

## Could Newton could be a “New Town”, and save a lot of energy?

By Gil Woolley

During the nineteen thirties, despite the depression, cities in Britain were rapidly spreading out of control, especially around London, which seemed likely to reach the South Coast within a few years. The war years, 1939 to 1945, provided a pause to think about the implications of this sprawl. Britain is a rather small island with a population of about fifty million; even “free market” believers did not want the entire island to be completely built over.

Towards the end of the war, non-partisan study groups recommended measures designed to preserve some of the British countryside. The most important was to set up what amounted to a system of national zoning, to preserve “Green Belts” (open space) around major cities. Another was to establish “New Towns”, intended to be self-contained urban centers where residents could live, work and shop, thus reducing the commuting time and oil consumption that accompanied the traditional pattern. This is a very effective way to reduce oil imports, air pollution, highway congestion and to make walking and cycling to work possible for many people.

Between the nineteen fifties and today, many New Towns have been established; London having more than any other city. Some were “Green Field” sites, where there was no existing urban development; others were located in existing small towns or villages. In addition to shorter commutes, advantages over traditional development include the ability to lay out new streets, and to set aside areas for schools, civic buildings and parks, and to do this while land was relatively inexpensive rather than waiting until the need arose and the cost had risen to an unaffordable level.

The reality was less than the vision. Most of the New Towns had good commuter rail service and attracted people who worked in the cities. Nonetheless, significant numbers of people live and work in these New Towns and enjoy reduced commuting distances and can walk or cycle to work.

I lived for a few months in Hemel, Hempstead, one of the earlier New Towns, about 25 miles northeast of London. I maintained an interest in the concept after moving to Newton in 1972, when I began to see that Newton had developed historically and by accident, some of the “New Town” characteristics. The New Towns have neighborhood shopping centers, which provide the same functions as Newton's “Villages”. Like a New Town Newton provides employment opportunities at entry and professional levels within its borders, some in the villages, others in office parks or retail centers. What is in short supply in Newton is major research and manufacturing facilities.

Like the New Towns, Newton has evolved a pattern that offers the possibility that significant numbers of people can live and work in the same area. This is the easiest way to reduce gasoline consumption, oil imports, air pollution, and ultimately, global

warming. For too many Americans, commuting to the workplace is responsible for the major part of their oil and energy consumption.

Changes in industry have made industrial and residential mixing more acceptable. In Massachusetts, at least, most industries are no longer the dirty, smoky, polluting behemoths of yesterday. The buildings they inhabit are no more intrusive than schools, and they are often more visually appealing and interesting than apartment blocks.

Newton, and other suburban cities and towns, should welcome mixed developments and office parks with light manufacturing. Greater Boston is already so large and spread out that it is not efficient to have most of the better jobs concentrated within the urban core. We can have our cake--- the advantages of traditional smaller towns --- and eat it, too, by also having easy access to the cultural, entertainment and sporting events of the metropolitan area.

*Gilbert Woolley is a retired engineer. A writer for MA Sierran, he has been an active member of the Sierra Club since 1971.*