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Cover Story

Washington's Future, a History

We picked some of the best brains in town to write an account of the next 17 years

By Marc Fisher

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THINK BACK TO JANUARY 1991: The Web, e-mail, cellphones -- all virtually unknown. The three networks still mattered. The Soviet Union still existed. Downtown Bethesda was barely worthy of the name. There was no Dulles Town Center, no Verizon Center, no Green Line. The Redskins played at RFK. A lot can change in 17 years. On the other hand, the Washington area road system was largely identical to what it is today. Madonna was already Madonna. The Wizards -- okay, the Bullets -- were already cursed. We had long since passed Orwell's dystopia date but hadn't yet partied like it was 1999. It hadn't yet occurred to us to panic about a Y2K disaster.

So, looking 17 years into the future is a daunting task. We studied reams of reports on the region's future, convened two panels of experts on everything from shopping to energy policy, and we found unanimity on only one point: In 2025, the haves will have more. The have-nots won't. As for everything else about the next phase of history, we reached enough consensus to spin out two separate, even conflicting, fictional scenarios -- views of life as it might be 17 years hence from the perspective of two Washington area families, one thriving and the other struggling. See the linked footnotes for some of the reporting behind the fiction.

[Scenario One]

VIVIAN AND VICTOR VERVER IN MANY WAYS EPITOMIZED THE CAPITAL REGION'S "YO-YO GENERATION." After 9/11 and the next wave of terrorist attacks, motivated at least in part by fear, they moved from their apartment in Crystal City out to the edge of sprawl, to a new townhouse in Stafford County. Then, more than a decade later, they found themselves moving back to the city's core.

Late in the 21st century's second decade, the Ververs settled in Stafford along with many other refugees from Fairfax, Arlington and other close-in suburbs. After years of nationwide economic decline, energy crises and sporadic small-scale terrorist hits, Vivian and Victor's townhouse community filled with people inspired to follow President Heath Shuler's "New Pioneers" call in 2017 for Americans to decentralize, to leave behind the congested and crumbling 1960s suburbs and embark on a massive resettlement of the land beyond the exurbs. Shuler's lure was the great open spaces that were now finally fully linked to AmeriWeb, the wireless information network that extended into every community in the land, the result of the most massive public works project since the construction of the

interstate highway system.

Shuler used that public investment to attract private capital, and, together with the nation's governors, he wove land development and job creation ever more tightly together. The private sector now created its own live-work communities, on the model of 19th-century factory towns, where private capital -- and employers' rules -- largely took the place of government investment.

The Second Age of Discovery, as Shuler called it, was designed to spread out the nation's population from the traffic-choked suburbs and therefore ease the road, rail and air gridlock that was strangling the economy. A more widely dispersed population, working in new urban centers such as Fredericksburg, Gainesville, Frederick, Konterra and La Plata, was supposed to strengthen the economy, enhance quality of life, let more people live near their work and bolster Americans' sense of safety in a dangerous world. Politically, AmeriWeb and the push to repopulate rural regions won support from both left and right by emphasizing the tremendous commitment to infrastructure (with millions of resulting jobs) and the strategic importance of dispersing the population and thereby diminishing the impact of any terror attacks. The old anti-sprawl ideology that was at the heart of the turn-of-the-century green movement gradually gave way to a consensus that Americans would never give up their dream of owning a nice piece of land, well separated from the neighbors.

What could be changed was the idea that the only way to keep housing affordable was for workers to live far from their jobs. The new acceptance of a more diffused population didn't do much to preserve open spaces, but Shuler and other politicians sold the idea by dangling before employers and workers alike the carrot of jobs and homes in close proximity. The idea was to engineer a significant drop in driving, which, coupled with striking increases in energy efficiency, would yield sharp declines in consumption of fossil fuels. Alas, as the Ververs would learn, reality did not live up to political rhetoric. Finding a job near home turned out to be harder than the president's pronouncements made it out to be. And, as ocean temperatures continued to drift upward, people worried about increasingly volatile weather. One upside for Washingtonians: January was an average of three degrees warmer than 30 years earlier. Downside: So was August.

