



# Choose Wisely: Land Use and Local Government Operations

Onondaga County Planning Symposium  
March 19, 2026

“We shape our  
communities, and  
thereafter, they shape us...

--Jeff Siegler, “Your City is Sick”



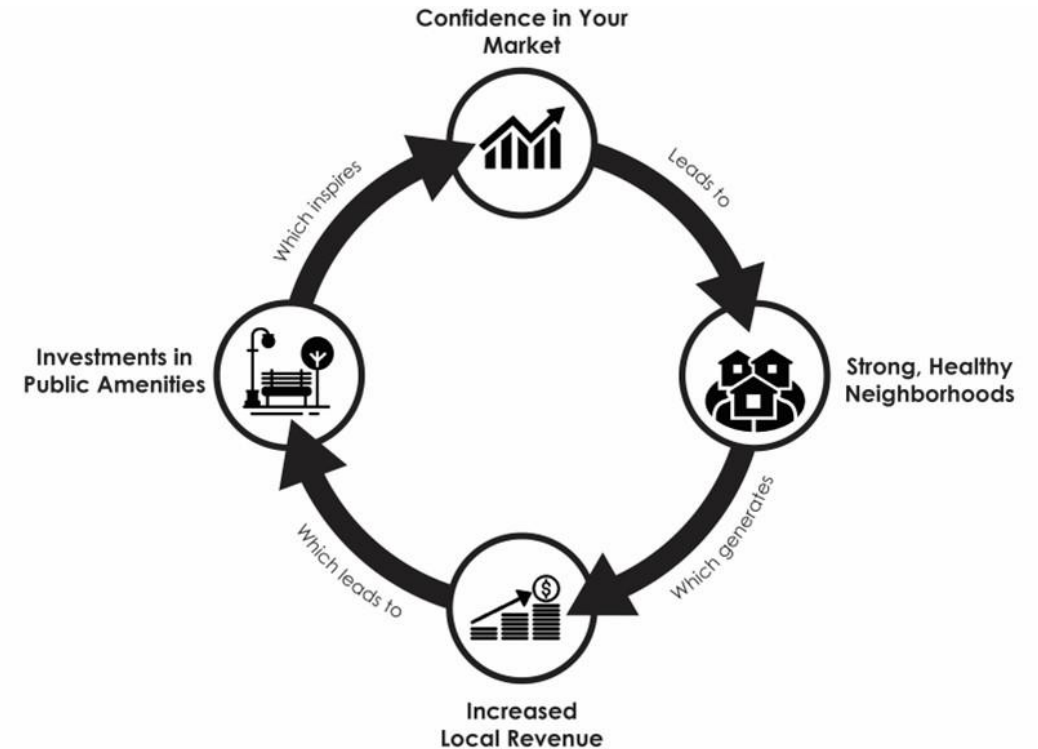
# Decisions Matter

- Communities routinely struggle with whether, why, and how to grow
- Escalating costs mean that, even when providing the same level of service, without some growth, existing residents will pay more
- Nationally, local governments are limited in your ability to generate revenue – the value of your land is at the core of your ability to fund priorities
- Development patterns shape everything in local government, from placemaking to quality of life to the cost of service delivery



