

City's future an open book

In Annapolis, the Mayor's Book Club discusses the problems—and the potential—of urban life

By Jamie Stiehm
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All eyes in the Mayor's Book Club in Annapolis were on the text: Chapter 13 of Jane Jacobs' 1961 classic on city planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

Mayor Ellen O. Moyer sat in a corner of the classroom with tables arranged in a square Wednesday at St. John's College but did not hold the floor. Under unwritten ground rules, she acted as only one of 17 participants in this unusual evening forum, which has been meeting every other week since September. Open and free to residents of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County, the forum's goal is to find ways to make cities more vibrant.

At best, they seek "exuberant diversity," to borrow a book phrase, for Annapolis - a small city brick landscape set on the water, known for graceful spires and domes. But there are issues, the book club members say.

Prosperity is one. Eastport, a thriving waterfront neighborhood where real estate has soared lately, is fast becoming a chic counterexample of healthy urban life, said Mark Lindley, a retired AOL senior manager with a gray ponytail. "It's striking in its reduction of diversity," he said.

"You don't want to lose that lively mix on the street," said Moyer, 69, who lives in Eastport.

Jim Martin, 57, who owns Free State Press on West Street, where business is booming, was troubled by a similar trend. "Some of my employees have to live as far away as Deale," Martin said. "How do we bring housing that's more mixed-income?"

What's different here is it's not all academic - the club plans to apply its lessons and give practical advice to City Hall, when all's said and done, on zoning, parks, sidewalks and building use. Authorized by the city council, the \$10,000 book program is financed by outside fundraising.



Mayor Ellen O. Moyer regularly attends discussions. The Club began meeting in September.

Karen Jennings, a 31-year-old geologist and a recent transplant to Annapolis, spoke for the younger set. "I underlined the passage that said families are crowded out when diversity self-destructs," she said. "I was thinking of all the [West Street] condos being built. But I'd like to have a family, and I can't afford to buy a house here."

Moyer said the city of more than 30,000 is populated mostly by those in upper- and lower-income brackets: "There's not enough in the middle," she said.

Another visible element, unique to the city mix, is the nearby Naval Academy's midshipmen brigade, which numbers about 4,000 during the academic year.

The club members - who read mainly Jacobs, with some other texts - include Brian Cahalan, owner of 49 West, a popular cafe and gallery; Bill Davidson, a talkative Montgomery County government official; and a handful of senior citizens. Moyer is the sole city official who attends regularly. Opinions are not in short supply.



Dan Sullivan of the Touchstones Discussion Project moderates the book program. After a period of study, the club plans to present its findings to city officials.

Jack Ladd Carr, who was Annapolis' planning director in 1961, said the book profoundly influenced him. "Jane Jacobs changed my mind about everything," he said. "This [book] is a diatribe against everything I was taught."

Carr said, "Old-timers are fond of saying that all those little shops you yearn for are all gone ... and I can remember when the St. John's faculty lived downtown."

Moderator Dan Sullivan, 35, of the Touchstones Discussion Project plows the group through Jacobs' crisp prose, which analyzes her own Greenwich Village neighborhood in New York, along with parts of Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore. In the chapter discussed last week, the author emphasizes notable public buildings, such as libraries and large concert halls, in defending the vitality of city neighborhoods.

In Jacobs' book - a fierce critique of urban renewal, public housing project designs and highway-building fashions in the 1950s and 1960s - she says, "There is a widespread belief that Americans hate cities."

Forty-five years later, the book club seems proof that some Americans still love cities.

Take Anne Nelson, who once taught at Cornell University and moved to the state capital with her husband in 2003 to be near their son, Christopher Nelson, president of St. John's College. In her time here, Nelson said she found city diversity "impressive" but dryly noted the expanded State House complex seemed to be looming larger: "State office buildings duplicate themselves."

Speaking of outer sprawl around city centers dotted with huge new houses, dubbed McMansions, Nelson said, "Why do they want to live in big mansions that are empty? That seems out of whack."

Decades ago when her family lived in Chicago, Nelson worked with then-Illinois Sen. Paul Douglas on public housing issues. Like Carr, she was well-versed in Jacobs' broadside against the orthodoxy of her day.

For others, delving into discussions about city life was a new experience.

"There are so many ideas in that book that never crossed my mind," said city resident Susan J. Wheatley. "I go to parties now and talk about ideas that engage people."

Wheatley, like others, signed up for the group last summer when she read about the initiative in a newspaper announcement. Another book club session is in the planning stages, organizers said.

After the book club meeting, some said the exchange became so animated at points that the mayor could not get a word in.

Said Lindley: "I thought it was a hoot that Ellen couldn't get in at times."

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