Vibrant NEO 2040 – Vision Session Q&A Transcript
Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium

Gemini Center (Fairview Park, OH)
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Panel: Hunter Morrison, Executive Director NEOSCC (HM)
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Question/Comment: I read Joel Kotkin's book The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050. The internet will be to the next 40 years what the interstate system was to the last 40. How is the internet's impact factored in [to the vision]?

H.M: Where there is good bandwidth people will be located there. In areas that were isolated in the past, they will not be. We see this in places like Youngstown with the business incubator where several firms are located there.

Question/Comment: If we achieve a higher growth rate, it may cause issues in achieving some of the environmental goals. Growth seems to come at the expense of the environment.

H.M: The four scenarios try to test a set of ideas. Grow the Same tests what happens if we continue to grow according to existing trends. In the upper-right side is the Grow Differently. Do Things Different and Grow Differently both have significant benefit? It suggested to us that you can't just grow your way out. Growth has its own consequences for ecologically sensitive lands, commute time and other factors. We are showing the results of growing and doing differently.

Question/Comment: I attended all three rounds [April/May workshops, July/August Open Houses, and October Vision Session]. They have all been useful and great. I have a couple areas of concern – the Browns winning the Super Bowl is missing. My point is that it is so broad-based – what about funding and resources? It is trying to get everything. I'm conflicted by the transportation piece. There is a disconnect since we are saying our commutes are short and low-cost and we travel alone, so why more transit?

H.M: We are celebrating our assets – in 27 years we will win a Super Bowl. We were seeing a consistent pattern of people wanting more choices. Demographic trends are saying we should focus on this. Baby Boomers, those 65 years and up, and those not needing to commute are trending to more compact places. Gen-Xers grew up on cul-de-sacs and many hate them. They are trending more towards compact and trending not to own a car. A few places it is working, like downtown Cleveland. Developers are doing residential conversions of the East Ohio Gas building, Ameritrust, Hanna Annex and other spaces. There are two in downtown Youngstown. Market segments are favorable for this. Not everywhere, but some places. Innovations districts are demonstrating a market today and tomorrow.

E.J: There are goals, but not pathways to advance these. The NEOSCC Futures Committee is looking at ways to advocate. Thanks to all the public officials in attendance tonight.

Question/Comment: You font needs to be bigger on the slides. Northeast Ohio is made up of millions of people. The results are from thousands. I just found out about your organization in the last week, and

I'm a relatively engaged person. I did see something on Cleveland.com, but no one under 30 reads that newspaper. You need to reach out to under-30-year-olds, like with CoolCleveland.com and direct mail.

H.M: It is a challenge in any planning project to reach people, which is why we did two public opinion surveys. There was an effort to reach out to get a sense of the communities. It has involved Cleveland.com, direct mail, online engagement. There are four million people. It is a draft and we need to take it out to people. It is good you are engaged now. It is the direction we've been headed over the last 20 years. We are going to zoning commissions and planning bodies and those who want to hear. If you are interested in a presentation you can talk to Jeff Anderle. It starts small and continues to grow.

Question/Comment: The following was phrased as a comment, not a question: I'm asking people here for a favor: Please do your research. Go to NEOSCC.com. [Note: this is a website that is not affiliated with NEOSCC or Vibrant NEO 2040.] There is a petition signed by 1,200 people to stop NEOSCC. This is Agenda 21. Please read it and keep an open mind. Please do your research.

Question/Comment: What is the problem to solve, specifically?

H.M: Where are we heading. Sharing what we know about abandonment, infrastructure costs, environmental degradation from runoff, growing distances. We are providing information for planning bodies now and for the future. For those investing public dollars now and into the future to say: Are we investing wisely? Can we collaborate? In the beginning 23 groups came together. Our board now consists of 3 organizations.

E.J: I started in the legislature, was there from 1995-2004. Sprawl and dispersal of a stable population was known then. At that time there was resistance from homebuilders that were profiting from this. Now the chickens have come to roost. Crime and abandonment are results. You can argue about that, but there are serious consequences and policymakers need to address them. Vision is all of the above. In ideological paralysis, what recommendations are there for strategic private investments in cities?