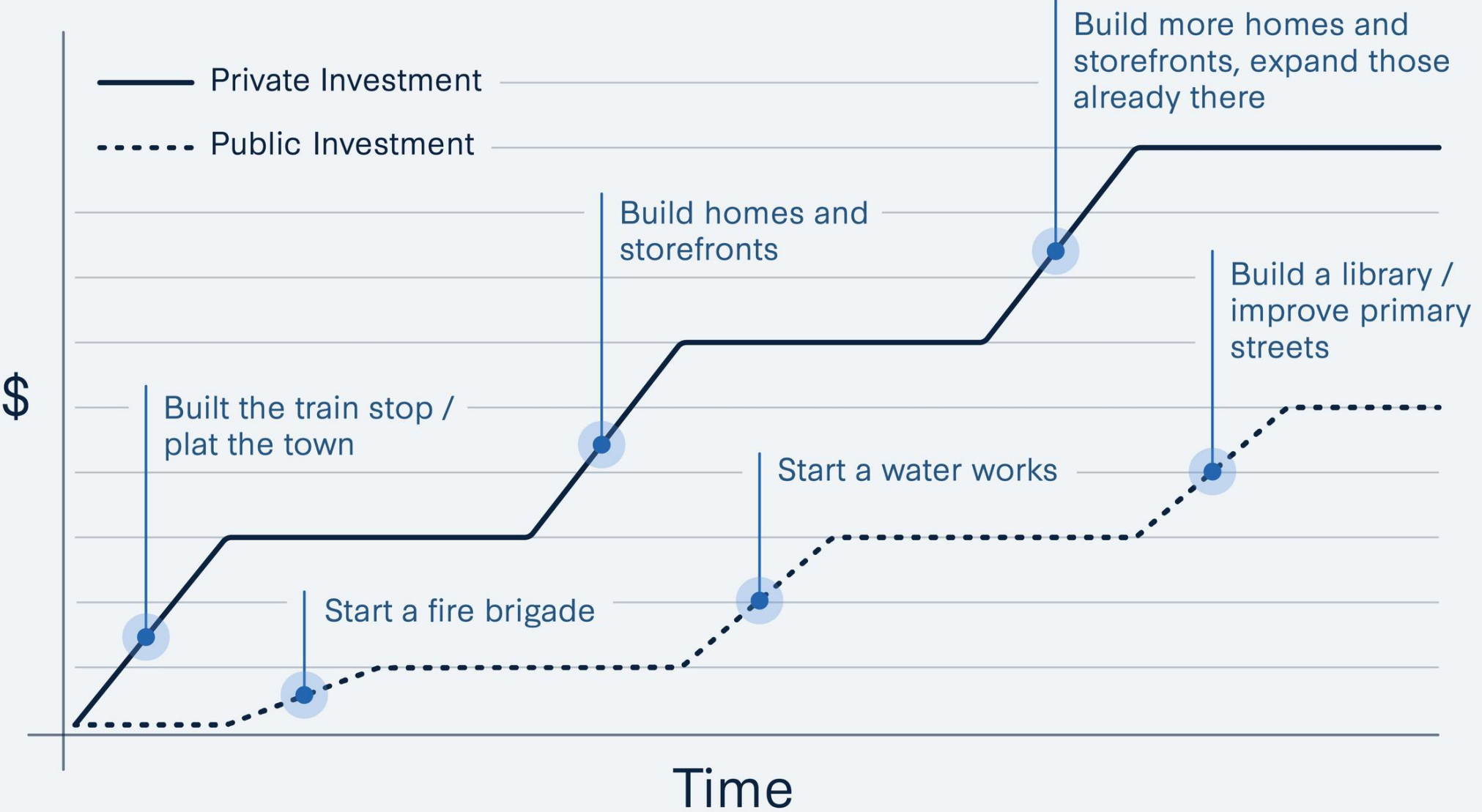
# The Growth Fallacy

- Many local government leaders view all growth as fiscally beneficial
- This leads to a “growth at any cost” mantra – otherwise known as “build it and they will come”
- “Opportunity-driven investment” without sound planning principles puts your community vision in the hands of the development community
- The most financially healthy communities establish a vision and planning principles; communicating your intentions to the market
- This, coupled with appropriately focused public investment will attract development that aligns with your community vision



