

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Flaws in the new “American dream”

On Tuesday we discussed the new “American dream” as analyzed by economist Anthony Downs of the Brookings Institution.

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 upon:

1. Ownership of a detached, single family home on a spacious lot.
2. Ownership and use of a personal private vehicle.
3. Stores and workplaces surrounded by ample free parking.
4. Strong local government as opposed to regional government.

Downs found some major flaws in this “American dream.”

One flaw is excessive travel. Low density housing, and the substantial distances between where people live, work, and shop, creates traffic congestion and air pollution. The average person now spends an hour a day in a car.

Most people who embrace the new “American dream” blame real estate developers and newcomers for traffic problems. Their attitude is, “I’m here, and now I don’t want anyone else to move into the area.”

Low density housing also makes it impractical to operate any kind of mass transit system such as buses and rail. This keeps out any potential residents who can’t afford cars.

The second flaw of the new “American dream” is it contains only relatively high cost housing, providing few if any residences where low and moderate income households can afford to live. Yet such house-

holds are an integral part of American life because they provide workers for relatively low wage jobs. Those jobs are vital to the efficient operation of every community, including the wealthiest exurban enclaves. Low wage workers are essential to many service firms, including fast food restaurants, gas stations, hospitals, retail stores, shopping centers, contractors and landscapers.



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton

In Montgomery County, 56 percent of all housing units are single family detached; 19 percent are single family attached; 1 percent are mobile homes; and 24 percent are multi-unit homes.

About 27 percent of Montgomery County dwellings are rental units.

Higher density housing does not form part of the ideal vision of how residential areas should be developed, and its construction is often strongly opposed by local residents.

If it wasn’t for a legal requirement that all municipalities must zone for every kind of land use, there would be no higher density housing in the suburb and exurbs at all.

Even so, many low and moderate income households cannot afford to live in brand new housing, even higher density housing, because they have their highest relative prices when they are first built.

At that moment, they contain the most modern and up-to-date amenities and design available, and they have not yet been subjected to wear and tear.

The inescapable result of the system concentrates low and moderate income households in older communities like Pottstown.

The new “American dream” doesn’t make any provisions for poor people. They should live “somewhere else.”



**Clients of the Pottstown Cluster line up for free food at the Cluster’s office and distribution center at King and Franklin streets. The region’s poor and troubled are concentrated in Pottstown because they can’t afford to live in the low density, car-dependent suburbs.**