

## Up, Up and Away

By

Ronny J Coleman

Superman, the hero of the fictional world, had a great line when he was ready to fly away to take some sort of action. I don't know how many times I heard the TV actor George Reeves say, "up, up and away" as he leapt from the ground, defying gravity. The phrase became a cliché, but is probably not heard that often anymore unless you are watching TV reruns.

If you are a firefighter today you might be considered a real hero instead of a fictional one. You might be well advised to edit that line by saying "look up, look up and be ready." That declaration may well save your life in the future. America's fire problem is changing, along with America's landscape. The future of firefighting may be influenced by a societal trend call the "New Urbanism." If you haven't heard of this trend I am not surprised. If it if sneaks up on you I won't be surprised either. But it is coming.

For almost 300 years of our country's existence, all growth was defined as "outward bound." If you look into the history books you can find a doctrine called "Manifest Destiny." In its simplest terms, it was defined as a need to expand growth throughout the continent. "Go West, Young Man" was intended to motivate people to push expansion. It worked well. Just look at the history of your town or city, especially if you are west of the Mississippi.

Cities were created. They expanded. They sprawled across the landscape. Eventually suburbia was created and the old downtowns of major cities began to decay. Populations abandoned downtown. They left the core city to drive hours on freeways. Different life styles emerged. Growth was measured in acres converted from agrarian land use to houses; specifically the single family home.

Here is where this column might become controversial. Beware! Things are going to change. It is called the "New Urbanism."

In essence, it is a trend towards the re-concentration of population centers into high density areas, either by redeveloping downtown areas or creating new suburban high-density planned communities rather than more single family homes. This trend is based upon the demographic factor of an aging population in our society that wants convenience over other considerations. It is further supported by a new generation of youth that is not overly concerned about having the suburban cottage with a white picket fence and a gas-dependent automobile. The evidence of this is in the increase of multi-family housing and the conversion of land use in the core cities into high-rises.

This may not be an obvious trend in your area yet, but it will be, and is already creating conditions that will affect our fire problem of the future.

The principles of urbanism can be applied through both development and redevelopment of our cities. These principles are:

1. Walkability
2. Connectivity
3. Mixed use and diversity
4. Mixed housing
5. Quality, architecture and urban design
6. Changing of traditional neighborhood structures
7. Increased density
8. Green transportation
9. Sustainability
10. Quality of life

We aren't really rolling up the lawns of suburbia and retreating en masse just yet. You might have to look very hard at your community's long-term land use plans and development policies to see this shift, but it is occurring whether you live in a revitalized metropolitan area or in a bedroom community that is planning to expand.

What is driving this new urbanism is the need to concentrate population into areas where vital services do not require extensive transportation. A significant number of individuals desire to live, work, recreate and have access to medical services that can be reached in minutes instead of hours on the freeway. The development community is responding by providing concentrated housing and service centers that are located in high-rise structures.

Over time, this phenomenon will change the nature of fire protection in some areas. It may force re-evaluation of policy and procedure. It will definitely impact the emphasis on built-in fire protection technology. There will be an increased need for both passive and active built-in fire equipment to hold events in check.

If you are in an area that is primarily rural, this also affects you. How many small- to medium-size fire departments have suddenly been confronted with large complexes dedicated to the needs of senior citizens? How many of our metropolitan cities are seeing mega campuses focused on seniors and medical services, or young professionals who don't own cars and want to work, shop, recreate and entertain themselves within walking distance of their residences?

Don't say we haven't been warned!

These changes require that we focus on building fire protection into buildings. That trend has also been increasing over the last few decades. We can see that with sprinklers, fire alarms, standpipes, firefighter air replenishment systems (FARS) and increasing emphasis on construction technology. In the future, the emphasis will need to be placed on prevention.

Don't worry -- the firefighter will always be a nonfictional hero in communities. But the firefighter's tool box is going to have to be much better stocked than it is today, and some of the most important tools need to be built in to these new structures. Density equals demand and demand means competency.

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