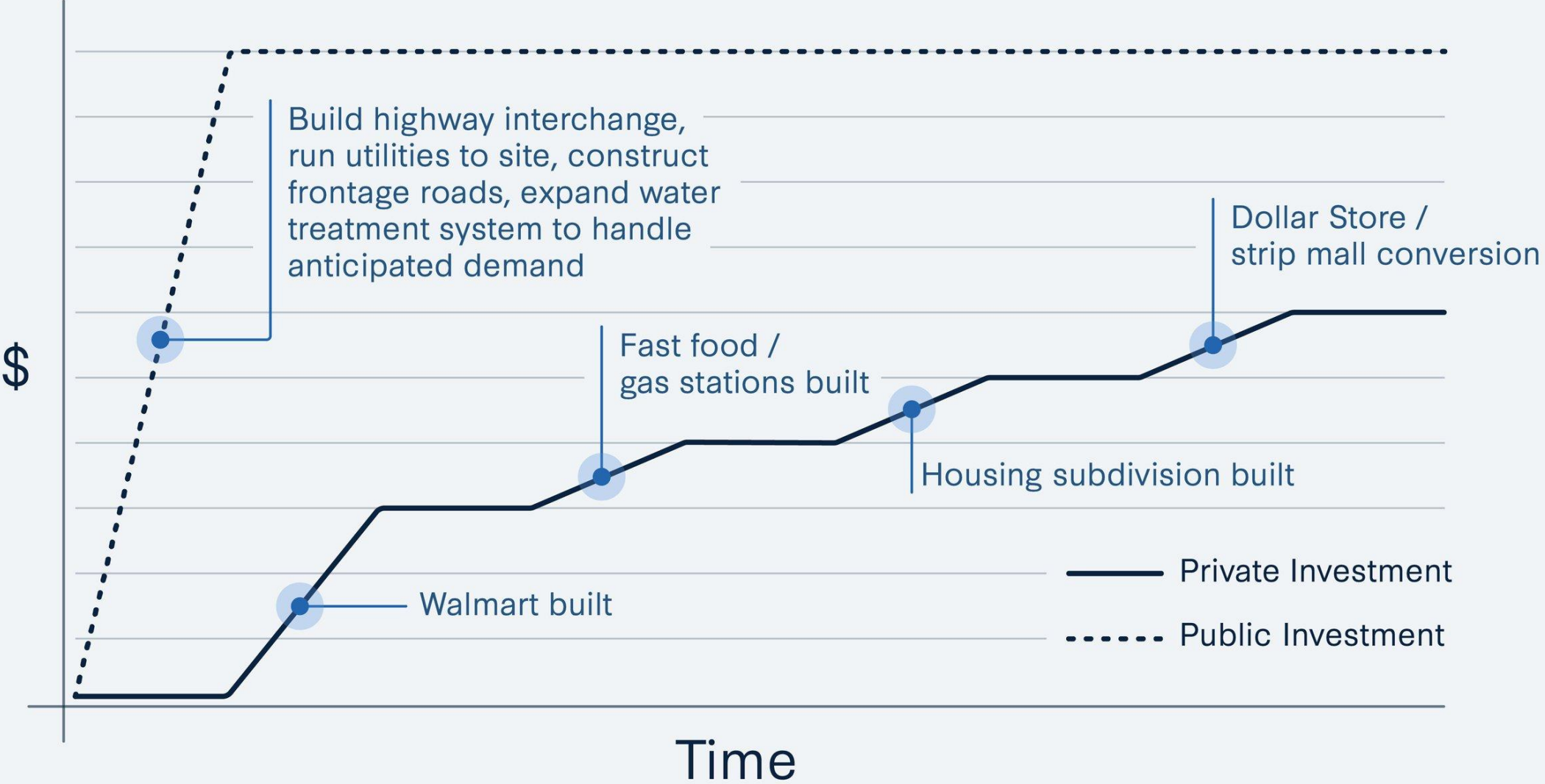


# Traditional Development Pattern



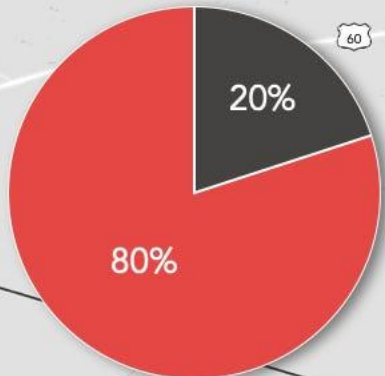


# Suburban Experiment



# Revenues & Costs Per Acre

Springfield, MO

