

# BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

## Pod People

**By stringing disconnected pods of development along our main roads, local planning policies force Virginians into their cars and aggravate traffic congestion.**

**W**e are all pod people now.

No, we haven't succumbed to the Invasion of the Body Snatchers. But we Virginians have undergone a bizarre metamorphosis of our own making: We have embraced the life of the pod.

One of the distinguishing contributions of the United States to world civilization is the elevation of pods, in the form of retail strips, office parks and cul de sacs, as the basic organizing units of our physical environment. Through planning and design, we have segregated the pods into three types -- residential, commercial and retail -- strung them along roads like gourds off a vine, and hermetically sealed them off from one another.

The consequences of pod-like development patterns are many, but none so pernicious as the impact on traffic patterns. Americans have created a physical framework that makes it impossible to move from one activity or errand to the next without driving an automobile. Making matters worse, this suburban alternative to tradi-

tional grid streets, which provide many alternate routes between any two points, is intrinsically bound to a system of congestion-prone feeder and arterial roads.

As Virginia lawmakers grapple over transportation policy, they have shown no cog-



nizance that traffic congestion is worst in parts of the state where pod development prevails. Despite the significantly greater density of city neighborhoods developed before World War II -- before pods came into vogue -- we don't hear the residents of Richmond, Roanoke or Alexandria crying out for relief from traffic congestion. No, the wailing comes from the pod people.

In my columns, I frequently decry what I characterize as the "scattered, *disconnected* and low-density" pattern of development that underlies our 21st-century transportation crisis. By "disconnected," I refer to thousands of pods strewn across the suburban landscape that are sealed off from one another by fences, berms and other man-made

barriers. These pods contain tens of thousands of lane-miles of road, built to Virginia Department of Transportation standards, that carry no more than a few hundred cars per day -- those of the local residents and the occasional tradesman. Yet they plug into feeders and arterials that carry thousands of cars per *hour*. Traffic congestion in Virginia stems not from any scarcity of asphalt but from the inefficient connectivity of that asphalt.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, the state Senate and the House of Delegates all want to raise more money for transportation improvements -- they differ mainly in how much money we need and where it should come from. But lawmakers are not addressing root causes of traffic congestion that are embedded in local zoning codes, subdivision ordinances and comprehensive plans, which mandate a pod-like pattern of development as an adjunct to the feeder-artery road system. Even General Assembly talk of "reforming land use" tip-toes around this foundational issue.

Until legislators confront the pod problem, raising another \$1 billion a year in revenue, as many are calling for, won't amount to a hill of beans. More money will only perpetuate Business As Usual by

subsidizing a failed system of transportation, land use and urban design.

I've been speaking about pods in the abstract. Indulge me as I describe what I'm talking about, drawing from personal, every-day experience in the west end of Henrico County -- one of the better designed and more livable parts of the Richmond New Urban Region, scarily enough.

I live in the Countryside pod, or subdivision, which is one in a cluster of pods bounded by three main roads: Parham Road, a four-lane arterial to the west; River Road, a two-lane feeder, to the south; and Ridge Road, a two-lane feeder augmented by turning lanes, to the east. A map is displayed below.

Scrutiny of the map reveals that this neighborhood is not a single, organic unit. It is comprised of eight discon-

nected residential pods -- some large, some tiny -- as well as mini-pods dedicated to a private school, a synagogue and two churches. This is typical of the pattern of development in western Henrico County. The neighborhood differs from new development mainly in that it does not demarcate pods with the fences and other physical barriers that are so common in newer neighborhoods.

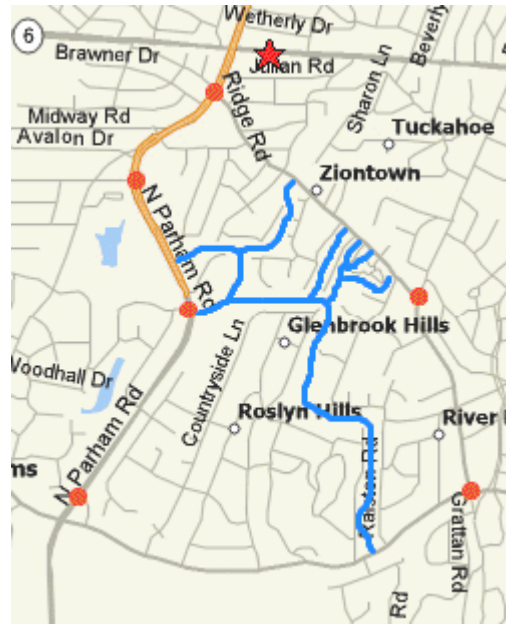
To gain access to the wider world, my pod-mates and I have two transportation choices: River Road and Parham Road. These roads will take us fairly conveniently to most major destinations in the Richmond New Urban Region. But the nonsensical logic of the pod is evident to anyone who navigates to neighborhood destinations.

