

The New Town Movement:

In one way, the planned city has always been a part of civilization. Records exist of plans for new towns back as far as the ancient Egyptians. Most of the “planned towns” in history were based on providing for military, trade, or harbor needs. The idea of planning a city for the needs of the people who would live there didn’t crystallize until the end of the 19th century when Sir Ebenezer Howard, an Englishman, first suggested a series of “garden cities” north of London.

However, it was another 50 years, at the end of World War II, when these garden cities really began to flourish. The world was moving into a new era of rapid urbanization. The problems of pollution, traffic congestion and the impersonalized isolation of urban sprawl were growing. The concept of creating new towns spread across Europe with the creation of planned communities to deal with these problems.

These “new towns” sought to plan in advance the design and growth of cities. Some of the key features were:

- Pedestrian friendly walkways separated from vehicle traffic to promote the safe movement of people between neighborhoods, schools, and shopping.
- Architecturally innovative housing,
- Community owned land to create activity areas and a sense of openness,
- Community works of art,
- Close proximity of commercial and industrial parks for people to live close to where they work, and
- A development philosophy to respect the land.

Interest in the new town concepts of Europe began to surface within the U.S. government during the presidency of John F. Kennedy due to the efforts of Robert Weaver, chief administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA). An economist with a long-time interest in comprehensive urban planning, Weaver recommended to Congress that the federal government provide mortgage insurance for the purchase of land designated for new community development. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was signed into existence in 1965. George Romney, the Governor of Michigan (and father of presidential candidate, Mitt Romney), was eventually appointed the HUD secretary.

Henry McKnight, a Minnesota Senator and real estate developer, was a friend of George Romney. McKnight was concerned with the problems being generated in the United States by uncontrolled urban sprawl. He had traveled extensively in Europe and had seen the success of their new towns. He was determined to bring the fresh idea of the new town urban planning concepts to America.

The development of Jonathan continued to receive support under the Nixon administration through the federal guarantee of financial assistance as part of Title IV of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968. Jonathan was to become the first “new town” in the United States.

The Federal guarantees supported the ambitious project to build Jonathan in a rural part of Carver County Minnesota. Henry McKnight assembled the brightest and the best urban planners, businessmen, government leaders, and architects to move forward with building this new town in America.

- Marsh Halberg, Jonathan resident & Heritage Committee member; *Chaska Herald* newspaper, October 2008