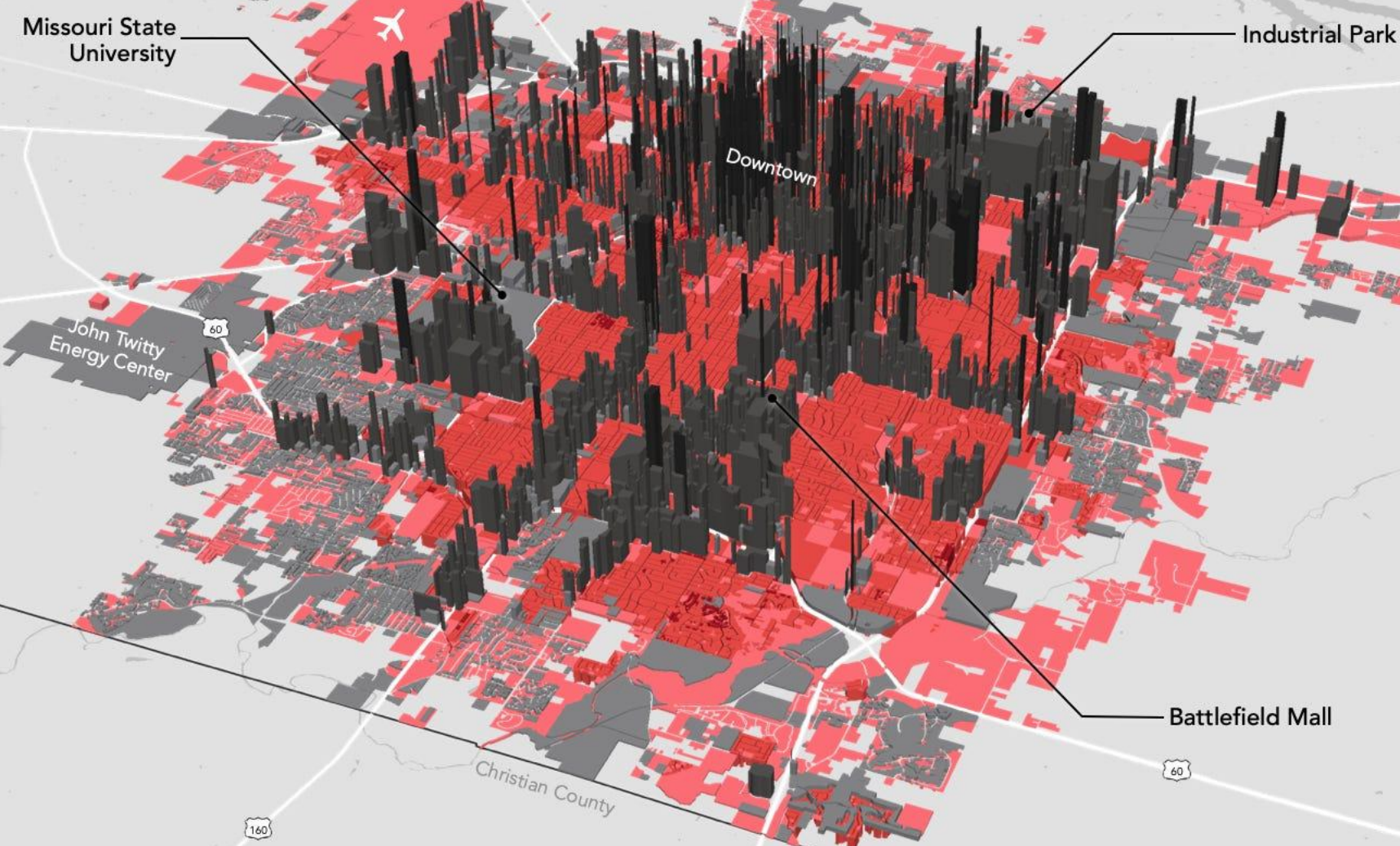


**Net Positive Per Acre**

- Most (Black)
- Least (Dark Grey)

**Net Negative Per Acre**

- Least (Red)
- Most (Dark Red)