As the memory of 9/11 began to fade, the fear that had driven the Ververs and others out of Dodge shifted to a new plane. Sporadic e-attacks hit at the heart of American business and government, causing temporary havoc and instilling a lasting fear that the core of the economy -- the intricate electronic web that enabled a seamless flow of information -- was no longer reliable.

As it has so often in the past, uncertainty proved to be a boon to the Washington region. Just as the District and its suburbs had added more than 100,000 jobs during the homeland security scare of the century's first years, now Washington was emerging as the world capital of cyber security, an industry undergoing explosive growth and helping to change the face of the region. It certainly changed the Ververs' life.

Victor never would have predicted that, by 2025, they'd be in the District, in a new high-rise development built on land that had previously held a federal housing complex. Vivian could hardly believe the view when she first looked out the picture window of their 22nd-story apartment -- a panorama stretching from Homeland Security headquarters high on a bluff over the Anacostia River in Southeast across the city's federal core to the Lincoln Memorial and over the Potomac to the towers of Rosslyn. [The lifting of Washington's height restriction in neighborhoods two miles away from the Mall](#) was certainly one factor that drew the Ververs back to the city, but, oddly enough, the main reason they'd returned was the same reason they had fled in the first place -- security.

The Ververs came to feel too isolated, too vulnerable being far from the city, especially now that life online was so uncertain. You never knew when you were being spoofed: tricked with fake news, bogus financial transactions or some new strain of identity breach. Whether it was organized crime, rogue nation states or old-school terrorists messing with the grid, the result was a surprising epiphany: There was both comfort and convenience in urban density.

During those weeks when everything virtual was on the fritz, the city suddenly made sense again, just as it had hundreds of years before. Here, it was economical and practical for the government to provide the security, supplies and information that became more scarce as you moved away from the center.

So, like many of their neighbors who decided to join friends and relatives in one of the burgeoning urban centers dotted around the Washington/Baltimore/Richmond metroplex, Victor and Vivian took a hit on the depressed value of their place in Stafford and returned to a Washington they barely recognized. The move felt a little gutsy, but the couple figured that at least one of them would be able to work from home -- especially after Victor, an information-filtering specialist, hooked on with The Network, [the Fredericksburg contractor that handles media synthesis and response for the federal government](#).

Victor was assigned to monitor and massage bloggers and citizen journalists who wrote about and took shots at the feds. Just as the work of journalism had devolved to a ragtag crew of volunteers working out of their cars and bedrooms, now the government was outsourcing much of its effort to communicate with voters, and Victor was supposed to be on round-the-clock patrol to catch any opinion wildfire that might be threatening the policymakers in his assigned sector. All that was easier to do from home than from the small office the agency maintained in Virginia.

Vivian, a teacher, easily found a new job with the Fairfax County schools, which were once again booming with the influx of families from China and India. The new arrivals were spending upwards of \$1 million each for EasyIn visas designed to encourage immigration by people with advanced degrees. Vivian was sad to leave behind her students in Prince William County, the closest place she could find to teach when they lived in Stafford. But the new commute to Fairfax proved to be much easier, thanks to the jitney bus services that had developed to ease the pain of the congestion-pricing tolls now imposed on all Potomac River crossings. Besides, Prince William's schools were imploding, losing an entire school's worth of Hispanic students each year as recent immigrants steadily left the county, an exodus fueled by both pressure -- tough enforcement programs aimed at illegal immigrants -- and the lure of the good money back home in Central America, where the service, hospitality and health industries were hungry for workers around the huge retirement colonies filled with septuagenarian boomers from El Norte.

[It had been nine years since a small nuclear device had exploded in a truck parked alongside a Manhattan synagogue](#) just before the 2016 presidential election, instantly killing twice as many people as had died in the September 11, 2001, attacks. The Ververs, then still living in a wooded cul-de-sac in Stafford, spent some months glued to the Web site featuring 24-hour radiation maps, not so much out of fear that New York's poisoned air would pose a danger to them, but more out of some nagging, generic anxiety, an unspoken questioning about whether it made sense to invest in home, community and the future when life seemed so very fragile.

The Ververs' neighbors in Stafford County were a mix of retirees, middle-aged couples drifting into third careers, and young idealists who believed that exurbia would be the next frontier, the place where private capital would provide decent roads, schools, jobs and energy.

