

## Housing economist sees new urbanism as little more than a niche product

by Jeff Ostrowski



Inside the Palm Beach County Convention Center yesterday afternoon, proponents of the new urbanism pointed to evidence that American consumers are embracing pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. Outside the convention center, a downpour provided a reminder of just one persistent objection to ditching our cars.

Ken H. Johnson, a housing economist at Florida International University, isn't attending this week's Congress for the New Urbanism conference, but he says new urbanist projects such as CityPlace and Abacoa are unlikely to be more than a niche product

"It's intuitively appealing. But I think it's just a small portion" of the overall housing market, Johnson said.

New urbanists are accustomed to such naysaying, but they predict Americans will reject sprawl.

"There's a migration away from that housing type," said Shyam Kannan of real estate firm RCLCO during the Congress for the New Urbanism.

In another change, Americans born in the 1980s and 1990s are rejecting suburbs and shopping malls, said Kennedy Smith of the Community Land Use and Economics Group.

"They prefer unique, authentic places," she said.

And Lawrence Frank, a planner from Vancouver, B.C., pointed to the links between sprawl and the growing epidemic of obesity.

Johnson says those arguments are compelling, but they're unlikely to reverse decades of car-centered development patterns.

"Are we all going to become walkable communities? No," Johnson said. "Not in our lifetime."

*CityPlace photo by Bill Ingram/The Palm Beach Post*