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Editorial: Giving the discussion on suburban housing a new shape

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By The Daily Herald Editorial Board

Phrases like "urban planning," "subregional solutions (to) short- and long-term housing needs" and "policy remedies" don't exactly flow off the tongue with the ease or enthusiasm of, say, prognostications about the coming Super Bowl.

Perhaps that's one reason that a new analysis of housing in a, forgive us, collaborative association of Northwest suburban towns has received such contrasting reactions. When the planners who produced it described their findings in Mount Prospect last fall, village leaders practically couldn't stop talking about it — spending an hour and a half reflecting on its predictions and recommendations. A few days later, Buffalo Grove leaders reacted to virtually the same report with little more than a polite thank you and the observation that the analysis is "very interesting."

A D V E R T I S E M E N T

In fact, the report released Thursday — "[Homes for a Changing Region](#)" — is very interesting, despite its reliance on the arcane vernacular of demographic statisticians. Produced specifically for the suburbs of Arlington Heights, Buffalo Grove, Mount Prospect, Palatine and Rolling Meadows, the report provides a foundation for those communities to work together as they generate ideas for housing development in the coming decades and to tailor their plans not just to what they would like their demographic makeup to be but to what available census and marketing data suggest that makeup will be.

In an era when housing development has slowed nearly to a halt, it can feel misguided to be talking about what kind of housing to build in a town and where to build it. But "[Homes for a Changing Region](#)" merits attention for a couple of reasons.

One, even the gravest cynic expects the economy will one day turn around and people again will be looking for comfortable homes in inviting communities. So, it's best to begin preparing now for the types of homes they'll be looking for.

Plus, the report — produced by the [Metropolitan Mayors Caucus](#), [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) and the regional [Metropolitan Planning Council](#), all with the support of the five communities involved — introduces some new concepts that can help towns be

smarter in their development. For one, it encourages cooperation among towns whose development futures seem intrinsically linked. For another, it focuses on reality rather than whim — the needs of residents a town is likely to have in the future rather than of residents it has today or even that it might hope to attract. It envisions an environment in which developers respond to the identifiable marketing needs of particular towns, rather than towns responding to the marketing goals of particular developers.

It's a worthwhile approach, emphasizing data and efficiency. And it's about to be applied in another collection of local communities — Carpentersville, East Dundee, Elgin and West Dundee. There, as in the Northwest collaborative, people may find the language more cumbersome and less thrilling than, to make a timely comparison, counting off the stats of a superstar quarterback or comparing defenses of teams from distant towns in the NFL. But the end result can certainly have a more direct and beneficial impact on their quality of life at home.