Alas, it didn't quite work out that way. Jobs didn't always follow residential construction. Families didn't necessarily want to live where they worked. Younger workers found themselves having to construct mega-commutes to Reston, Tysons, Dulles, the burgeoning Greenway Corporate Park, Quantico and Fredericksburg (Northern Virginia's fastest-growing commercial and office center) by some combination of hybrid vans, VRE, Metro and bus rapid transit. The logistics of life seemed too expensive, arduous and time-consuming.

[Despite decades of agitation, the Metro system remained stuck in its 20th-century conception](#). The money for expansion out to new job centers never materialized. The result was a flowering of private bus services, an expansion of bus rapid transit lanes on major roadways and a new wave of sprawl, as employers sought more obscure locations away from the most heavily traveled commuter routes. People like the Ververs found themselves spending four hours a day just getting to and from work in other suburbs. Although many professionals now had African and Middle Eastern immigrants drive them to and from work so they could be on the job in the car, that was a luxury the Ververs simply could not afford.

The city beckoned. Plug-in hybrid cars had finally caught on, and only the city was equipped with government-subsidized charging stations attached to every parking meter. With gas at \$12 a gallon and air travel still trying to rebound from a devastating series of crashes that were blamed on cutbacks in maintenance budgets, the idea of living in a self-sufficient city

made more and more sense. (To the great surprise of many, while energy prices soared steadily for almost two decades after the 9/11 attacks, in the past few years the cost of fossil fuels had stabilized. Depending on your political ideology, this was the result of either the Total War for Energy Independence that President Jeb Bush launched in 2021, or of Iran's velvet revolution and the new openness toward the West that the secular-friendly Young Islam movement was exporting across the Middle East.)

The District's tax rates were remarkably low, and crime had fallen as gentrification pushed poor people farther and farther from the region's center, out to where the new subsidized housing was being built. As crime and social ills followed society's least well-educated and -housed members from the city, the District evolved into one of the nation's wealthiest enclaves. The city remained sharply divided between haves and have-nots, but the haves changed their perception of the District as a place that made sense only for the childless.

By focusing on a handful of top-shelf schools that were now privatized or managed by independent nonprofits, the city had satisfied its more affluent residents, even as the remaining poor population struggled in subpar facilities. The Ververs had no kids, and, while they cared about good education, it wasn't a personal priority. Indeed, as more and more people lived longer and worked well into their 80s, the portion of life during which most taxpayers cared deeply about the local schools had diminished, leaving the public schools with precious little in the way of voter support.

Victor, whose mother was Chinese, had been especially attracted to the city's burgeoning Asian American neighborhoods. When they were still debating the move, he often lamented to Vivian that Washington had decent Chinese food, and here they were, living two hours away. Vivian had been less enthusiastic about the idea of moving back inside the Inner Beltway -- where would she work? Before Vivian found the job in Fairfax, [Victor had suggested that she might be able to teach at one of the new, private Asian Academies that wealthy Indian, Pakistani, Chinese and Korean Americans had opened to train the children of new immigrants for jobs in the tech, health and communications sectors.](#)

These academic boot camps were springing up to serve immigrants who had been pouring over the Canadian border ever since major U.S. employers and universities had lobbied quietly, and successfully, to deactivate the virtual fences that had been thrown up at the height of the anti-illegal immigration movement. The academies' reputation for excellence grew so quickly that they were filled not only by the children of the new Chinese, Korean and South Asian scientists and other professionals that U.S. firms needed to compete against Asian economies, but also now with more and more affluent non-Asian students. Indeed, some non-Asian families had begun to move to Washington from the suburbs expressly to take advantage of the Asian Academies. That phenomenon created a boom in the teaching field, as well as a subindustry of tutors and prep centers such as the Great Leap Language Institutes that prepared native English speakers for the Academies' entrance exams (the Academies' instruction was primarily conducted in the immigrants' native languages because many of the newcomers intended to send their children back to Asia to launch their careers).

Vivian finally was persuaded to give up her back yard and proximity to the woods where she had loved taking long hikes. But, by moving to the city, at least she and Victor would be an hour closer to the Delaware coast, where they had a friend who had held on to his beachfront condo, even when the feds declared Atlantic Coast properties to be uninsurable after the devastating wave of hurricanes and floods in the 2010s.

