



# An Intelligent Redesign of America's Communities?

March 19, 2009



In Richard Florida's recent piece for the Atlantic, "[How the Crash Will Reshape America](#)," he foresees a more concentrated population centered around cities, leading to the further expansion of mega-regions - systems of multiple cities and their surrounding suburbs - based on their ability to offer higher paying jobs and attract the best talent. Florida views this shift as not only inevitable - loss of jobs forcing people to move where they can find work - but necessary. This geographic clustering he argues, will speed the kind of innovation required to remake our economy into a more resilient and adaptable model. He points us to a study on "urban metabolism" conducted by the Santa Fe Institute:

[W]hen the Santa Fe team examined trends in innovation, patent activity, wages, and GDP, they found that successful cities, unlike biological organisms, actually get faster as they grow. In order to grow bigger and overcome diseconomies of scale like congestion and rising housing and business costs, cities must become more efficient, innovative, and

productive. The researchers dubbed the extraordinarily rapid metabolic rate that successful cities are able to achieve “super-linear” scaling. “By almost any measure,” they wrote, “the larger a city’s population, the greater the innovation and wealth creation per person.” Places like New York with finance and media, Los Angeles with film and music, and Silicon Valley with hightech are all examples of high-metabolism places.

But if the future landscape of the U.S. does mean more people in less places, what exactly does that look like and how do we meet the challenges of this reordering? As Florida notes, “We need to ensure that key cities and regions continue to circulate people, goods, and ideas quickly and efficiently.” Much of this touches on ideas about building sustainable communities with smarter infrastructure in place to help facilitate this growth. Not exactly notions that you would expect to be kicking around the halls of Congress - until now perhaps.

On his blog, [Fast Lane](#), Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood has been writing about his desire to create “livable communities”:

[O]ne of my highest priorities is to work closely with Congress, other Federal departments, the nation’s governors, and local officials to help promote more livable communities through sustainable surface transportation programs. By focusing on livability, we can help transform the way transportation serves the American people—and create safer, healthier communities that provide access to economic opportunities.

To that end, LaHood and HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan presented in front of the House of Representatives yesterday, detailing their plans for creating “a high-level inter-agency task force to better coordinate federal transportation and housing investments.” Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised when our government makes intelligent and ultimately transformative choices, but this move comes as bit of a happy shock. Recognizing the larger context and inter-connectedness of housing, transportation, energy consumption and its effect on people is an enlightened first step on the part of our officials. As Secretary LaHood says, “I like an idea that makes sense. This idea makes sense.”