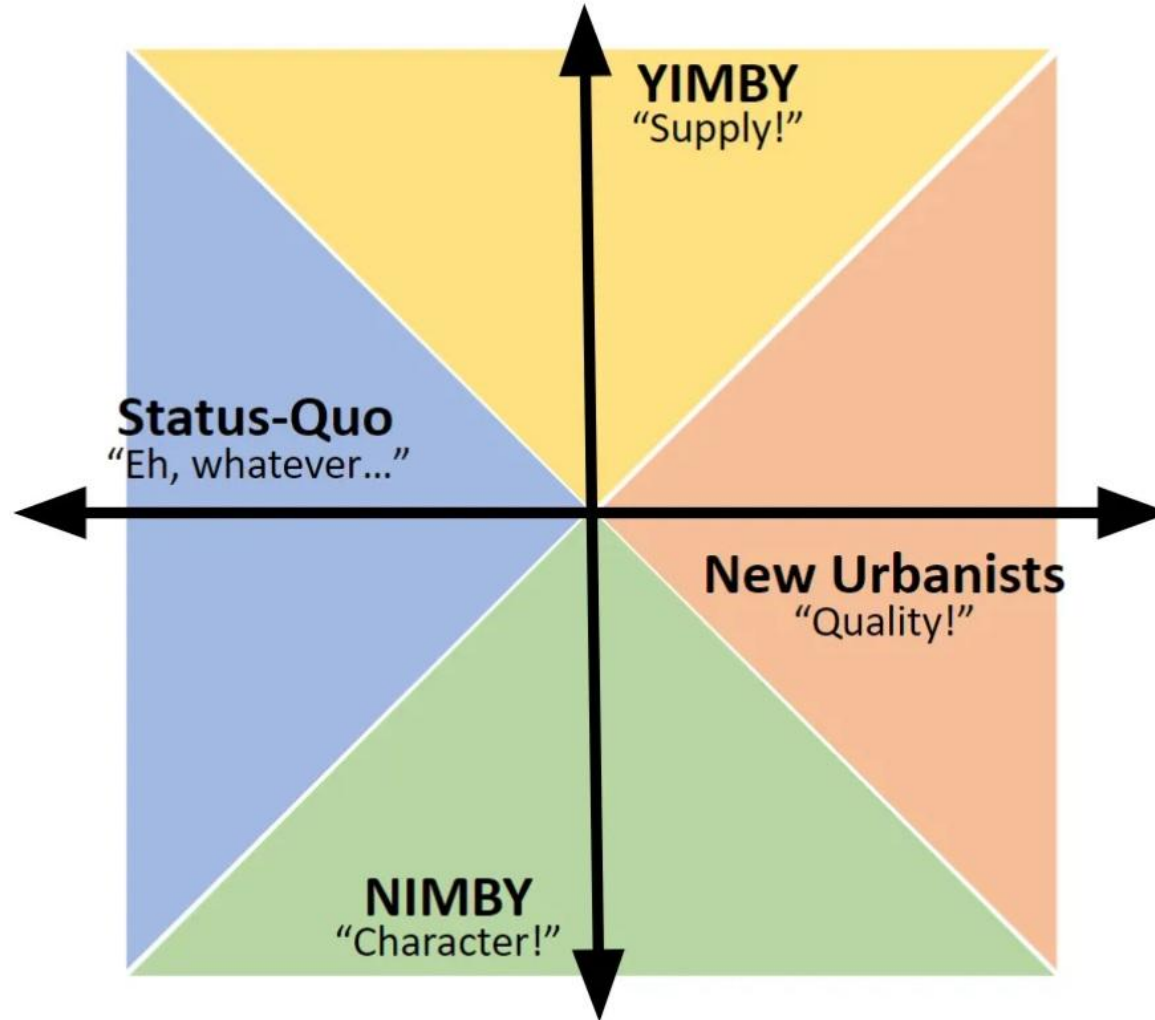


# The Price of Standing Still

- Local government is driven by volatile cost centers – salaries, benefits, fuel, electricity
- Even pre-COVID, these costs were escalating at alarming rates
- New York’s local government funding mechanisms are constrictive and limited
- Property taxes and sales taxes are directly tied to development
- The land within each municipality remains the single largest resource to address rising costs of service delivery and higher demand for service diversity and quality by residents
- However, misallocating land resources could put you deeper in the hole



# The Great Growth Debate



# Urban

City's Annual Cost, per Household



**\$1416**

(Total)



Parks & Recreation  
**\$69**



Fire Department  
**\$177**



Transportation  
**\$91**



Culture / Economy  
**\$19**



Sidewalks & Curbs  
**\$27**



Governance  
**\$158**



Libraries  
**\$38**



Roads  
**\$26**



Storm & Waste Water  
**\$147**



Solid Waste  
**\$185**



Police  
**\$192**



School Bussing  
**\$13**



Transfers to Provinces  
eg. School Boards  
**\$232**



Water  
**\$42**

# Suburban

City's Annual Cost, per Household



**\$3462**

(Total)



Parks & Recreation  
**\$129**



Fire Department  
**\$406**



Transportation  
**\$171**



Culture / Economy  
**\$36**



Sidewalks & Curbs  
**\$194**



Governance  
**\$297**



Libraries  
**\$72**



Roads  
**\$280**



Storm & Waste Water  
**\$613**



Solid Waste  
**\$185**



Police  
**\$360**



School Bussing  
**\$87**



Transfers to Provinces  
eg. School Boards  
**\$435**



Water  
**\$197**



# Villages are Cheaper?

- New York's governmental structure doesn't do any of us any favors
- The costs of low revenue development can be shifted away from the home government if a neighboring Village or City can provide the same services at no cost to Town residents
- Well-meaning collaborations like mutual aid tend to mean lower investment for rural towns – even if they dabble in suburban commercial development
- Utility collaborations must be studied closely to ensure fair cost share
- Very difficult to address costs associated with streets, parks, and similar “open” facilities





# Intentionality

- Great places don't happen by accident
- Land use planning should be guided by sound, thoughtful planning
- Planning efforts should rely on actionable data; robust, meaningful public engagement; and application of best practices
- Matt's two rules of community planning -
  - Get the big things right; and
  - Not everything is a big thing



Case Study

# Uptown Canandaigua – Preserving Critical Assets



Case Study: Uptown Canandaigua

# Impressions of Abundance

- Canandaigua has nearly 60 square miles, or 36,000 acres of land
- Much of the land is agricultural / undeveloped
- The community is highly desirable as a location for housing; with great schools and ready access to the Rochester market
- Development pressure is significant