They made the move on a blistering May day in 2023. The view -- and the all-solar energy system -- had sold them on their building. They loved the idea of the ground-floor showrooms that the new residential buildings featured -- big, sprawling spaces reminiscent of the department stores of yore, where city dwellers could browse and touch the wares of hundreds of retailers before making their purchases electronically for instant delivery to their apartments. That kind of convenience, plus the prospect of sharing their lives with other smart, creative people, convinced the Ververs that they could be happy in the city. But a slight unease remained. Washington was still a target. The city was still a place they associated at some level with danger, noise, vermin and class resentments.

Victor overrode the butterflies in his gut, just as he'd overcome his addiction to the attention-boosting pills he'd been provided with each day at lunchtime at his previous job at Listenwell, a Herndon company that supplied employers with intelligence about job applicants' character flaws by searching job seekers' cellphone conversations for troublesome content. (Listenwell was one of the most successful of the giant information-processing firms that sprang to life as two seemingly contradictory legal trends -- the protection of free speech on the Internet and the removal of old barriers to surveillance -- combined to increase the ability of government and the private sector to monitor Americans' activities.)

Victor's concerns about his new home were outweighed by a chance to create a new life, to find a way to live more as his grandparents' generation had -- surrounded by family, friends and people who knew one another's lives and cares, people who found ways to carve out time to just be. Like the kids in high school and on college campuses who were now rebelling against the technology that suffused their education, the Ververs sympathized with the paper nostalgia movement, those Luddites and fuddy-duddies who put out neighborhood newspapers and insisted on writing letters long after the government had sold off the Postal Service to UPS. There was something about those old ways of connecting with other people that reminded Vivian of the quieter, slower life she read about in her "20th-Century Novel" course in college.

So, soon after the Ververs moved into their apartment in Washington, they handed out invitations to their new neighbors to just "come over and hang out" on Friday nights after work. Mostly they got weird looks. Vivian's idea of having adult sleepovers -- all-night movie marathons, a cooking project involving the whole floor -- didn't exactly go over well with folks who wondered whether the Ververs were some kind of political or religious extremists. But the Ververs persisted, and eventually found two like-minded couples, people who had kept their parents' and grandparents' old diaries and occasionally dipped into them to find stories of a time when what your relations and close friends were doing was somehow more important than the latest developments at the office.

Together, the three couples spent their Saturdays down on New York Avenue, queuing up to buy provisions from the Locavore Center, a store that carried only goods grown or created within 100 miles of home. (About the only time the Ververs and their friends left the city on weekends was an occasional jaunt across the Potomac to grab some fried food, which had become awfully hard to secure because of government restrictions on unhealthy cooking methods in the District and Maryland.) Locavore was one of the few remaining stores in town that spurned the trend toward combining retail with entertainment. Ever since Wal-Mart -- desperate to persuade time-starved customers to leave their homes to shop -- began installing gaming parlors, movie theaters, dog-racing tracks and shooting ranges in its stores, retailers had been adding on any attractions they could think of to compete against automated purchase and delivery systems such as Last Shop and TheFlow. Even so, most people took care of life's necessities by subscribing to a retail service that delivered everything on a weekly schedule. [On weekends, the affluent stole away to the lifestyle centers that had been built in most urban nodes](#), places that charged admission and provided the privileged with a demographically calibrated blend of outdoor sports, experiential retailing, medical care, and school and work coaching.

Even if he could afford them, Victor couldn't stomach those places. The prepackaged experience felt false, even cartoonish. He preferred the social connections he and Vivian created on their own -- clumsy and overly purposeful, yes, but nonetheless the beginnings of real community. The close friends they began to gather got them thinking about how they could make this weekend oasis of a few hours the center of their lives. Could they recruit some friends to swim against the currents of an atomized culture? In theory, the density of the city meant more opportunity to connect with others, but, in fact, life seemed to speed up with each passing year -- almost impossibly so.

