June 2015

Dear Students,

I’m pleased that you’ll be joining me at Alumni College this summer to discuss “The Rise and Sprawl of the American City.” The course is based on a sophomore-level elective of more prosaic name—Urban Economics—that I have taught for 10 years at Middlebury. I’m excited to adapt the course to a new audience with a wealth of experiences living in small towns and big cities across the country and globe.

We will begin with a question that most of us rarely stop to ponder: “Why do cities exist?” From our modern perspective, it easy to treat the city as man’s natural habitat. But man only became an urban creature in the last two hundred years, a blink of the eye in our existence as a species. We will discuss this dramatic change in how we live and the two-way connection between technology and urbanization. We’ll then consider the role of steel, elevators and cars in shaping the modern urban form and discuss how current transportation innovations might shape cities of the future. I’ll ask you, the students, to select additional special topics that you’d like to discuss. These may include the role of the housing bubble in the financial crisis; local economic development initiatives; the economic effects of big box stores; housing discrimination; and segregation and economic mobility.

I’m looking forward to discussing what economists can and cannot—and should and should not—say about cities. To motivate our discussion, I’d like everyone to read “The Geography of Nowhere” by James Howard Kunstler prior to arriving at Bread Loaf. The author is an eloquent and strongly opinionated critic of the modern urban form who wrote this now-classic diatribe on sprawl for a popular audience. You may not agree with all that he has to say, but I suspect that you will find it thought-provoking.

See you in August!

Best,

Caitlin Myers
Associate Professor of Economics
Middlebury College