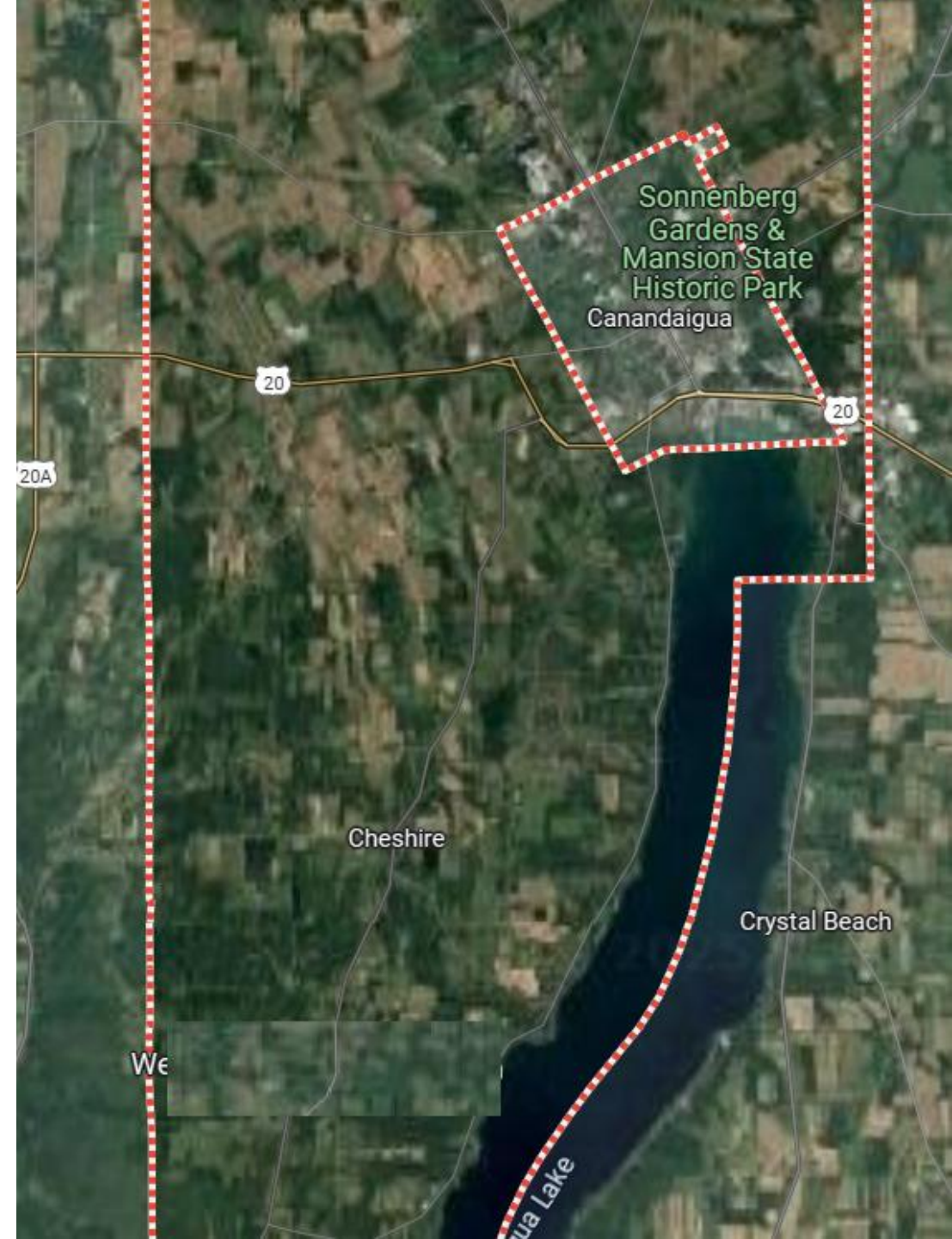
# A Community Vision

- In 2019, the Town commenced with an update of its comprehensive plan
- Public feedback overwhelmingly noted that quality of life, natural setting, agriculture, and rural character were priorities
- Residents also lamented the cost of living – particularly real estate and taxes
- An acute workforce housing deficit was also noted



# A Balancing Act

- Residents clearly identified rural character as critical; but also note that cost is an issue
- Town leaders engaged in a series of specialized plans, including:
  - Agriculture Enhancement Plan
  - Open Space / Scenic Views Master Plan
  - Natural Resources Inventory
  - Parks and Recreation Master Plan
- Leveraging the feedback from all of these planning efforts, Town leaders identified a focused area in which to target growth



Case Study: Uptown Canandaigua

# Uptown Canandaigua

- NY 332 connects Canandaigua to the NYS Thruway
- The Town borders the more densely developed City at 332/North Road
- The development pattern is intensely suburban and auto-oriented
- The area is well-served by infrastructure, and development has minimal impact on lake views, steep slopes, or other natural resources



# Setting the Table

- Town leaders worked with the community to establish the Uptown Canandaigua Master Plan
- Land use planning contemplated walkability and multi-modal transportation, with more dense development
- Anticipated development has the potential to provide for more affordable housing alternatives, while increasing the taxable assessed values by upwards of 5x





# Takeaways

- Work with your residents and stakeholders to establish a clear, unified communitywide vision
- Identify end goals of development
- Identify assets to be preserved / enhanced
- Focus on areas that require low public investment to spur development
- Take care to ensure that development regulations are calibrated to market conditions



