In 40 years, Youngstown has lost more than half its population. Those people aren’t coming back. But shrinking doesn’t have to mean dying. **By Christopher Swope**

**Anthony Kobak has borrowed the mayor’s Ford Taurus for a spin around Youngstown, but as he steers the sedan down a pitted asphalt road, he wishes he’d borrowed a Jeep instead.** Driving comes pretty close to off-roading in this part of Youngstown’s east side, where the surroundings are mostly fallow lots and a few scattered homes. Kobak stops at one street that is little more than a dirt path into the woods. But it is a city-maintained road all the same, with water, sewer and power lines. “We’re just 10 minutes from downtown, but you can see it’s very rural,” says Kobak, who is Youngstown’s chief planner. He points out the window toward a lone deteriorating house in a field. “Those are chicken coops over there. You can see the cages.”

This part of Youngstown is called Sharon Line—the name, Kobak explains, came from a street car route that used to run through the area. Back in the 1950s, this place was expected to develop into a bustling urban neighborhood. The steel mills were still roaring, and with 170,000 residents, Youngstown was Ohio’s seventh-largest city and the 57th most populous in the United States. Planners believed that the east side would soak up continuing growth and prosperity. What in fact happened was quite the opposite. Not only did suburbanization suck the life out of city neighborhoods, as happened in much of America, but in the 1970s, the steel mills closed and population went into a free-fall. Quite suddenly, Youngstown’s growth problem had turned into an abandoned-property problem. In Sharon Line, new houses simply weren’t needed anymore. The area remained an odd country enclave tucked inside a fast-declining city.

Now, Kobak and other Youngstown officials have come around to a drastically different vision for Sharon Line. No longer are they holding out for a miracle growth spurt. Rather, they’re embracing the radical idea of gradually turning this place back to nature. Roads and infrastructure may be taken out of service. Some properties could be converted to wetlands. Kobak calls this way of thinking “going from gray to green,” and it’s not just at work in Sharon Line. In
Oak Hill, just south of downtown, and in Brier Hill, to the north, once-vibrant blocks now plagued by abandoned homes and weedy lots are candidates to become parkland, open space and greenways.

In Youngstown these days, an ambitious planning process has come to a haltingly honest conclusion: The city is shrinking. If that point seems obvious enough—population is now down to about 82,000—it’s one that leaders of other declining cities stubbornly refuse to admit to themselves. Cincinnati, Detroit and St. Louis all have focused on reversing population losses in an attempt to reclaim bygone glory. By contrast, Youngstown’s “2010 Plan” begins by acknowledging that Youngstown is a small city now, burdened by the overly ambitious infrastructure of its past. The plan likens Youngstown to “a size-40 man wearing a size-60 suit.”

If Youngstown has made peace with its smaller self, however, its policy makers are still grappling with the key question: What does it mean to manage shrinkage in an intelligent way? Volumes have been written about how to implement “smart growth.” But what about smart decline? Youngstown may emerge as something of a national laboratory for ideas on how to cope with urban contraction. It’s not that the town’s civic leaders want to be in that position—they simply see little choice. “We’re on our way to accepting some obvious things about what the city is and isn’t going to be,” says Jay Williams, Youngstown’s 35-year-old mayor. “It was unrealistic to think we’ll be a 100,000 person city. But why not be an attractive city of 80,000 or 85,000 that offers a quality of life that competes with other cities across the state and across the country?”

Or, as Hunter Morrison puts it, “saying you’re shrinking is not saying you’re a dying city.” Morrison was Cleveland’s city planner for 20 years and now directs the urban and regional studies program at Youngstown State University. “Every city,” Morrison says, “is looking back to when it used to be 200,000, 500,000, a million—whatever it was at its peak. As Marshall McLuhan put it, they’re always looking to the future through the rearview mirror. And what we’re saying in Youngstown is, the past is the past. It’s time to turn granny’s picture to the wall.”

Global Shrinkage
Youngstown is coming to this self-assessment at a time when the fortunes of urban America are very much mixed. A decade ago, population in most industrial-era cities was continuing a downward glide path that had been well established since the 1950s. From New York to Seattle, the question wasn’t whether big cities were losing people to the suburbs. It was how fast.

Then, in the late ’90s, many cities began seeing an urban renaissance, fueled by immigration, dropping crime rates and favorable demographics. Population losses in New York and Chicago turned into gains. (New York, currently at 8.1 million people,
has never been larger than it is now.) Other cities began experiencing a population paradox. Boston and San Francisco count fewer people than they did five years ago, yet they seem to be in better economic health. What they're essentially doing is losing families with school-age children and gaining singles, childless couples and empty nesters—smaller households with ample incomes that demand much less in the way of city services.

