

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## The new “American dream”

The most dramatic change in how we live and work in recent generations has been the economic and social decline of traditional towns like Pottstown, and the growing hodge-podge of houses, stores, and offices scattered all over what had been the countryside.

This has been the result of a new “American dream” as analyzed by economist Anthony Downs of the Brookings Institution (who died last fall at the age of 90).

The new “American dream” arose in the wake of the Second World War. Up until then, most people lived in cities and towns. But the new “American dream” was soon embraced by upwardly mobile households, businesses, and government officials.

The dream is based on four pillars, each of which is a key desire of nearly all American households.

### Pillar 1.

Ownership of detached, single-family homes on spacious lots. Repeated polls show that over 90 percent of all American households would like to own their own homes, and the vast majority want single family detached units. This is the prevailing image of how a household “makes it” in contemporary society.

This pillar leads to very low density settlement patterns.

### Pillar 2.

Ownership and use of a personal private vehicle. Every American wants to be able to leap in his car and zoom off on an uncongested road to wherever he or she wants to go in total privacy and great comfort and to reach their destination in not more than 20 minutes.

This factor has rapidly escalated total vehicle ownership in recent decades. More than 90 percent of all households have access to a car, and 60 percent of households have two or more cars.

The average number of miles driven

per person has skyrocketed from less than 2,000 miles annually in 1950 to more than 11,000 miles annually today.

### Pillar 3.

The third pillar of the dominant ideal vision involves a structure of suburban workplaces. They are visualized as consisting predominantly of low rise offices or industrial buildings or shopping centers surrounded by a large supply of free parking, so that those who work in it or patronize it can conveniently drive and park there without cost.

### Pillar 4.

The fourth pillar for this ideal vision concerns governance. Most Americans want to live in small communities with strong local self governments.

They want those governments to control land use, public schools, and other key elements affecting what they perceive as the quality of neighborhood life. This institutional structure permits existing residents to have a strong voice in controlling their local environments.

The above four elements define the prevailing vision of the “American dream” as it is conceived by the vast majority of suburbanites and by many city dwellers.

All four elements express what might be termed unconstrained individualism.

They represent the pursuit of an environment that maximizes one’s own well-being without regard to the collective results of such behavior.

This ideal vision has been reinforced over the past few decades by promoters including homebuilders selling new dwellings, Realtors reselling them, advertising highlighting suburban lifestyles, politicians running for election, and planning officials trying to carry out the policies of local politicians and voters.

**The dominant ideal vision has become so strongly entrenched that it has become almost political suicide to challenge openly any of these four pillars of “the American dream.”**

*Thursday:  
Flaws in the new  
“American dream.”*



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton



**ONE TENET of the new “American dream”: Low slung buildings surrounded by copious parking.**