We run many of our errands at a neighborhood shopping center. There is a Rite Aid drug store there, as well as a wine shop, a dry cleaner, a hardware store, a tailor shop and three restaurants, all of which I patronize, as well as 7-Eleven, a cycling store, gift shops and

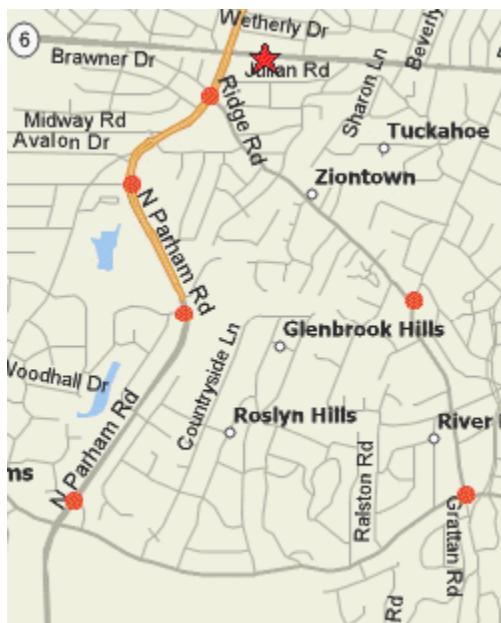
assorted boutiques that no self-respecting middle-aged man would have the faintest desire to enter. Plus, nearby there is a large swimming pool/tennis court club that we belong to.

The problem is that these neighborhood destinations are located in different pods. As the crow flies, the destinations are located not too far from where we live, but we cannot access them through neighborhood streets. We must travel by River Road and Ridge roads in a circuitous route.

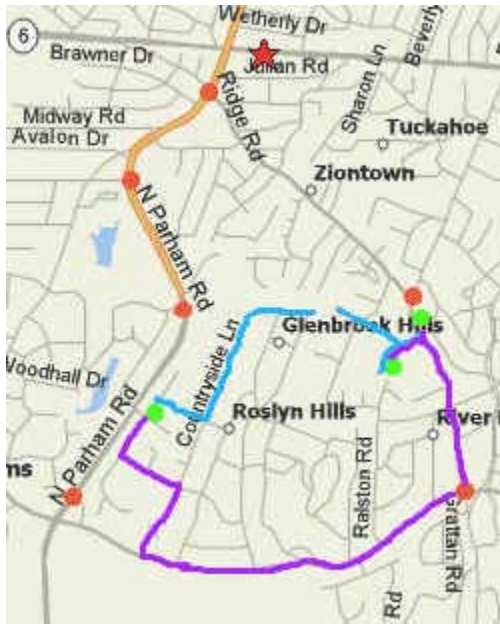
Because Ridge Road serves local traffic and is rarely congested in any case, our circuitous route does not cause a problem there. But River Road, a critical commuting



Residential pods are marked in blue. The Countryside pod, the largest in the neighborhood, is located in the southwest corner.



The Countryside neighborhood is bounded by Parham, River and Ridge Roads. Red dots indicate stoplights.



The green dot in the southwest quadrant shows the location of the Bacon household. The green dots to the right indicate the neighborhood pool and shopping center.

The blue line shows a route, which, if connected, would allow the Bacon family and neighbors easy access to the neighborhood amenities. The purple line shows the route we actually follow.

route, is heavily traveled and frequently congested, so our roundabout path between pods does add incrementally to congestion. Multiply our situation hundreds of times across the New Urban Region, and local pod-related irritants become significant contributors to traffic congestion region-wide.

There is one other point worth making here. I have a seven-year-old son. Jamie is too young yet to ride a bicycle to the neighborhood pool, or to the 7-Eleven for a Slurpee, but he's not far from the age when he could. If he could follow the blue route above, he would enjoy considerable independence. But he can't. The path to the pool

follows the purple line -- and River Road is not suitable for 10-year-olds to ride on a bicycle, even for a short distance. The two-lane road is narrow and winding, and it has no sidewalks or shoulders. As a consequence, Jamie is confined to our pod. His mom and I will have to chauffeur him to these destinations.

