

BETTER!

formerly *New Urban Network*

CITIES&TOWNS

ONLINE

The decision maker's bridge to stronger, greener communities



New Urbanism: Best Practices Guide

The most comprehensive sourcebook
on the ideas and techniques of the New Urbanism

Only \$99 —
save \$30
off list price
[click here](#)

[Home](#) > [News and Opinion](#) > [Blogs](#) > The cost of auto orientation >

The cost of auto orientation

Blog post by [Charles Marohn](#) on 03 Jan 2012

Charles Marohn, Better! Cities & Towns

In the United States we've proceeded for sixty years with reconfiguring our public spaces to accommodate the automobile. The built in assumption of this approach, especially when it comes to commercial property, is that the more cars driving by the better. What we've overlooked in our haste to "modernize" is the lower return on investment we get from this approach, even under ideal conditions. Today we need the humility to acknowledge that our ancestors -- who built in the traditional style -- may have known what they were doing after all.

Highway 210 runs east/west through downtown Brainerd. In the hierarchical road system, it is the top of the pyramid and would be classified in most places as a "major arterial". It is designed as a STROAD (a street/road hybrid), attempting to apply highway design standards to what otherwise would be an urban street. In doing so, it has dramatically transformed the land use pattern of the area.

The picture below highlights two blocks that front the highway corridor. The one on the left, which we've labeled "old and blighted", is a block that has retained its traditional development pattern. To the right we have identified the "shiny and new" area, the block that has recently been transformed to an auto-oriented development style, to the glee of city officials and local economic development advocates. In between is a hybrid of the two; part traditional and part auto-oriented.



The old and blighted area is a collection of run down, marginal establishments. There are two liquor stores, a pawn shop, a barber shop, a bankruptcy attorney, a campaign headquarters, a retail establishment, a cafe and a vacant building. This is not a desirable area. If the adjacent highway didn't already ensure decline,

local "improvements" have degraded what little pedestrian connectivity may have existed to the adjacent areas. None of it that remains is easy, natural or inviting. In the community's eyes, this is an area that is waiting to redevelop, to transform itself fully into an auto-oriented pattern. That transformation has begun; note that the very westerly building, which is a liquor store, has turned two lots into a parking lot.



By contrast, the shiny and new area contains only one business, that being a new Taco John's drive through fast food restaurant. The modern facility contains two drive-through lanes, good access to the adjacent streets and all the parking that would ever be needed. They've done on-site stormwater retention (the environmentalists applaud) and modern signage. It meets all of the city's design and zoning codes. The restaurant replaced some buildings that were, themselves, part of an evolution from the original, traditional development to the auto-oriented. With the new Taco John's, the transformation is complete.



If there was any question regarding the public's opinion on these two lots, the city of [Brainerd's comprehensive plan](#) specifically calls for the transformation of areas that we've labeled "old and blighted" into "shiny and new". The city has designated this area *General Commercial*, expressing a desire to see the development along this corridor become highway-oriented. This they describe on page 93 of their plan.

General Commercial

The purpose of this category is to identify portions of Brainerd that should contain general retail commercial uses adjacent to the arterial highway system. The intent of this designation is to provide areas for highway-oriented businesses. Consequently, having a strong general commercial base in the city helps the downtown as well. Having a strong highway commercial area helps draw consumers to the city and provides for a healthy downtown. Examples of these could include highway-oriented businesses such as fast food restaurants, convenience stores, gas stations and other auto-oriented businesses as well as a number of large retailers.

In that definition of *General Commercial*, it is stated that a "strong highway commercial area...provides for a healthy downtown." The problem is that "strong" and "highway commercial" are -- in almost all cases -- mutually exclusive terms. The numbers prove the point in this case.

The eleven old and blighted lots -- some of the most undesirable commercial property in the city -- arranged in the traditional development pattern along the incompatible, major arterial of Highway 210 have a combined tax base of \$1,136,500.

<u>Owner</u>	<u>Parcel ID</u>	<u>Land Value</u>	<u>Improvement Value</u>	<u>Total Value</u>
Scott and Susan Fisher	09122004006B009	\$ 47,300	\$ 7,400	\$ 54,700
Scott and Susan Fisher	09122004005B889	\$ 20,300	\$ 80,200	\$ 100,500
Scott and Susan Fisher	09122004005A009	\$ 20,100	\$ 77,900	\$ 98,000
Robert and Darlene Willette	09122004004D009	\$ 28,000	\$ 77,000	\$ 105,000
North Central States Regional	09122004004A009	\$ 20,100	\$ 116,000	\$ 136,100
Kevin Matthews	09122004003B889	\$ 28,000	\$ 40,000	\$ 68,000
S & L Properties	09122004003A009	\$ 19,200	\$ -	\$ 19,200
S & L Properties	091220040020009	\$ 38,500	\$ 199,500	\$ 238,000
PJS Properties, LLC	09122004001D009	\$ 20,100	\$ 68,700	\$ 88,800
Klein Bank	09122004001C889	\$ 18,800	\$ 104,000	\$ 122,800
Kurt W Martin	09122004001A889	\$ 21,900	\$ 83,500	\$ 105,400
	TOTALS	\$ 282,300	\$ 854,200	\$ 1,136,500

To compare, the Taco John's property -- the one that is not only shiny and new but configured precisely as the city of Brainerd desires the old and blighted properties to someday be -- has a total valuation of only \$803,200.

<u>Owner</u>	<u>Parcel ID</u>	<u>Land Value</u>	<u>Improvement Value</u>	<u>Total Value</u>
PBJ Rentals LLC	09122002004X889	\$ 302,400	\$ 500,800	\$ 803,200

At its nastiest and most decrepit, fighting the negative auto traffic speeding by and the absence of pedestrian connectivity, lacking all natural advantage from the neighboring land uses that would ideally accompany a traditional neighborhood design, the old and blighted traditional commercial block **still outperforms the new, auto-oriented development by 41 percent.**

Imagine how much more valuable this traditional block would be if the businesses were simply given some relief from the speed of the STROAD-induced traffic and/or provided some connectivity to the adjacent neighborhood, two things that could be done far cheaper than the millions the city has spent to make this area the dominion of cars.

Imagine how much more prosperous we would all be if we started building Strong Towns.

There is much more to report on this case study. Check back later this week. In the meantime, here is some related information:

- [Location on Google Maps](#) (explore the surrounding neighborhoods)
- [Brainerd Comprehensive Plan](#)
- [Rethinking Economic Development](#) (November 25, 2009)
- [Mobility? We were just kidding about that.](#) (April 25, 2011)
- [WalMart. Too big to fail.](#) (March 7, 2011)

Charles Marohn is a Professional Engineer licensed in the State of Minnesota and a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. He is president of [Strong Towns](#), a non-partisan, non-profit organization that advocates for changes in development patterns and a complete understanding of the full costs of methods of growth.