In a society with only the most tenuous ties to old notions of trust, Vivian thought there was enough latent longing for human connection that people would embrace a way to step out of their media rooms and away from online acquaintances they had never met in person, and find satisfaction just being with others. [She decided to offer her services as a trust counselor, advising stressed commuters on how to rebuild bridges to neighbors and extended families, creating the kind of friendships they recalled from childhood.](#)

She started with her own friends, then spread the word at the school where she worked. For this to catch fire, she knew the initial contacts would have to be face-to-face; that was the whole idea, wasn't it? She set out to remind people of those few experiences they had had living in close contact with people other than their nuclear family -- a college dorm, a summer camp, military training. She promised to find ways to recapture some of that magic.

Hardly anyone thought she could do it. But as word spread about Vivian's venture, which she called In the Flesh, a few people actually hired her to consult on their lives. She knew that much of her advice garnered little more than nods and theoretical agreement; sure, her ideas were lovely, but nobody wanted to face the rejection, suspicion and derision that would surely follow the entreaties and invitations

Vivian suggested. Couldn't we just discuss this with our online friends, they wondered?

And yet, just as she thought her effort was destined to devolve into one more electronic service, one more site to visit for a facsimile of connection, a strange thing happened. People

started to show up at the Ververs' door on Saturday mornings. They just wanted to tag along with Vivian and Victor, to spend the day. What Vivian loved most was when people didn't even text her that they were coming. They just . . . popped by.

[Scenario Two]

THE MILITARY HAD WARNED THAT THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE ASSASSINATION OF AMERICA'S BELOVED TOP GENERAL in the Total War for Energy Independence might be dangerous. A nation in mourning is a nation vulnerable, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had cautioned, and President Jeb Bush had orchestrated an elaborate week of remembrances. Even so, [the cyber meltdown that followed a campaign of denial-of-service attacks on Homeland Security headquarters at St. Elizabeths in Southeast Washington struck with thoroughly unexpected force](#). Within weeks, the pace of the federal exodus from the District had accelerated to a level no study had foreseen. But it wasn't only the billions of dollars in fried electronics and the incalculable loss of data that was driving the relocations. They had begun even earlier, during the difficult days of 2015's Saudi civil war, when the United States suffered scheduled blackouts, alternate-day driving restrictions and spasms of e-terrorism.

Paula Pineiro was tempted to blame the strains and pains of those years on the constant threat of attack, but the reshaping of her life had little to do with terrorism and much to do with heat -- the brutal, relentless steaminess that made life in her District apartment seem like a special kind of hell. As temperatures mounted in urban hot spots, the escalating restrictions placed on air-conditioning use seemed like a targeting of those who couldn't afford to get out of the city.

So, when the jobs started drifting out of town, Paula felt compelled to follow. The federal government had decided it was much cheaper to build new structures using solar-powered water-cooling systems than it would be to retrofit 20th-century buildings downtown, so nearly half the federal agencies were now clustered along the I-95 and Intercounty Connector corridors.

The privatization of the roads and transit lines Paula would have to use to get to Konterra, the nation's burgeoning satellite capital in northwestern Prince George's County, made a commute from Washington all but impossible. Only the top ranks in her agency could possibly afford a long commute during premium-priced rush hour, and Paula could hardly switch to all-night work hours with the kids at home. The drive from Washington to Konterra took long enough; now, [the checkpoints at the gateways that controlled movement in and out of the inner District could stretch any workday by two or three hours](#), especially for people like Paula who still had no security clearance implants and little prospect of being able to afford any.

In this era of e-attacks and cyber meltdowns, energy rationing and angry protests, the path to social and economic mobility was clear: It was all about physical proximity. If you could somehow arrange to live near where you work, get your kids into nearby schools and subscribe to food and other suppliers close to home, you could make it. If not, well, sometimes Paula didn't think there really was a bottom to how far a family could sink these days.

Goodness knows she started out encouraged. A job at the Energy Department's Fossil Fuel Resource Allocation Agency campus in Konterra and the prospect of a place to live in Clarksburg or one of its suburbs -- this was what she'd worked for all these years. Never again would she have to swallow hard and choose the \$65 Lexus lane to have any prayer of making it on time. Now, she might even be able to wangle a seat on FedBus, the agency's employees-only transit system that came with the too-good-to-be-true bonus of its own dedicated lane all the way to the new campus.

