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The day after peak oil

Will we die in our cars or retool our communities?

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You know that place alongside I-85? Or was it I-75? Maybe State Road 400? Could have been I-20.

Well, it doesn't really matter what stretch of concrete because the environs are all the same. Mass-produced cul-de-sac subdivisions are surrounded by cookie-cutter malls, all laced together with endless ribbons of car-clogged roadways.

Sprawl. We know that. Been there, got the "sweltering on the expressway" T-shirt. But to understand what sprawl really means -- for your future -- we need to connect a few dots.

We have sprawl because ... well, because of gasoline. The internal combustion engine created in the last century this phenomenon called the suburb. Hundreds of millions of Americans suffer from the mass delusion that they live (sorta) in the "country" because they have a 3,000-square-foot, incredibly-cheap-construction manse and bit of grass, and their subdivision boasts a name like Fox Run or Oak Creek. Those not intoxicated with gasoline fumes have noticed that such names are historical markers recording what once was on the land before it was bulldozed.

As industrial and commercial urban centers became noisome and noxious, the car allowed people to move into the burbs. The commuter was born (and is slowly dying), with the interstate as an umbilical cord.

So, if a gasoline glut giveth sprawl, will paltry petroleum production taketh it away?

You haven't heard a lot in the mainstream press about something called "peak oil." The Atlanta Daily Newspaper of Declining Circulation -- whose marketing and news orthodoxy is that sprawl is splendid -- has mentioned the term only four times. Ever. Those items include one letter and, oh, one column from the pro-sprawl, pro-more-roads Georgia Public Policy Foundation. That column labels peak oil as a "belief" that's foisted on the public by "snake oil" salesmen.

"That's really stupid," says Richard Heinberg, author of two books on peak oil, and a guy who practices what he preaches. He's converted his California suburban home into a mini-farm where he raises food on once-manicured lawns. Through solar panels, he has cut his energy bill by 80 percent.

"The public policies that encourage sprawl are insane," Heinberg says. "Peak oil isn't a hypothesis. It's an observation. We're writing history, not predictions. And policies that don't recognize that are creating a tragedy that our children and grandchildren will pay for."

Sometime in the next 30 years, the world will have exhausted oil supplies to the point where production will rapidly diminish. A 2005 U.S. government study (clearly ignored by Bush & Cheney Inc.) called the Hirsch Report concluded that peaking "without timely mitigation" will result in "unprecedented" social, economic and political chaos.

How do you mitigate the affects of peak oil? As the Hirsch Report underscores, the old blather about "market forces" doesn't apply. True, rising prices will eventually prompt conservation and promote the search for alternative energy. But that won't happen soon enough to skirt disaster. The study found it will take 20 years to recalibrate American society for a future of diminishing oil. If we've already hit peak oil, which might be the case, we're facing two decades of horrendous crisis. Or, if the peak is still 20 years off, we'd better start preparing

today.

Many cities -- Portland, Ore., San Francisco, Bloomington, Ind. -- have passed peak oil resolutions that call for sensible public policies.

In Georgia, meanwhile, our Republican leaders are headed in the opposite direction. Last legislative session, they slipped a transit-killing poison pill into the state budget. And rather than vetoing that anti-commuter provision, Gov. Sonny Perdue is backing a new wave of road building funded by "public-private partnerships," which means the public will bleed billions and "private" pals of legislators will cart away the money.

Jim Kuntsler, a peak oil author who lives in New York, says Georgia's policies are creating "a public realm that has been reduced and impoverished into a universal automobile slum."

There are smart people who live here, and they're thinking about the problem. Joe Allen heads a community improvement district at the aging Gwinnett Place Mall. He's picked up on the themes of transforming sprawl into new cities, places where people can work, live and play with minimal reliance on cars.

"We have a great infrastructure here," Allen says. "It needs dusting off and a new direction. In 1984, the mall forever changed the face of the area. New concepts that transform this into an urban center will again change Gwinnett for another 20 or 40 years."

Gwinnett County's planning director, Steve Logan, quips, "I've long seen all of those huge parking lots as a way to land-bank property for future use. We'll see sprawl areas congeal and intensify. Five-dollar-a-gallon gas will make it happen a lot faster."

The idea is to carve out scores of cities in metro areas -- real centers of commerce and housing. Instead of 90 minutes in the car, you spend nine minutes strolling to your office. Or, if you commute, it's a couple of miles on a trolley or train, not 30 miles in the SUV.

What's at stake is the future. Good public policy is the key. Kuntsler calls for programs to rebuild America's train system. Others favor jacking up gas taxes and using the money for transit -- a good idea if provisions are made so that the burden won't disproportionately fall on the poor.

In the near term, reconfiguring suburbia into new cities -- like the plans for Gwinnett Place -- could transform sprawl into communities. While we're at it, we should retool the nation's agriculture and retailing -- returning to local farms and neighborhood shopping. It's a better way to live -- and we could escape the worst of the day after peak oil.

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Get involved

Dozens of groups are attacking the problems of peak oil, sprawl and the future of urban design. National organizations include Global Green (www.globalgreen.org/greenbuilding/) and SmartGrowth America (www.smartgrowthamerica.org). A good information source is at www.tndtownpaper.com/neighborhoods.htm. Locally, the Sierra Club (georgia.sierraclub.org/) is involved in sprawl issues, and the Georgia Brain Train (www.georgiabraintrain.com/) advocates commuter rail from Atlanta to Athens.

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