

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Americans need to learn from Europe**

by Dan Wilhelm  
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Americans have tried high rise housing for low income people, but it generally has been a failure. Americans need to look to our European friends who have successfully had such housing for 80 to 100 years and learn from them. The answer is not just about a building. Rather it is about the many measures needed to make an area livable. It includes an integrated community setting that has access to transit, recreation and parks, schools, and shopping. It means an area that is safe and where people feel secure. It is an area that is attractive. It is about integrating people of all economic levels together. Following is an article by Pam Lindstrom and provides one example of how Europe has achieved this integration. I also realize that ideas from Europe may require adoption to fit in America but we should be willing to learn from others.

### **Civic Federation Learns Urban Planning Viennese Style**

By Pamela Lindstrom

Montgomery County will soon be "built out" in conventional suburban terms, as land planned for new development is consumed in the next few years. Growth will continue, though the pace should be slower. Both County policies and market demand support development of housing and office buildings in an urban form near the transit backbone. This transition is good in principle. It will increase our opportunity to live sustainable lives, and prepare us and our economy for the end of cheap oil.

We are learning the potential problems with this transition. We can learn to avoid mistakes by studying local places like Arlington. But in many ways, the world leaders in urban planning are now the best European cities. They are using their planning powers to create places people want to live, thus competing successfully with their own suburbs for growth. This is not just a matter of history. Europeans feel the same urge as Americans for living in a detached house with cars as the chief means of mobility.

The cities adopted policies to combat sprawl, to encourage growth in the cities, and the citizens agreed – interest in conservation of historic cities, landscape, and energy is strong. The city planners have pursued this goal with creativity and efficiency, addressing affordability, development without generating a lot of car traffic, providing neat public places, and providing greenery in clever ways. Vienna, Austria is a good example, and my slide show to the Civic Federation showed their methods.

- Innovative affordable housing. We looked at several recent projects, including large mixed use apartment – office building – shopping centers along the Danube. These upscale developments (affordable to the middle class) sit side by side with well-maintained public housing buildings from the 1920s. It has perfect walking and cycling access to the rail transit system, and to the extensive parks along the Danube.

- Gee whiz housing. The tradition of excellent architecture in public housing and more recent "social housing" continues. Several buildings are tourist attractions, including Hundertwasser Haus, which pioneered the vegetated façade, with trees appearing to grow out of the front walls. The Gasometers are 19th Century gas storage structures

which have been improbably renovated with apartments, and a shopping center on the lower floors. These projects are planned by the City housing department following the general plan. The housing officials negotiate with private “building societies” to build the buildings. The builders submit bids that include architecture, environmental standards, and finance, including what the rent or sale price of the units will be.

Thus social housing is built on a large scale, with quite low costs to residents, a major part of the strategy to keep people in the city.

- Fascinating public spaces. We saw a spectacular public market built into the arched roof of an old water reservoir, leading to a pedestrian street and church square, recently fit into a rather low income area full of immigrants. We saw the main shopping street, Mariahilferstrasse, which has accommodated vast office and retail construction, while sidewalks were expanded and car lanes reduced.

- Access to green places. We saw everything from gardens on rooftops and green facades, to local parks and plazas, to the green hills of the Vienna Woods ringing the city. It is all accessible by foot or by public transport, another recurrent theme.

The lesson I draw is that successful urbanization requires attention to all aspects: attractive affordable housing (mostly apartments), perfect access by transit or foot for normal activities, but limited car access, plus some gee whiz stuff to keep the City intriguing to tourists and its own residents. Some Civic Fed members argued with urbanism as a policy and Vienna as an example. They cited its small households and apartment living (though most Montgomery households are small and all-adult, too.) They defended their choice of detached houses and cars for travel. That choice will always be available though increasingly problematic.

A large fraction of us Americans would be happy to live in an urban, intensely mixed, affordable, convenient setting with access both to a world class city and the green countryside. Montgomery County can offer all that, but it must be done right.