Case Study

# Geneva Downtown Revitalization – Mitigating Employment Volatility



# A Generational Debate

- The City of Geneva peaked at around 30,000 residents in the early 1960's. Today it is around 13,000
- Historically, the City has been a manufacturing center – thousands of heavy manufacturing jobs
- By the 1970's manufacturing had disappeared, and downtown was struggling
- Long-time residents sought a return to the “good old days”



c. 1900



# Unclear Priorities

- For decades, Geneva vacillated between various development priorities
- A late 1990's score of the largest manufacturing project in NYS (at the time) swung the City back toward manufacturing as a priority
- Meanwhile, downtown and its neighborhoods hollowed out
- By 2008, first floors in downtown were 50% vacant, and upper stories were worse



# Defining a Win

- In 1998, Detroit-based Guardian Glass announced development of a manufacturing project in Geneva
- The project promised, and delivered 300 jobs. It also promised spinoff jobs, which largely did not materialize
- City leaders offered a 100% land cost write-down and a 95% property tax abatement for 30 years
- The \$60mm plant pays around \$300k per year in PILOT fees to the City



# A Change in Perspective

- By the late 2000's, City leaders had turned their attention to downtown
- The 2017 Comprehensive Plan noted that the downtown district paid far more in property taxes per acre (and in total) than the industrial park, and had an equivalent number of jobs (and wages)
- Based on the market data from the plan, and public sentiment, Geneva doubled down on downtown – vacancy rates dropped to single digits



# Takeaways

- Recognize the total cost of attracting employment engines
- Leverage data to better understand potential opportunities and challenges with all types of development
- Align economic development strategy with established planning principles
- Avoid “too many eggs in one basket” conundrum



Case Study

# Beaufort, SC Corridor Planning – Placemaking and Safety



# Overnight Growth

- Beaufort, South Carolina had been a sleepy southern enclave for over a century
- Growth pressures from Savannah and Charleston brought attention to the community quickly
- U.S. 21 served as a critical artery between I-95 and the underdeveloped Sea Islands
- Early stage developers sought to capture the power of traffic counts



# Our Front Door

- U.S. 21 had been viewed as a “pass through for many years, despite its isthmus location
- The goal of SCDOT was to move cars through as quickly as possible – despite pedestrian and cyclist deaths
- Through a community planning process, the corridor was recognized as a “front door” – and critical to Beaufort’s success
- New zoning, design standards, and infrastructure investments were planned



# Reinventing the Corridor

- Remaking the corridor would require a total investment – private and public – planning and execution
- The City leveraged TIF, Sales Tax, and grant dollars to reconfigure the public spaces
- Updated regulations required developers to think differently about their parcels
- Early trials were met with significant pushback from developers.



# Takeaways

- Understand the effects of varying types of development on all modes of transportation
- Don't ignore your most valuable and visible natural assets
- Prioritize high-quality development in your most traveled corridors
- Recognize the challenges of change and be prepared for difficult conversations



Case Study

# Duncanville, TX Plaza Redevelopment – Rebuking “Built-Out”



# The First Stop

- Duncanville was the first stop in the urban flight movement from Dallas in the late 1970's
- Executives from Dallas's largest firms moved from central Dallas to Duncanville's large estates
- Commercial development quickly responded to Duncanville's new population
- The City was overrun with strip style development



# Wealth Moves On

- By the 1990's, wealthier residents began moving to outer-ring suburbs of Dallas
- Shopping centers began aging out too – facilities required reinvestment, but the market wasn't sufficient to serve new development
- Weaker tenant mixes meant lower rents. The City responded by permitting investment farther out – closer to new developments
- Inner ring developments attracted fewer tenants – vacancy and disinvestment



## Case Study: Duncanville Redevelopment

# Starting Small

- A local developer identified infill opportunities inherent in forgotten shopping centers
- He recognized these misappropriations of land as a chance to add new value and address community needs
- Wheatland Plaza has been the first redevelopment opportunity
- Initial projections show a nearly 1000% increase in taxable assessed value from new commercial and residential uses

**Wheatland Plaza**  
Duncanville, TX



# Takeaways

- Challenge community assumptions about what is possible
- Recognize the life-cycle of the built environment
- Engage in incremental development approaches that capture market capacity a little at a time
- Avoid limiting development regulations that curtail potential wins



# Land Use Planning Tools



## Comp Plans

Best opportunity to get full community input.  
Complete every 10 years and update every five.  
Ensure a clear focus on implementation



## Area Plans

Translate ideals from comprehensive plan into actionable strategies at the block level. Engage direct beneficiaries and other players.