By joining the move out of the city and into one of the new federal office and residential clusters in Konterra, Hyattsville or Fredericksburg, workers like Paula caught a tax break, too. If your agency relocated for security or energy reasons, you'd be exempted from [the federal energy tax, which charged citizens based on the mileage between their home and place of employment](#).

But the move proved harder than the politicians made it out to be. After all, except for the opening of Montgomery County's agricultural reserve to developers, hardly any private land remained to be turned into housing, and nearly all of the new homes within an affordable commute were being built by employers for their own staffs.

Schools built housing for teachers -- the only way many teachers could afford to work in the Washington area was to live in the new high-rises going up on former playing fields outside many suburban schools. [Counties put up communities for their police, fire and other](#)

[workers](#). And the feds were busy erecting a new kind of company town -- especially after the Pentagon's decision to close all defense bases inside the Inner Beltway and redevelop them as residential projects.

But the building boom couldn't come close to keeping up with demand, and million-dollar starter townhouses were not in the cards for Paula's family. When she did hear about possible openings near Konterra, what Paula found left her in despair. The new housing looked fine at first, but it quickly became clear that the government's contractors had used low-quality materials. Within a few years, the agency's new headquarters was surrounded by instant slums. Add the continuing power outages and the rapidly diminishing Web access for families that couldn't afford the steep subscription fees, and a community that at first had seemed like a stepladder to mobility began to look more like a place to park society's have-nots.

To her own surprise, Paula was prepared to accept substandard housing if she could get her daughter, Petra, into Konterra's Federal High, one of the top-rated schools for kids heading into the security and information sectors. With so few tuition-free public high schools remaining in or near the city, landing Petra a place at Fed High would be a coup. Under President Mark Warner's Live-Work-Learn clustering policy, parents and schools alike benefited from powerful incentives to keep children in schools near where their parents worked. But that only jacked up competition for those cherished spots, and the privatized, charter and religious schools gave preference to paying customers and the most gifted students. That left kids like Petra scrambling to find space in an academic public school for fear of landing at one of the government's job-training schools, which so rarely led to real careers.

Petra, being 15, was loath to leave her hard-won place at the District's Wilson High School, which was operated by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees government workers union. [She didn't want to give up her post as president of the school's Anti-PED Campaign, which agitated for a return to the days before officially sanctioned performance-enhancing drugs had changed the face of scholastic athletics.](#) But over time, Paula convinced her daughter that a new school would have a far superior academic program and more kids like herself. It's not that Petra had anything against the Chinese and Iranian immigrants who dominated Wilson's population; she just sometimes felt excluded from their social circles.

[In Konterra, Petra wouldn't be a minority -- no one is.](#) Fed High, like all of Prince George's County, had no dominant racial or ethnic group. And with the entire county school system now operated by Google PeopleShaping, Fed High was free of all No Child Left Behind regulations, free to offer a full range of courses in subjects that the city's schools hadn't taught in decades, such as music and drama. Another advantage of switching schools: By enrolling in a Google-sponsored school, Petra would automatically qualify for one of the new Brin college grants for young women who pledged their intent to bear children -- a policy aimed at relieving the persistent shortage of well-educated, homegrown workers.

Paula wanted all that for her daughter, yet she knew the move would be best of all for her son. Paxten was 12 and big. Already, he'd been caught inside one of the District's fried food speakeasies, where kids found ways around the ban on unhealthful eats in Maryland and the District. And Paula was desperate to find a way to keep Paxten far from the gang battles that too often crossed the river from Virginia, where Salvadoran and Mexican gangs had set up what seemed like a permanent insurrection against state and federal immigration agents. Konterra promised to be a respite from that scene -- a place where the region's biggest employers were determined to develop a new generation of native-born workers who could ease the need to recruit constantly in Asia and Latin America.

