April 1, 1999
Ray Watson comments draft of Bloom’s forthcoming book.

Nick:

I’m pleased with your enhanced focus on the new towns contribution to reforming (or just forming) suburbia. The relatively recent (35 years) mass movement of jobs to the suburbs is transforming the 200 year long growth of the “residential suburbia” movement as subordinate to some regional core into the growth of metropolitan cities composed of their historic cores and the emergence of multiple small suburban towns. All of who are relatively politically independent but economically dependent. The books Crabgrass Frontier and Bourgeois Utopias chronicle the history of the former while Edge Cities begins to do the same for the later.

I see the term’s “new urbanism” and “neo-traditional towns” which architect/planners use for their work as a way to escape their peers claiming they’ve sold out to suburban developers. On the other hand it is a further legitimization of this new movement. I much prefer describing what we are doing as developing suburban towns. It says what they are, towns, and where they are located.

While the term “neo-traditional” has strong marketing imagery it hardly fits any of the new town models I know. Its imagery is one of a Norman Rockwell small town in the cornfields of Nebraska. But, regardless of whether the street circulation and house facades vaguely recall a small town in the prairie the fact is it is located within a dynamic metropolitan area. As a consequence its’ residents commute throughout the region, commute by e-mail all over the world and most likely barely know their next door neighbors (whether they have a porch or not.) As for “new urbanism” the average homeowner and small business owner associates “urbanism” with everything they think is wrong with cities. The architects like it because they hate the word suburb.

What we need are paradigms of suburban towns and how collectively they become part of what I call, for lack of another term, the metropolitan city. By also focusing on the dynamics and needs of the metropolitan city the planners and leaders of each of the many local towns will recognize that in addition to their internal layout, commercial centers and house designs they can also encourage the development of regional elements. If you had also studied Orange County and the distribution of regional parks, commercial and recreational centers, bodies of water, museums, etc. you would then have seen how Irvine plays off and contributes to them.

Now to your question, “would the Company have gone ahead and built high-density housing” had the city not down sized the general plan. The simple answer is NO! Even now we build below the maximum densities allowed by the revised general plan.

Why? We are already pushing the density envelope of what the market will buy and/or economics allow. Of course, had they lowered maximum densities to only allow single-family houses on large lots that would be another question. But they didn’t do that. Fortunately, for us Orange County has had a tradition of modestly high-density housing. Remember that we are building a suburban town. Highrise (high density) housing in the suburbs has bankrupted many a builder who sought to maximize densities rather than responding to the market.

The same answer pertains to commercial and business buildings. We avoid, for the most part, building parking structures because of their cost. We have built a number of relatively high-rise office buildings but even though we have the entitlements to build more the demand is away from expensive high rise office space to two-story park like business complexes. When the market changes we’ll change.

RAY