Many communities have seen a shift in market drivers as a result of recent national and international economic conditions. In addition, demographic changes projected for the next few decades will create significant challenges as communities adapt to changing population needs. Communities must consider next-step strategies, including adapting development patterns to community needs and existing infrastructure, avoiding additional infrastructure outlays, creating a proven return on investment, and capitalizing on the existing character and amenities. Here we outline a proposed scenario of how a fairly young suburb of Kansas City could utilize local census data, Pew research, and Smart Growth principles to change municipal zoning and development codes to address issues resulting from changing economic and demographic conditions. Applying green infrastructure, multi-use zoning patterns of development and shifting to an interconnected network of pedestrian scale streetscapes shows promise for accommodating the needs of an aging population and the desires of a new generation, while easing infrastructure maintenance burdens and reinvesting in existing sites with strong amenities. This paper is the framework for a second graphic submission which will provide a comprehensive, redevelopment overview for two example areas of low density, auto-centric growth.
Smart Growth has been a dynamic and comprehensive way for communities to plan and shape the future but it can also be a powerful tool for rethinking development in a contracting international economy. Many communities have taken Smart Growth principles and applied them to redevelopment and infill strategies but precious few cities have developed a comprehensive approach for these challenges in the fallout of the Great Recession. This paper will explore how a typical suburb of Kansas City, Missouri can look ahead and use the tools of Smart Growth to adapt to a changing demographic, community expectations and create a more robust outlook for development in the next ten to twenty years.

At just over 34 square miles and around 48,000 residents, Lenexa, Kansas is a moderately sized city, largely formed by conventional suburban growth. Lenexa’s prime location, highway access, and inexpensive green field development, lead to a population boom of over 200% in a few short years during the 1980’s. High quality schools attracted many upper middle class families and retail and commercial projects followed close behind. Large, residential subdivisions and a handful of strip centers stretched further and further west, away from the highways and the central core of eastern Lenexa. These same qualities created an attractive business environment as well, as light industrial centers and warehouse distribution facilities set up shop.

Around the 1990s, a demand for higher-end subdivisions emerged as the US economy enjoyed stability and growth. Several golf course communities began to establish and a more sophisticated planning strategy began to emerge in response to patterns of development. Elected officials, residents and city staff began to form a vision for the future of Lenexa based on a desire to preserve some of the character of the community including protecting its many valuable natural resources. Vision 2020 was crafted in 1997, by citizens and at the direction of the mayor. This process set a path for a more intentional, values-driven pattern of growth.

Although Lenexa City Center was envisioned in response to Vision 2020 and was intended to provide a centralized district of mixed used and higher density land use, the affects of the Great Recession created widespread doubt about the viability of Smart Growth and the good intentions of visioning plans. Even as the economic crisis of 2008 seemed to fly in the face of all the good intentions of Smart Growth and vision plans, Lenexa residents and community leaders were completing another visioning plan, Vision 2030. In Vision 2030 residents and community leaders look ahead to many more years in their current neighborhoods and the desire for a distinctive, small-town character is stronger than ever. The challenge that lies ahead is how to reconcile the demand for Smart Growth as clearly outlined in the new Vision 2030 guideline for Lenexa with the economic realities of current markets. Won’t requirements like stream preservation, open space minimums and quality building finishes chase away the few investors and businesses left standing? Doesn’t Smart Growth cost more? How can we
afford it now? Communities have a tremendous opportunity to look ahead, regroup and find a new path that meets the needs for Smart Growth. The redevelopment and infill plans of many communities already identified where facilities were reaching end of life, where density could be increased, where zoning could be adapted to accommodate new patterns. In Lenexa, demographic information from the 2010 census combined with some basic projections from the surveys at the Pew Research Center show how to anticipate these new patterns and a way to move forward with development to meet the challenges of the economic reality.

A solid foundation of owner-occupied homes and stable businesses mean that the Great Recession has taken as much of a toll as it could and Lenexa is still thriving. Lenexa’s current population is predominately middle-aged and affluent and this is a fortunate position for a community looking at quality growth. Projections for the demographics of Lenexa based on current conditions show increasing levels of affluence, rebounding home values and a fairly homogeneous population. Projections also show vulnerabilities in these trends, however, that could be capitalized into opportunities. Anticipating an aging middle-aged population in Lenexa that will be close to retirement in 15 years and shows potential shortfalls in the current mode of development.

By 2050, Pew projects that 20% of America will be over the age of 65. According to surveys, 1 in 7 Americans over the age of 65 can no longer drive a car. One quarter of those same adults will develop memory loss. That is a serious problem for suburbs like Lenexa who have thrived on an auto-centric design paradigm. Along with the aging of the predominant population of many suburban communities comes a shift in households to a multigenerational combination of adult children coming back home during or after college, along with older parents who may be unable to afford independent living into their 80s. Roughly a quarter of young adults (18-34) live with their parents, according to the 2010 census. The majority of Americans recognize that it is harder to afford college, to buy a home or start a family now than in previous generations and 60% of young adults surveyed have reported intentionally delaying starting a family because of the economy and when they do have children, they’re likely to have few children. With record setting unemployment for those under 34 and median wages fallen by more than 6% since 2007, it’s not hard to understand what is being termed “boomerang” kids.