Paxten grumbled about having to leave the city and the activities he loved, hanging out at Unicare City, the giant sports-and-healthplex alongside the Anacostia River where the Hogs and D.C. United played at Fenty Field and where much of the city received medical care at Six Flags' Snyder Memorial Hospital. (Paxten's favorite NFL team, finally renamed in 2016, might be hopelessly lackluster on the field, but it would soon be the first professional sports franchise to also act as health insurer for a majority of its fan base.) His mother didn't know it, but Paxten and his friends loved to wander around the mostly abandoned Nationals Park and the ruins of the entertainment complex, despite reports that coyotes had a den in the Nationals' former bullpen. The park had been neglected since Major League Baseball dissolved Washington's team in the second wave of contractions to hit the sport. Once Paxten moved to Konterra, there would be no such chance to roam the city, to think of it as his own playground.

Of course, that's exactly the kind of excessive freedom Paula sought to curb. Maybe she was dreaming, but Paula hoped that, with the whole family spending nearly all its waking hours

in the new town, the kids might discover some of the joys of her own childhood -- the simple pleasures of lingering over meals or discovering some new path through the woods. Well, she could dream, couldn't she? Her friends listened to her fantasies about family evenings and weekends, then reminded Paula that the 10-hour workday was now a given, that the supposedly temporary mandatory sixth day of work wasn't going away anytime soon, and that the only reason she still had a federal job was because she had "voluntarily" signed a life contract that would keep her at her desk well into her 70s. As the bosses always said, somebody has to pay for all those boomers in assisted living.

By the time Paula, Petra and Paxten settled in a small, one-bedroom apartment at the edge of Konterra, the family was exhausted. Nervous about their new lives, the three of them sat down over dinner one night and catalogued the changes that defined their days, changes sparked in many cases by the pressures of the dwindling workforce.

After the church in which she'd grown up closed for lack of money and pastors, Paula switched to one of the nondenominational congregations that Wal-Mart had added to many of its retail/social complexes. She got around mainly by bus, but sometimes she drove to the office with a friend who owned one of those cool autonomous vehicles -- self-guided cars that spaced themselves out on the interstates -- that really did take some stress out of commuting. The new "auto-autos" dramatically reduced accidents, despite the growing number of overriders -- those kids who managed to hack their way past the safeguards and take back the authority to drive the cars as they wished, which usually meant too fast. Then there were the national ID cards that, once the controversy died down, really had helped to control the borders, redefine labor markets and reduce health costs. An explosion in the higher education business -- including a wave of expansions of many of the nation's greatest universities, driven by the spike in philanthropy from the new Carnegies, the now-retiring first generation of digital-era billionaires -- bolstered America's position in competition with China and India. And the development of effective antiviral pharmaceuticals by companies along the I-270 corridor had sparked a new wave of innovation and hiring there.

Now, Paula thought, what people needed was a similar set of advances in how to relate to one another -- a way for the most technologically connected generation in history to recapture the human bonds that seemed to dissipate ever since the Internet and video games first drove people to hunker down at home. On good days, Paula liked to think that the pendulum was swinging back toward those old kinds of bonds, first in places like Konterra, where so many functions of life that had once been separate were now blending into one space: The new retail spaces erased old concepts of category, weaving entertainment and socializing into the process of gathering goods, eating and working. The new subscription retailing was catching on in cavernous buildings, old big box stores that had been reconstituted as workspaces. Here, people could spend a good chunk of their day, moving seamlessly from their work pod to take in a movie with a friend, choose the dinner items that would be delivered before they got home, and take care of the day's errands, all while staying in constant touch with colleagues, and all for one monthly Google LifeServices subscription fee.

But that new way of living was something for Paula to observe, not to take part in. Only the top brass could afford LifeServices or any of the other new ways. Yes, Paula Pineiro could escape the city and move closer to the life of those who enjoyed the fruits of change. But actually participating was something that only her children might get to do -- or maybe even that was an unattainable dream.

Footnotes:

1. "The distinction between the private and public sectors will be blurred," says Bobbie Kilberg, president of the Northern Virginia Technology Council. "Basic functions of government will be outsourced."

2. The root desire of the creative class and investors to live in the city will continue to drive increases in urban density, says John Talmage, president of Social Compact, a nonprofit that promotes investment in low-income communities. And in Washington, he believes, the need to compete with other cities and to attract a strong workforce will lead to a lifting of the city's restriction on building heights, at least in the areas outside the federal core. But Stephen Fuller, director of the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University, cautions that change comes only slowly and that 80 percent of the region's jobs and 90 percent of its population are in the suburbs. "There's no demand for 50-story buildings," he says. Rather, he says, we will see new urban centers pop up around the region, from Fredericksburg to Konterra Town Center near Laurel.