But that scenario is not playing out everywhere. In particular, smaller industrial cities, located mostly in the Northeast and around the Great Lakes, are finding it almost impossible to recover from the decline of their manufacturing employment base. San Francisco, Boston and Chicago can prosper in the 21st century as cultural and entertainment centers with concentrated office and retail activity and strong downtown residential growth. Elmira, Flint and Youngstown can't realistically nurture any such hopes.

The problem of shrinking industrial cities is attracting fresh interest in academic circles and new attention abroad. Since the Berlin Wall came down, factory towns in eastern Germany and the former Soviet Union have been emptying out, forcing governments there to grapple with industrial and residential decay. Longer term, some European nations and Japan project national population declines of 20 to 40 percent over the next 50 years, owing to their low birth rates. German researchers recently published two volumes under the title Shrinking Cities, outlining strategies for managing urban decline around the world.

Closer to home, a shrinking cities exhibit currently on tour in Europe is set to arrive in New York next month and in Detroit in February. Also in February, the Institute of Urban and Regional Development at the University of California, Berkeley, is hosting a symposium on the topic. Meanwhile, the Shrinking Cities Institute at Kent State University is plotting provocative events in Cleveland, such as an urban campout. "We're trying to get people to recognize the change that's happened right under their feet," says Terry Schwarz, a Kent State planner. "It's a little surprising to see how much emptiness there is."

This isn't the sort of conversation most politicians are comfortable having. Instead of accepting decline and trying to manage it in a deliberate way, mayors tend to gravitate toward revitalization plans that involve building convention centers and sports arenas and subsidizing hotels and shopping malls. They also get into desperate fights with the Census Bureau over population estimates and counting methodology. "How many politicians in America will stand on a soapbox and say, 'I'm going to lead this city and we're going to shrink it?'" asks Joseph Schilling, a professor at Virginia Tech's Metropolitan Institute.

The urban planning profession is not well equipped to handle shrinkage, either. Planning literature is fundamentally oriented toward growth and how to manage it. That's true of tools such as zoning regulations and pattern books, and it's true of planning creeds such as New Urbanism and "sustainable development." As Schilling says, "We have two predominant planning models in this country. One is growth, growth, growth. The other is redevelopment.
"We're trying to get people to recognize the change that's happened right under our feet. It's a little surprising to see how much emptiness there is."

-Terry Schwarz,
Kent State planner

urbs and exurbs. "When you go to an economically struggling city in Europe, they are more vital and vibrant than American cities, even though they’ve experienced the same economic shocks such as loss of the steel sector or the decline of coal," says Bruce Katz, director of the Metropolitan Policy program at the Brookings Institution. "That’s because they don’t sprawl as much."

New Faces
Youngstown’s cycle of industrial boom and bust may sound familiar. But few cities that have gone through that cycle fell so far so fast. The Mahoning Valley was the nation’s third-largest steel-producing center. Then on September 19, 1977—"Black Monday"—Youngstown Sheet & Tube announced it was shutting down. U.S. Steel and Republic Steel followed suit. Suddenly overnight, 40,000 jobs evaporated. Steelworkers abandoned homes by the thousands, crime reached epidemic levels and a plague of corruption settled in, symbolized most infamously by former U.S. Representative Jim Traficant, who eventually went to prison on bribery charges.

Lately, though, a new generation of civic leaders has come of age in Youngstown. Mayor Williams, a home-born banker who also worked as the city’s community development director, was just five years old on Black Monday. Several key positions are in the hands of outsiders whose thoughts aren’t haunted by ghosts of the mills. Anthony Kobak, Youngstown’s planner, arrived from Cleveland in 2000. So did David Sweet, the president of Youngstown State University, who had previously been dean of

the urban affairs program at Cleveland State.

A year later, Sweet asked Hunter Morrison to join him. "Many of the politicians and the business leadership who were here when things collapsed either retired, moved or died," Morrison says. "One thing that happened in the 2010 planning process is people looked around and said, ‘You know what? The boss is dead. We don’t have to ask permission anymore.’"

The 2010 plan emerged from an unusual town-gown partnership. One of Sweet’s first tasks at Youngstown State was to create a new campus plan. Meanwhile, the city was gearing up to re-write its comprehensive plan for the first time since 1991. Strategists on both sides saw the benefit of intertwining their efforts. The university, which sits on a bluff above downtown, is not only Youngstown’s biggest employer but an obvious potential catalyst for new development. The city’s deterioration, however, is a liability in recruiting students and faculty.

The city hired Toronto-based Urban Strategies to help with visioning and public engagement. City officials posted get-involved ads in newspapers and on billboards, screaming such provocations as, "Our kids go away and never come back!" It worked. Neighborhood input sessions averaged 75 attendees. More than 1,000 people twice packed the historic Stambaugh Auditorium, first to learn about the overall vision—including the idea of acknowledging Youngstown’s smaller size—and then to see the plan in greater detail. By the time of last November’s mayoral election, the 2010 plan had become an agenda setter. Williams, who as community development director had become the face of the 2010 process, won convincingly.

