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Is this the end of a wild party? I'm worried. Six decades of suburbanization have left North America in poor shape to adapt to the end of the era of cheap oil. Our society has literally built itself into a cul-de-sac, from which egress will be painful. The practice of single-use zoning has resulted in dispersed land uses that are only accessible by driving. As gas prices go higher and higher, the split-level home with the white picket fence will fall off the economic cliff, as people are unable to get from their distant homes to work.

The public has no idea how bad things are going to get. Not understanding that the fossil fuel era is a brief aberration in human history, they naively believe that the future will look a lot like the present. As a result, the actions needed for the gradual transformation of the economy into a sustainable one¹ are not happening.

That's because there is no political leadership. No one, with the possible exceptions of Al Gore and Jimmy Carter before him, is willing to be the bearer of bad news. Voters don't want to hear that their comfortable lifestyles are coming to an end. Looming unpleasant realities are much more likely to be met by massive denial than by political solutions. I'm afraid that, in the absence of strong interventions to reshape fundamental forces in our society, things are bound to get ugly.

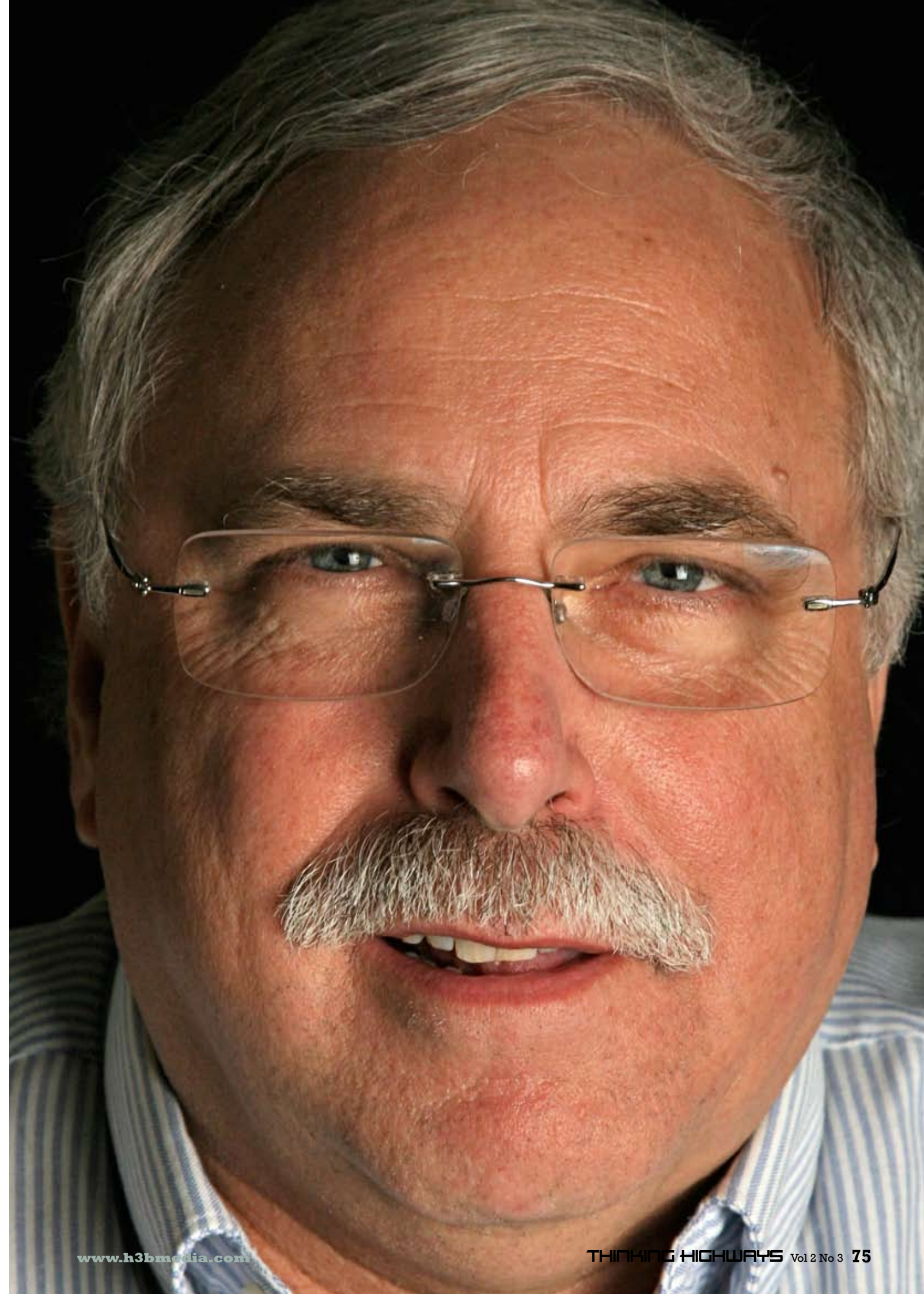
How did we get here? The introduction of suburbanization was a tremendous break with the history of human civilization. Transport in earlier societies was