Survey trends indicating a drifting away from the model of young, upper middle families anchoring suburbs, can create a bleak picture in the economic realities faced by many Americans today. These trends are widespread and likely to affect all kinds of communities but the conventional suburban model is very susceptible to decline because the inherent costs associated with extensive infrastructure systems (roads, water, wastewater, stormwater and even power grids) that may never see the return on investment predictions that first justified the expense. In order thrive, growth is going to have to shift along with the demographics and evolving market demands. Retrofitting the suburbs is the best way to accommodate these changes and it’s easier than many communities may perceive.
The first step in retrofitting the suburbs is to look to the guiding principles from the residents. In Lenexa, Vision 2030 calls for Smart Growth, LEED and Sustainable Sites principles along with broader goals like “open and green spaces with a system of parks, plazas, streetscapes and waterscapes” and “interconnectivity among parks and residential areas attempting to allow access without using roadways”. Mostly importantly, the Vision plan shows stakeholder support for “flexible building and rezoning efforts that reflect and the ever-changing needs for a balance of starter-type residences, single-family...and life-cycle senior housing”. This is the cornerstone of the approach to a retrofit: community leaders who fully appreciate the challenges ahead and show commitment to quality growth. An emphasis on the positive attributes of the community like excellent schools, highway access, natural resources and park facilities is an important facet of evaluating the potential for refining the style of development as it sets an encouraging tone and shows the value of perspective in enacting comprehensive changes to growth in a community.

In Lenexa, the next step was review of the city’s development codes, to evaluate roadblocks, hurdles and disincentives to the kind of development patterns emerging now that are divergent from the intent of the code decades earlier. Rather than piecemeal this revision process, it was important to look at the code wholesale and evaluate the interconnected nature of the various sections and remedy any conflicting expectations. It is helpful to bring an external auditor in for obvious reasons of objectivity and expertise in emerging approaches to development. Once the audit is completed and staff have fully engaged in the review process, support from the governing body is critical to achieving the goal of real, tangible progress.

After the code is sufficiently audited, approved and accepted, the next step is to identify potential sites to target for intensive case study. This is a similar process to the redevelopment and infill audits many communities were engaged in pre-recession with a few critical differences: instead of empty lots, abandoned warehouses or brownfield sites, the primary target will be strip centers, big box retailers and the areas of parking lot characteristic to many suburbs. These facilities are increasingly expensive to maintain and are likely to be part of an outmoded, less dense pattern of growth that is predicted to decline in the next two decades. Integrating enhanced features like green infrastructure into retrofit sites can reduce these maintenance costs.

Lenexa has developed just such an inventory of sites, stemming from the increased maintenance costs and declining returns of investment of many strip centers. A few potential reconfigurations available for the majority of conventional single-story commercial are particularly attractive to changing market including adding second and third stories of office and rental residential space to structurally reinforced strip centers, outfitting expansive parking lots with complimentary retail not in the form of out-lots but in higher density, walkable configurations that encourage pedestrian traffic and incorporate multimodal transportation like bus stops, bike parking and shady plazas for a more distinctive human scale that attracts lingering and connectivity. Pedestrian bridges can provide dedicated access on even the busiest 4 or 6 lane arterials while inviting those limited mobility to venture in. Vertical zoning, multiuse developments
and attractive streetscapes are used to create a neighborhood feel and along with a higher density of development that creates “nodes” throughout the community. This revised model is scalable to most suburbs, customizable for retailers and commercial developers looking for a particular feel and creates opportunity for reuse of existing commercial tracts that have been so staunchly segregated from residential land uses in most conventional suburbs.

A subsequent submittal will outline the key components for this revised growth model along with graphics depicting detailed design elements, proven green infrastructure technologies, site-specific maps and prime locations for neighborhood nodes in Lenexa along with projected public transportation routes and opportunities, educational and institutional facility tie-ins and a comprehensive land use overview highlighting the scale of the opportunities for parking lots, single-story strip centers and pedestrian facilities. Two case studies will be highlighted, in particular, to illustrate challenges and opportunities in the widest range of growth Lenexa currently has: a 15-year old strip center with a grocery store anchor in a predominantly high density rental residential area in the older part of the city and a 5-year old outlot style development with a grocery store anchor, prime highway access, and an almost exclusively single-family residential golf course community in the newest part of Lenexa. This second submittal will highlight the adaptability of retrofitting suburbia in a pair of real world scenarios.