Green Option
But now comes the hard part: figuring out what it actually means to rightsize a city’s neighborhoods and infrastructure. Unlike the industrialists who bolted from Youngstown 30 years ago, the mayor can’t simply shut off sewers or stop plowing snow just because those services aren’t economical. What he can do is target city investments where they will pay the greatest return to Youngstown’s quality of life. Williams hopes to entice residents to relocate out of neighborhoods that are too far gone to save. At the same time, he wants to
focus on stabilizing transitional neighborhoods and keeping healthy middle-class neighborhoods from withering. "What it means is in many instances you have to start saying no," Williams says. "That's not easy as a public official, when it comes to people with all sorts of ideas that are well intended but not necessarily realistic."

One example is the city's program for helping low-income people fix up their homes. Until recently, that aid has been distributed on a first-come, first-served basis, going right down a waiting list, regardless of the condition of the neighborhood. Now, the Community Development Agency skips homes in far-gone areas. It's also looking at dangling rehab dollars as a carrot for people to move into more stable neighborhoods. "Does it make sense to invest $40,000 or $50,000 in a home that is on a street where more than half of the other homes have to be demolished?" Williams says. "Can we afford to keep investing that money on a randomly chosen basis and think that we're affecting sustainable positive change?"

Similarly, Williams has put a moratorium on the construction of homes financed with low-income housing tax credits. Over the past decade, nonprofits have built new homes in Oak Hill and other declining neighborhoods, using federal tax credits and other state and local subsidies. The new vinyl-sided homes are respectable enough, but Williams believes that they, too, represent a wasted investment. "We didn't have a plan and they popped up in areas that just didn't make sense," Williams says. "A brand-new house constructed between two houses that need to be demolished—we're not doing anybody a favor. It's not that we don't need decent quality housing for low-income individuals, but where we house them in the city has to be well thought out."

Many of Youngstown's shrinkage strategies are aimed at its massive abandoned-property problem. There are 14,000 vacant lots in Youngstown, and 1,000 deserted homes and commercial buildings sitting on them. Williams has quadrupled the funds available for demolition to $1.2 million—enough to take down about 350 homes this year. Another initiative, spearheaded by Mahoning County Treasurer John Reardon, is clearing a mountain of back taxes owed on those lots so that churches, businesses and residents can take ownership of them. His goal is to put 5,000 lots into productive use within five years. Most of the time, "productive use" simply means allowing homeowners to triple the size of their yards by buying the empty lots next door.

If there is a guiding principle in all this, it is that Youngstown can afford to be generous with its land. That notion implies that stewardship is more important than the plat lines on Youngstown's maps. Looking at a row of empty lots tangle with vegetation, you don't have to squint too hard to see wild prairie or woodlands—or even a wetland. There's environmental value here, but there's also economic value—developers are under obligation to create a new wetland when they destroy one somewhere else. Youngstown has commissioned a survey of potential wetlands-in-waiting. Developers may come to value Youngstown land not because they want to build on it but because they don't want to build on it.

As Anthony Kobak sees it, the greening of Youngstown is also about enhancing quality of life. The city doesn't want to keep shrinking. It wants to make itself as attractive as it can be for the people who've stuck it out. If it succeeds, perhaps one day Youngstown can think about growing again. "You could call it declining gracefully," Kobak says, "but I like to think of it more as looking to be competitive and having the potential for growth in the future."

Back in the Ford Taurus, Kobak ends his tour of Youngstown at a conservatory that lies above the tip of Mill Creek Park. The leafy park, designed by associates of Frederick Law Olmsted, is one of those 19th-century gems, with boathouses and stone bridges, that even the wealthiest American suburbs are incapable of replicating today. If Youngstown is a size-60 suit on a size-40 frame, Mill Creek Park is its shiniest ivory button. There are others—a downtown with early 1900s skyscrapers, two solid art museums, a symphony, the university. They are vestiges, ironically, that a city of 82,000 could never possess unless it had once been twice that size.

Kobak leads a reporter through a trim and colorful rose garden to a shaded stone terrace. This is the spot, he says, where newlyweds come on Saturdays to take wedding pictures. It's obvious why. The picture-frame view opens up on a lake below, surrounded on all sides by a thick green canopy of trees. "Here's the pitch," Kobak says. "Look how easy it is to get out of the city and into the country. We're right off the interstate. Our housing stock is incredibly affordable. We're an hour from two international airports. Perfect for telecommuters, retirees, anyone trying to get out of the rat race. It's just amazing what's here."

"We know we're not going to be a city of 170,000 as we were in our heyday," he continues. "It will be a challenge. The city can decline more unless we do something about it. But I think we are trying to do that."

Christopher Swope can be reached at cswope@governing.com

### Rust-Belt Shrinkage

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<th>2005</th>
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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