

The suburbs are doomed. Peak oil will hit within the next 20 years, and suburbanites will no longer be able to access essential items such as food, medical care and education. That is assuming peak oil hasn't hit already, in which case you can move the timeline up a couple of decades.

That was the message presented to me and small group of fellow concerned citizens earlier this year in a series of film screenings held in our local high school. The films were sobering at best, depressing at worst.

The End of Suburbia; Depletion and Collapse of the American Dream (www.endofsuburbia.com) is a 2004 documentary that introduces the concept of peak oil, the idea that society is now on the downward slope of the bell curve of crude oil left in the ground, and from here on out, supplies will rapidly dwindle, become increasingly difficult to extract and, naturally, significantly more expensive.

If you believe we've already hit peak oil—and 36 percent of Awakening Consumers do, according to a recent g-Think survey—it's hard not to agree with the idea that the writing is on the wall for the suburban way of life. The problem with the suburbs is that, like so many aspects of modern business and society, they were built on the premise of an inexhaustible supply of cheap oil.

In most suburbs and certainly in the area of Rockland County, N.Y., where I live, you can't go anywhere without a car. There are no sidewalks, and speeding cars on twisting, narrow roads make bicycle riding a treacherous proposition. The nearest commercial establishment to me is a dopey little strip mall more than a mile away. It offers a dry cleaners, a deli, a Chinese restaurant, a kosher sushi restaurant and a nail salon. Nice little places to have around, but nothing worth risking your life over.

The second film our group screened was *A Crude Awakening; The Oil Crash* (www.oilcrashmovie.com). This one didn't just doom the suburbs, but the entire Western system of production and consumption created during the Industrial Revolution, based on an infinite supply of natural resources. By now, I had dubbed our little screenings "The Stay Away From Sharp Objects Film Festival."

After each film, our assembled group generally of around 30 or 40 people, had a discussion about the films and what they represented to our community—a community that, doomed or not, we all liked living in and wanted to preserve. The general gestalt was along the lines of: Okay, there's a big, scary freight train baring down on us, what do we do? How do we adapt our suburban lifestyle to be sustainable after peak oil?

We evaluated our collective assets and started feeling better about our chances. For one thing, we have a terrific, 40-acre biodynamic farm in our community. We could develop a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, so that we wouldn't depend on having our food shipped to us. The CSA could be run in conjunction with our well-established natural food co-op. What's more, we have an agricultural school in our community that could teach us all how to pool our land together and create various community gardens. A friend of mine announced he was learning how to make artisanal cheese in his basement. He also has a solar panel installation business to help ease our community off the grid (at least somewhat). If there were someone down the street who baked bread, he would happily barter a big wedge of cheese for a couple loaves, he said. (I started thinking about resurrecting my hobby of homebrewing beer as my currency for barter.) He mentioned developing a tool-sharing model. There's no need for every house on the block to have a weed-whacker if one house has one that can be loaned out in exchange for use of a neighbor's chainsaw or log splitter. Some people

mentioned they have started raising a small number of chickens.

Others spoke about working with the local government to make code and zoning changes that would allow for commercial enterprises to be closer to residences, encourage multi-family housing (a thorny issue, but one that is worth examining), making the streets safer for bicycle traffic and more.

People left both screenings feeling hopeful that, despite the threat diminishing oil supplies represent, there are things we can do to maintain our community, especially if we recognize the threat early on and take steps to mitigate the possible consequences.

Within a few weeks, we created a Ning-based social network site for our “transition initiative” (the transition being from oil to some other form of energy). Even though it’s only got 40 members, it’s now hosting our tool-sharing forum and provides a platform for members to share relevant articles, videos, event announcements and thoughts. As it grows more robust, I can see the site serving as a town square for a town that doesn’t have one.

I missed the screening of the final film in the series, which was possibly the most important one, *The Power of Community, How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* (www.powerofcommunity.org). Apparently, the film is quite uplifting, and presents a topline model of how communities can survive, and even thrive, in the absence of cheap, plentiful oil. The people who attended the screening told me the film gave them hope, which is, of course, a critical element in the equation of survival.

It was also about this time I was introduced to Lyle Estill’s book, *Small Is Possible* (www.newsociety.com). The way Estill and his neighbors have been able to create a North Carolina community that is increasingly self-sufficient, yet not isolated from global issues fueled my sense of hope.

As oil supply issues gain more traction in the mainstream media and general consumer consciousness, I suspect more and more communities will be having conversations like the ones taking place in mine. One of the things Awakening Consumers are awakening to is the need to reshape our system of production and consumption to be sustainable.

Brands that embrace this sort of self-reliance-by-necessity spirit, and offer products to further that cause, stand to realize increasing levels of success as the fundamental nature of suburban living evolves.