3. The forces that created sprawl will not change appreciably, Kilberg contends. "I don't believe our transportation infrastructure will ever catch up," she says. "Leesburg will be a close-in community." Verizon's decision to move from Reston to Loudoun County because

its workers couldn't afford to live near their office is a symbol of the inexorable push outward. But employers and governments will work together to create more opportunities for people to live near their jobs in those new communities. "There is no Metro 2.0," says Michael Beyard, senior resident fellow for retail and entertainment development at the Urban Land Institute. "Maryland is building light rail; the District is doing streetcars. The little change we will see in transportation infrastructure is totally disconnected."

4. Anxiety and even the reality of terror don't have nearly the impact on people's life decisions that doomsayers believe they do. At the height of the sniper terror in 2002, "housing sales in this region had the best October in history," Fuller says. "Life goes on." Flight from the city just won't happen, argues Beyard. High energy prices and the need to reduce global warming emissions are more likely to push people toward dense urban centers than terrorism is to drive them away. "European cities have lived with terrorism for years and years," he says. "People just get used to it."

5. Our panelists are almost unanimous in declaring that the District's public school system will have to be dissolved, sold off or otherwise disposed of. Not one of our panelists sees much hope for success in the reform efforts of the early 21st century. Gary Marx, president of the Center for Public Outreach in Vienna, foresees a decision to shut down industrial-age schools and reinvent education with a heavy emphasis on expanding the ranks of creative workers and diminishing differences across national borders.

6. Beyard and others who study shopping trends see a return to the showrooms of the early days of catalogue shopping, with niche and experiential retailing combining with online commerce to produce retail centers that are as much about entertainment as they are about acquisition. "The next period will be about recapturing the public realm from fear of crime and of people who are different," Beyard says. "The fear that led to gated communities and shopping in enclosed boxes will give way to streets that feel more friendly, safer and more full of cultural experiences."

7. Despite the continued migration of some commerce to the Internet, the number of retail establishments per capita continues to rise, notes Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech's Alexandria campus. "People need to connect," he says. "The more technology permeates our lives, the more people want to be together," says D.C. developer Monty Hoffman. "There is a primal need to socialize."

8. A cyber meltdown is "a real threat," says Suzanne Spaulding, a veteran of the National Commission on Terrorism who served as Mark Warner's adviser on homeland security when he was Virginia's governor. "The Internet will be pinged and hacked and become unreliable." Attacks that disrupt the flow of information could produce a situation "where you can't trust anything; you're constantly being spoofed." The threat of such attacks is likely to create a "burgeoning industry in cyber security" in the Washington area, says Kilberg.

9. Poet and cultural critic E. Ethelbert Miller foresees the core of the District becoming "akin to the Green Zone in Baghdad," a place of such powerful symbolic importance and yet a place under such extreme threat of attack that it is essentially cordoned off from the rest of the country, protected but isolated as nowhere else.

10. A major health or terrorism event is likely to spark new federal or regional taxes, says Fuller. "It has to be something that threatens the suburbs."

11. George Mason University is building housing for its faculty members, and Fairfax and Montgomery counties are exploring using public land to create affordable housing for civil servants, just the beginning of a trend toward a new twist on the factory towns of an earlier time, says Fuller. "The government is the next big player in affordable housing because the government has land," says Hoffman.

12. "This area has the characteristics of Los Angeles," says Lang. "We're the Sunbelt of the Northeast, the most affluent and best-educated area in the country." With students of 140 nationalities at George Mason University, and a thoroughly international workforce in Northern Virginia's tech industry and Montgomery County's biotech corridor, the region's economic needs will outweigh any backlash against increased immigration.

13. Attention-boosting drugs are already here, and other designer pharmaceuticals will slip easily into daily life, our panelists agree. Our chemically enhanced work and leisure hours will coexist with a growing emphasis on locally grown and less industrial foods, at least for the affluent, says Julianne Brienza, founder and executive director of the Capital Fringe Festival.