## Zoning

Translating vision into action. Be sure to measure your approach to ensure alignment with vision and local market conditions.



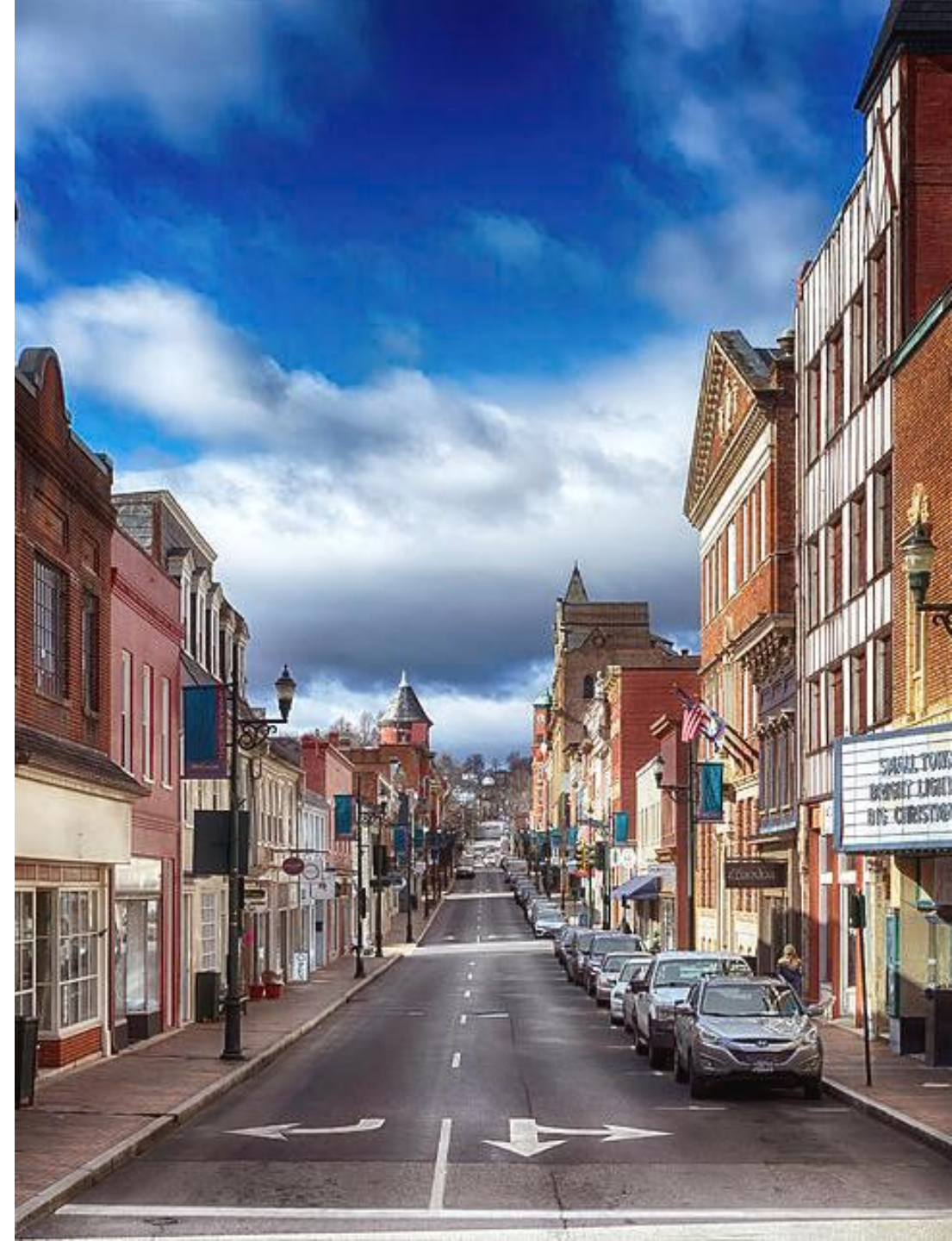
## Development Regs

Beyond land use. Leverage these to ensure that the nuts and bolts of development are aligned with local expectations of aesthetics/functionality.



# Summary

- How land uses are allocated drives a full range of community issues – costs, placemaking, safety, and vitality
- A clear, unified, community vision is critical to ensuring that future development translates into the quality of life that your residents expect
- Our real estate represents the best chance to address both revenues and costs – consider the effects of your policies on both
- Ensure that regulation is metered to address community expectations and market conditions – don't smother, but avoid growth at any cost
- Think big! Think long term! Don't get trapped in "right now"





# Choose Wisely: Land Use and Local Government Operations

Contact me:

[matt.horn@mrbgroup.com](mailto:matt.horn@mrbgroup.com)

571.439.0845