

Yes, my dad had been right: There were more people than I'd ever seen together in one place. But it didn't escape my notice that many of them in places like Paris were women my age, and that fact alone was more interesting than a mere animal kingdom in Wyoming or Montana.

Multiple summers were spent touring, learning and experiencing, and each time I elected to return to Indiana. Somewhere along the way came the grudging realization that with an established business, family ties and the unlikelihood of feasible international relocation, New Albany was going to be a permanent home. Diana and I got a great deal on an old house downtown, took a closer look around the neighborhood and had the same astounded reaction.

So much raw potential — and just as much all-embracing incomprehension.

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Amazingly, there are New Albanian residents who'll vehemently disagree if you assert that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. If they could say "no" for a living, they would. Unfortunately, theirs are the voices that the majority of local politicians heed, hence a large measure of the eternal problem.

Unraveling the confused argumentation deployed by these semi-pro obstructionists is nearly as fun as wandering through a classic hedge maze in search of the exit, except that when it comes to efforts to reason with the city's Luddites, there aren't enough progressive pints of refreshing ale on the planet to ease your transition back to the coherent side of life.

But let's leave my 3rd district councilman out of it, shall we?

Consider the city's efforts to broker the construction of the downtown YMCA, a project envisioned by former mayor Regina Overton as the first phase of the Scribner Place revitalization effort — one funded primarily by private donations, including a substantial tithe from the Caesars/Horseshoe Foundation. Only a minuscule annual contribution from economic development monies was required to bring this win-win deal happily to fruition.

Even the Geico caveman could grasp it, and yet it took all four years of James Garner's tenure as Overton's successor and the first year of Doug England's term to finally open the doors. Never has a governmental

entity been compelled to fight so long and hard to spend millions of someone else's cash, and the reason why touches on the hallmarks of the New Albany syndrome: envy, jealousy and a seldom-used word normally used in an Irish context, begrudgery.

The very same people who objected to the city spending its economic development money for economic development to help build the YMCA — predicting no one would go there — now are grouching about the parking problems caused by too many people visiting the YMCA. This means that we can add another characteristic to the New Albany syndrome checklist: aversion to irony, as in a tragicomic appearance at the YMCA's opening by two mercifully retired councilmen who spent their last four years in office vigorously opposing its construction.

That's either extreme chutzpah — or utter cluelessness.

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Then, as now, the YMCA and Scribner Place proposals make sense because they're components of purposeful downtown revitalization, and purposeful downtown revitalization makes sense because utilizing the existing urban area means a more effective leveraging of resources we already have at hand. Low-risk expenditures in infrastructure like the YMCA and Scribner Place developments help broaden the tax base, encourage private investment and bring needed jobs to the city. They prime the pump for further growth, but more importantly, the growth achieved does not come at the expense of dwindling green fields.

Moreover, such public/private investments acknowledge that a city is a city — not a suburb, not an exurb and not a collection of cabins in the forest. It concentrates available resources, work and amenities, and makes it possible to share burdens. There was a period when we forgot much of this, and now a doctrine has emerged that reminds us of the way it is. It's called New Urbanism.

If I'm not too busy opening a business downtown, I may write more about New Urbanism in the weeks to come. Until then, you can do what the naysayers won't:

Just look it up.

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