H.M: Homebuilders have opportunities for investing in urban areas. We see it in the Cleveland development community. They see opportunities. Businesses see necessity of locating where workers don't need cars. They say they are stymied at the permit desk. Historically, we've made this type of development illegal. Zoning codes. We need to work with local planning and zoning bodies about how to make it better.

Question/Comment: What does the data say about Brownfields, and how do we repurpose it?

H.M: I don't have the numbers at hand. We looked at the most productive areas. We looked at the 8,000 acres of vacant industrial land near productive transit lines. Why don't we work together to put valuable uses back on this land?

E.J: Paul [reference to audience member] comes from Euclid, and I do to. This is about policy – where do you invest in legacy sites – gas stations and brownfields? Or do you make green fields more attractive. There is a role for state policymakers. Mayor Patton said the Clean Ohio program helped her remediate contaminated sites in this city.

Question/Comment: The following was phrased as a comment, not a question: This is my third session. I applaud your efforts. I second that the other person said [question #4]; I found out about this through NPR. More young people definitely need to be here. You need to get them involved. The Downtown Cleveland Alliance put out a video about living in Cleveland. View it – it is a great piece.

Question/Comment: The following was phrased as a comment, not a question: I am a builder. For years all we could do is build low density since that is all that was legal. It is refreshing to see efforts like this. These are the projects I want to build. I applaud this effort. Zoning laws are becoming less antiquated, and there is a market for this.

Question/Comment: What is your ideal city?

E.J: We haven't thought about this. County Executive FitzGerald wants to invest in downtown. What draws people in – it is co-dependent on jobs and a vibrant downtown. Businesses want educated workers and without this, businesses will be wanting for employees. Chicago's investment in Millennium Park is an example. Some want more suburban areas, but there needs to be a balance. We can't have outer ring suburbs with a downtown that is decaying.

Question/Comment: The following was phrased as a comment, not a question: You need to incorporate the theme [in addition to the 3 themes] of financial sustainability. Local governments are hurting. Financial sustainability brings it home for people as a theme. Historically, we've had mediocre planning here, but this links up many different efforts. The Chicago GO TO 2040 plan – things have happened there – implementation because it has teeth and there is progress.

Question/Comment: Concur [with the previous comment] that we need to document and sell pending financial issues, but we need to also think about how we're perceived outside the region. Mega cities will be 10 million+, and we need to place ourselves as having a population base large enough to the rest of the world. I think there is enough to sell to others and ourselves. Internal and external PR is needed to help citizens and others.

H.M: We were avoiding the PR effort like Cleveland+ since there can be internal resistance. We're using a network-linked approach. We need to link and leverage to identify themes we have in common. How do we promote in the broad context? Changing mentality and redefining. The example of Youngstown. The way we conceptualize ourselves needs to include strengths of all communities. Not that Chicago's GO TO 2040 isn't great, but it is hierarchical. How do we take advantage of our unique network of places?

Question/Comment: It seems these are ambitious goals. How is this going to be regulated or implemented? Are zoning laws going to be changed to force different housing types? Control locally, otherwise there will be repercussions from central planning.

H.M: I'm a local government guy. There is always a sense this is central planning, but it is not possible or desirable in Northeast Ohio. We have Home Rule. Historically, the bias is toward control over our fate. There are four MPOs [Metropolitan Planning Organizations], not one, composed of local officials. We are coming forward not with a plan, but a framework. We are a nonprofit with no authority to implement. Suggestions are for local officials to make better decisions on what to do. NEOSCC is a nonprofit with only the power to advise. I understand your fears and concern.

E.J: Don't underestimate pushback on the policy agenda. I saw this is the legislature. Some will say we should invest in areas like Dublin [outside Columbus] versus urban areas. Some will say, 'Keep hands off – the inner-ring had government infrastructure support back then, now it's our turn.' My experience is that it is very difficult to impose. Incentives are much better to advance goals versus imposing.