

SEIDMAN SAYS: City design could help with post-pandemic mental health crisis

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When the COVID shutdown began, where did we go for relief from the stress? Nature. Fresh air, green spaces and the sound and sight of water provided solace from the heavy mantle of anxiety and uncertainty.

And as we were forced to limit our activities, what did we miss most? People. Dinners with friends, milestones with family members, a chance, uplifting encounter with a stranger – the social connections all humans need and crave.

Pandemic deprivations have now continued for more than two years, [fueling an unprecedented demand for mental health services](#) and crippling an already inadequate system of care. They've also instilled an awareness of and a demand for the kind of environmental and social supports that reduce stress and strain.

[“Restorative Cities: Urban Design for Mental Health and Wellbeing,”](#) makes the case that cities with more green space, water features, street safety and social hubs and less congestion, noise, pollution and physical discomfort can make residents healthier and happier.

If that seems like common sense, [Jenny Roe](#), co-author of the book, who has been working passionately in the field of human-centered design for more than 15 years, doesn't disagree. But it took a global pandemic, she says, before “the world was ready to listen.”

“It's blindingly obvious to most people, but not to those people who govern our cities and oversee public health,” says Roe, a professor and director of the Center for Design and Health at the University of Virginia who will visit Sarasota next week.

“They absolutely need scientific, robust, evidence to see the merit in this. What's happened as a result of COVID is there's now a public demand because people are finally getting this piece that the environment can really support our mental health.”

When Roe says “environment” she means more than just city parks. The book lays out seven evidence-based principles that make for a “restorative city” framework:

- “Green” takes nature into the city core.
- “Blue” maximizes access to water.
- “Sensory” Immerses all five senses.
- “Neighborly” supports social cohesion.
- “Active” encourages mobility.
- “Playable” provides creative play for all ages.
- “inclusive” promotes mental health equitably across demographics.

“It's not just about the physical,” says Roe. “It's also social and that rich mix we like in cities that is being squeezed out.”

And therein lies the biggest rub for Sarasota. Inclusivity, or “healthy equity” can be hard to come by when wealthy residents are concentrated in the downtown core and the poorest can be miles away. Which is why Roe says it’s critical for affordable housing, public transportation and public health policies to align with restorative design practices to insure all residents can flourish.

David Lough, president of the [Downtown Sarasota Condominium Association](#), sees isolated bright spots in Sarasota’s restorative assets, including [The Bay](#) waterfront makeover, the [Bobby Jones](#) golf course and places like his own Rosemary District neighborhood, which will soon have a [new park](#) and hosts regular [street fairs](#). But restorative practices are at odds with the rapid growth and unrestrained development that has been Sarasota’s priority in recent years.

The city has been shaping a strategic plan to help manage that growth. When Lough discovered Roe’s book last year, he sent it to city officials with the idea that “residents could help the city harmonize that plan with a loftier mission and vision, with Jenny’s pillars as part of the framework.” The ultimate goal would be to develop a “scoring” system for any proposed city project based on its restorative potential.

Recent surveys indicate residents already intuitively understand the value of Roe’s concepts. For example, of three [designs for the new Rosemary District park](#), respondents chose the least urbanized, most “tranquil” version.

And according to a preliminary results of a [survey about “streetscape” designs](#) for Boulevard of the Arts and 10th Street, trees, landscaping and green space are the highest priority. Sidewalk cafes were the top request on BOTA; safe bike lanes and “a gateway to The Bay Park” rated high for 10th Street.

In a bit of an understatement, Lough says the area where “maybe we have the most room to improve” is facilitating Roe’s principle of “inclusivity,” so the restorative benefit of human-centered design is felt by all residents. “What kind of urban design can help with the involvement of diverse demographic groups and cushion our wealth effect?” Lough asks.

That’s a question Roe will explore when she visits Sarasota next week at the invitation of the DSCA, to participate in a [public discussion](#) and in focus groups with city staff, public health officials and other stakeholders, including developers.

At a time when a recent [survey of U.S. mayors](#) identified mental health as their top priority and local elections are on the horizon, the post-pandemic period represents a perfect time for candidates to make mental health a primary platform.

“If you’re really serious about this, it can be a vote-getter and you can make a significant difference in the health and welfare of your community, an investment for the future,” Roe says. “I think Sarasota would be doing a very smart thing if they started thinking about how to address this whole issue right now.”

[Register](#) for a panel discussion with Jenny Roe, Thursday, March 24 from 4 to 5:45 p.m. at the Senior Friendship Center, 1888 Brother Geenan Way. <https://downtownsarasotacondoassoc.com>

Contact Carrie Seidman at carrie.seidman@gmail.com or at (505) 238-0392.

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