



Smart Growth America

Making Neighborhoods Great Together

Smart Growth Stories: More choice for less cost in Washington state

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I'm John Hempelmann from Seattle and I'm the chairman of a law firm in Seattle called Cairncross & Hempelmann and a big part of our practice is representing real estate developers, builders, property owners – both for profit and not for profit in affordable housing.

Seattle and the surrounding communities are a beautiful place to live and raise families. We've got great scenery. We've got great water. We've got a climate that is very temperate. We are a global gateway city, very focused on international trade and our relationship with Asia and also with Canada.

I want my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to experience the same great life that I've had. The city is growing so much and not just Seattle but Bellevue and Everett and Tacoma – the cities around Seattle – and we cannot continue as we did in the 50s and 60s and 70s to sprawl out. We need real economic opportunity for the development community building in the cities and building close to the transit hubs.

It's as simple as this: if people have a fixed amount of income and we know that 2/3 of that income is spent on housing and transportation and if a family or an individual can reduce that transportation cost component, they can spend more on housing. The difference today is that the predominant choice that was available in prior decades was that suburban drivability option. We are now providing an urban walkable option and we're finding that a lot of people are opting for that choice. The vast majority of our clients are seeing that choice. That's the market, as I said earlier, because it allows you to reduce transportation costs and allows you to spend more on housing so there's an economic value to both the buyer and the seller – in our case, our developer clients.

We want as many people and as many different kind of uses – residential, retail, commercial – within that magic quarter-mile around a high capacity transit hub that encourage people to walk rather than drive. In the case of our region, it's mostly light rail stations.

We're not going to eliminate the suburban model. We're not going to eliminate drivability to the suburban single-family home. But we have created the urban, walkable option and it is going to capture a much greater share of future rental and homeownership. That is a given. It's happening today and I think it's going to accelerate.

America is growing and it's a great place to be. People come from all over the world still to attempt to realize the American Dream, so we've got a lot of people to accommodate and we have to do it in a smart way.