

## UMB News

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### Urbanist Says Now Is the Time to Act on Future of Cities

**February 26, 2024** | By [Lou Cortina](#)

As an urbanist, futurist, and globalist, Greg Lindsay has been studying cities and urban policy for more than two decades, and he thinks the world has reached a critical moment.

“As of about 15 years ago, more than half of humanity now lives in cities, so we are an urban species,” Lindsay said as the guest for the University of Maryland, Baltimore’s (UMB) President’s Panel on Politics and Policy on Feb. 22 at the SMC Campus Center. “We’re also living in the moment where based on global population projections, human population may come close to doubling in this century before we enter permanent demographic decline, but urban land cover will triple in size.”



*Graduate School Dean Kenneth H. Wong, PhD, asks a question during the Q&A session at the President’s Panel on Politics and Policy on Feb. 22.*

Being in this important moment in time, he said, is the reason he chooses to focus his work and research on the future of cities.

“The decisions that we make — and how we choose to build in and around cities — this is our once-in-a-civilization opportunity to define how big and how dense and how compact and livable our urban fabric becomes,” Lindsay said. “So, understanding that story and its implications was irresistible to me,

and everything I touch sort of borders on reporting about cities and the effects of urban policy.”

UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, led the conversation with Lindsay, who is a senior fellow of MIT’s Future Urban Collectives Lab and an urban tech fellow at Cornell Tech in New York, among numerous roles. The discussion, titled “Don’t Believe the Hype: Cities Are Alive and Well,” covered issues such as transportation, parking, housing, zoning, equity, and climate change,

followed by a question-and-answer session with members of the audience of 200.

Jarrell began the event by describing a recent evening he spent downtown attending an Andrea Bocelli performance at the renovated CFG Bank Arena, then afterward seeing more people out and about on the streets coming out of a play at the Hippodrome Theatre. He noted that this was happening about a month after the Baltimore Ravens had packed M&T Bank Stadium and energized the city for two consecutive weekends during the NFL playoffs.

"I felt like I was on Broadway that night," Jarrell said. "There are a lot of really good things happening in Baltimore. It's an exciting, vibrant area. But when you are driving in to work the next day and listening to the radio, they don't talk about what happened at the arena last night, they talk about the negative things happening in the city. Yet the picture I see is people investing in the city, new housing units being built — I see a lot to be bullish about."

Lindsay agreed that Baltimore has a lot going for it, and that in addition to addressing crime and public safety, perhaps the most critical problems that need to be solved revolve around housing.

"Baltimore is centrally located in the wealthiest stretch of urban agglomeration on the planet," Lindsay said. "It has amazing potential infrastructure, and it sits on the Acela corridor. In the end, Baltimore has incredible bones. And in visiting the city and having conversations about the trajectory of Baltimore, we talk a lot about the challenges it faces from a public safety standpoint, from an economic development standpoint, and obviously from a health crisis standpoint as well. But to me the No. 1 crisis of Baltimore is housing availability and affordability.

"If Baltimore and Maryland can solve the rising affordability issue, then it will start to unlock more and more economic opportunities, because as I said, the city has incredible bones, and incredible location, and incredible educational institutions such as UMB. But I think housing lies at the heart of its future trajectory."

Lindsay praised Maryland Gov. Wes Moore for making housing affordability a focus of his agenda and budget priorities. He noted that states such as New York and Montana also are taking action on housing issues, with the former looking to create a "social housing" agency to promote building affordable housing less reliant on government subsidies, and the latter working to reform zoning laws to address future housing needs.

"At no time in my career have I seen such an embrace of potential solutions that go beyond the classic approaches to this issue," Lindsay said. "It's really interesting to see both sides of the political spectrum working on this. You are seeing a left-wing approach where you need to build up so-called 'social housing,' and you are seeing a right-wing approach that says, 'We need to really loosen up zoning and allow the free market to do these things.' So perhaps this will lead to consensus."

Lindsay gave examples of urban planning success stories from Kansas to Georgia to as far away as Newcastle, Australia. He also discussed the idea of a "15-minute city," an urban planning concept where work, shopping, education, health care, and leisure activities can all be accessed by citizens within a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or public transportation ride. Among the goals are to de-emphasize automobiles and cut down on pollution. He said the concept is being implemented successfully in Paris.

"Carlo Ratti, who teaches at MIT, wrote a great paper recently on whether the United States can have 15-minute cities," Lindsay said. "The answer is yes, though it's going to typically be more of a '15-minute drive' city. And this is why it's so essential to have great public transportation systems — so that if you can't be someone who resides in these places, you can still have access to them without a car.

"In the 1960s, Toronto extended bus service into its future suburbs before people really settled there," he added. "They actually locked in a higher proportion of people using public transportation per capita than any other city in North America except New York. And so it allows people who were pushed to the periphery by housing prices to still access services and jobs in the core of the city. And that's something that every American city needs to be able to do."

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