dependent on walking or on animal power. Homes and shops clustered into villages and cities because access was achieved largely by proximity. The industrial revolution brought mass transit, which allowed the expansion of settlement patterns, but kept it all connected as a network. That all changed with the advent of fossil fuel-powered personal vehicles. They became inexpensive enough to become the dominant form of transport. The automobile enabled the society to jettison the discipline of the interconnected transit network.

The car drove the cancerous expansion of land development that we now call sprawl². This enabled a much lower density of housing, which, coupled with the practice of separating housing from shopping and from work (single-use zoning), now makes participation in modern life dependent on large amounts of energy for transport. This is why our society is about to experience a very rough ride.

In June of 2004, National Geographic ran a cover story 'The End of Cheap Oil.' "In our lifetime, we will have to deal with a peak in the supply of cheap oil" says Boston University economist Robert Kaufmann. "That peak will be a watershed moment."³ The profound implications of this moment have not been grasped by the public, or by their elected officials.

The public expects the future to be like the past few generations, unaware that North Americans have just experienced the longest and most extravagant party in human history. Those expectations form cultural values



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that are extremely resistant to change, especially when manipulated by economic powerhouses like auto manufacturers, land speculators, and the oil companies. Continued denial is likely, followed by an eventual economic collapse.

As gas prices inevitably rise, the first to fall will be the far suburbs, whose residents commute an hour or more. The cost of a single-occupant commute will become overwhelming, forcing the development of car pools, van pools and bus charters. Because of the dispersion of work locations, this will necessarily result in reduced commute convenience and longer travel times as shared travel modes stop at multiple destinations. (This mode shift should, however, reduce highway congestion.) As the full cost of transportation becomes evident, distant suburbs will no longer seem so affordable. Higher density urban living, closer to work, will become more economically competitive. The realities of sustainability will start to emerge.

There is time to redirect our resources into preparing for the challenges of the future. But that would require a fundamental realignment of our cultural expectations. The political system would have to be dramatically reformed, subjugating the power of the fossil fuel and auto industries. It would be like putting society on a war footing, equivalent in scope to the mobilization of American society after the invasion of Pearl Harbor. Everything changed, then. Enormous changes are needed now, if North Americans are to avoid the harsh consequences of peak oil and climate change. Acting later, when the economy is already greatly stressed, will be far less effective.

Incentives and regulations are needed to push new development into transit-oriented villages and cities. A shift in funding away from highways is needed to create a sustainable transit network, including High Speed Rail. Carbon taxes are needed to align consumers with the new world of higher cost energy we are entering.

Are we likely to see these changes? They sure don't seem likely to me. Are we likely to see a giant shift away from sprawl to Smart Growth? Probably not. On a continent that has not invested in convenient alternatives to the auto, many people will be left without adequate transport. I don't think we will change soon enough to prevent the great suffering that is the fate of having built an unsustainable society. Buckle up - it's going to be a bumpy ride. **TH**

1 David Schonbrunn, "View from Another Planet," Thinking Highways, Sept/Oct 2007, pp. 34-37.

2 Sprawl: a pattern of development comprised of housing subdivisions, shopping centers and office parks for which a personal vehicle is the only practical access.

3 Page 88. For a compelling recent update, see Lester Brown, "Is World Oil Production Peaking?" www.earthpolicy.org/Updates/2007/Update67.htm



Interview by Kevin Borrás