By the standards of contemporary suburban design, Countryside is a benign example. At least our pod isn't cordoned off by physical barriers. In the city of Richmond, neighborhoods of city blocks on grid streets transition smoothly into one another (except in those places where suburban-style planning took root. In Henrico County, by contrast, the logic of the impermeable pod has taken over.

Jamie plays in a handsome Little League facility in the far West End. The complex is surrounded by pods of



The ditch and wooden fence lining "Little League Lane" separate single-family houses (off the photo to the right) from the depredations of local little leaguers.

middle-class houses, many of which are inhabited by families with children. In the city, ball fields provide open space and recreational amenities for the neighbors. In Henrico, the Little League is quarantined from the neighbors as if it were a haven for rabid dogs.

Another absurdity can be seen behind the H.F. Byrd Middle School. The school offers tennis courts and basketball courts that neighbors occasionally use. But there is no way to access the courts on foot from the houses nearby, which are blockaded by a wooden fence.

Even residential areas that don't wall themselves off with fences erect psychological barriers that function as

These recreational amenities at H.F. Byrd High School are accessible only by automobile, constraining the ability of anyone without a drivers license to use them. The fence segregates it from nearby houses.







*Left : Note the dumpster to the left of the car and, beyond, a steep incline leading to the loading dock of the shopping center next door.*



*Right: cut-through to parking lot and Hollywood Video store on the far side.*

pod husks. A couple of miles down Parham Road, there is a large cluster of shopping centers, fast-foot outlets and gas stations -- each in its own separate pod, of course. Amidst this ill-connected litter of commercial establishments, there stands a small apartment complex.

In theory, the apartment complex is desirably located -- it could offer pedestrian access to a wide range of amenities from video stores to restaurants. In city neighborhoods, such as Richmond's Carytown district, homeowners pay a premium to reside within a pleasant walk of a vital shopping district. But it's hard to imagine anyone paying such a premium to live in the Gateway Apartments.

The apartments are not unattractive in themselves, but they are set amidst a sea of asphalt driveways and parking spaces. There is a bit of greenery, but it is not functional -- its sole purpose is to separate the apartments from neighboring properties.

You do not see kids throwing Frisbees, students reading under the shade of a tree or families gathering around a picnic basket.

Psychologically, the apartments are set off from adjacent amenities, including a bank and a video store, by a split-rail fence on one side and an ugly, trash-strewn hedgerow growing up around a wire fence on the other. Someone did think to create a footpath up the incline to the shopping center next door, but pedestrians must navigate through an inhospitable parking lot to reach any destination there.

**S**o, what lessons can be derived from this brief excursion

through the dark underside of suburbia?

There is no undoing the pods now that we've built them, except in rare instances where developers can consolidate enough property to redevelop large tracts of land. Instead, planners and developers need to give more thought on how to improve connectivity.

In my observation, pods can be connected with sidewalks, jogging-and-biking trails and cut-throughs that link cul de sacs. Though inexpensive, this is not an easy job. It will require sustained attention to micro-level detail, and it will entail patient diplomacy to obtain the buy-in of the resi-

*How expensive could it be to link pods by connecting dead-end roads like these?*

*Neighbors might object that through traffic will disrupt the quiet of their streets. But that concern is easily addressed: First, the link is unlikely to be used anyone but drivers in the neighborhood. Second, it is easy to install traffic-calming features to keep people from driving too fast.*



dents affected. Planners and developers also need to pay more attention to the design of sidewalks and parking lots, issues that I will address in up-coming columns.

Improving pod connectivity is not a cure-all. It will reduce the need for some car trips, and it will take some cars off congested thoroughfares, but even when replicated across thousands of pods across Virginia, the consequences will be incremental, not revolutionary. Connecting pods is not a substitute, for instance, for a well-designed grid system of streets. Connecting pods is not a substitute for building communities with a balance of housing, jobs and amenities that match transportation infrastructure with transportation demand.

Connecting pods is only one of many strategies enumerated in the pages of *Bacon's Rebellion*, which, taken in their totality, can address Virginia's transportation crisis without raising taxes. But it is a necessary strategy, and one that should not be neglected.

— **April 3, 2006**

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