

“From Middle Tennessee”

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In 1995, a group of residents of Nashville, Tennessee, concerned about the Metro government's plan for a six-lane highway to pass through the downtown, organized an urban design forum. One of its members, Bill Purcell, was elected mayor in 1999 on an urban design platform, and a year later the Nashville Urban Design Center-- a partnership of the University of Tennessee, Vanderbilt University, the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency, and the government of Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County-- was established.

In 2002, the group started work on a long-term plan intended to parallel Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago. (Rick Bernhardt, FAICP, executive director of Metro Planning Department, and Ed Cole, planning chief of the state Department of Transportation, served on the plan's 14-member steering committee).

Local author and planning writer Christine Kreyling was hired to turn the historical research and proceedings of the meetings into a usable text. The result is a well-written and well-illustrated book called *The Plan of Nashville: Avenues to a Great City* (2005; Vanderbilt University Press; 250 pp.; \$45).

The plan, which was developed over three years both by planning professionals and more than 800 public participants, deliberately takes a long view (50 years) and a visionary one. It is very much of its time, emphasizing history, nature (notably the Cumberland River), low- and mid-rise infill, neighborhoods, and mixed uses. “For the central city to hold its place in civic life, we must rebuild it the old-fashioned way, with a mixture of residences and retail, offices and entertainment, schools and civic spaces.”

After Nashville mayor Bill Purcell's forward, in which he describes the plan as “a gift we give to ourselves,” the book reviews the region's history and lists the plan's 10 basic principles. The plan itself comes in three parts, dealing with the region, the downtown, and the (close-in) neighborhoods.

Highlights include:

- A plan to “heal the pikes”—diagonal arterials that spider out from the center—by moving buildings up to the sidewalk, limiting curb cuts, moving parking to the side and rear of buildings, eliminating billboards, and gradually increasing density as downtown approaches, among other things.
- Greening the Cumberland River and its 57-mile Davidson County frontage, in hopes that it can be to greater Nashville as Lake Michigan is to Chicago.
- A four-step program of “weaning ourselves from the highway,” which could involve turning a number of interstates into urban boulevards, reconfiguring cloverleaves, and leaving just two major interstates to accommodate through traffic passing between Memphis and Knoxville, Louisville, and Atlanta. The goal is “a drastic reduction in local usage of the limited-access highways.”

In a sidebar that's likely to appeal to planners more than to politicians or voters, traffic engineer Walter Kulash makes the case for “deliberately tolerating congestion” because doing so “may have unintentional consequences in a positive direction.” The

plan “strongly recommends” no increase in the capacity of the through routes, claiming that any increase there would induce more traffic.

- Upgrading mass transit, although a citizen survey in April 2003 found that only 12 percent of the 500 people polled had ever used Nashville’s public transportation.
- Orienting the city around the state capitol by formalizing its north, south, east and west axes.

Kreyling concludes that the fate of the plan now depends on “the willingness of the public to embrace it,” and on “the Metro government bureaucracy’s readiness to respond.” Any city thinking of mounting a similar effort should pay attention to how they do things in the middle of Tennessee.