

Henry McKnight, Visionary and Futurist:

Founder Henry T. McKnight's original vision of Jonathan was for it to be a place that would offer people an alternative to suburbia as they knew it. A state legislator, cattle raiser, heir to a logging and milling fortune, real estate developer, and state senator, McKnight borrowed ideas from the innovative 'new town' communities he visited in Europe after World War II. He often stated that one of the primary goals in planning Jonathan was "to save and preserve absolutely everything we can. We must re-do our thinking to save the land rather than re-do the land to serve us."

McKnight believed that "the major opportunity with a New Town, such as Jonathan, is to plan the community for minimum negative impact on the environment, while making sure that the people who live there will enjoy that quality of life that makes living worthwhile."

Jonathan, in McKnight's vision, was to be an experimental, utopian community (eventually growing its population to 50,000) that would co-exist in perfect harmony with surrounding nature – an outcome different than the suburban sprawl that he found so disorderly and unpleasant. "We must utilize the land with full regard for the quality of the environment people seek," McKnight said. "Planning a New Town like Jonathan offers us the opportunities to preserve the natural environment, conserve our remaining resources, and even improve the countryside."

McKnight's New Town was named after the American explorer Jonathan Carver, and he envisioned a "mega center" in the middle in the middle of five separate villages that would each grow to 10,000 residents. He also planned the inclusion of industrial parks (more jobs and a larger tax base) that would form outside the ring of villages. Jonathan would appeal to young families, McKnight believed, because there would be beaches, tot lots, and other features which were at the time unheard of in the more stereotypical suburban developments of that day. McKnight planned to permanently preserve as much as thirty percent of the land for open space so that Jonathan residents could share a network of trails and parks among the various neighborhoods.

McKnight also advocated bold experiments in Jonathan. Neighborhood Two included an "idea house" (topped by inverted trusses and featuring then-futuristic innovations like a trash compactor) designed by Ralph Rapson, the architect who designed the Guthrie Theater and the United States embassies in Stockholm and Copenhagen. Other partners in these experimental housing designs included the Stanford Research Institute and the General Electric Company.

In November 1972, Henry McKnight underwent surgery for a brain tumor and died the following month at the age of 59. At the time of his death the New Town of Jonathan had grown to 1,500 residents, 30 industrial tenants, and retailers with 800 employees. The United States was in a financial recession and the housing market had collapsed. Without McKnight's vision and energy, Jonathan's leaders were unable to address the complaints of HUD officials and federal mortgage officials who were complaining that experimental New Town communities like Jonathan didn't look enough like the typical subdivisions they preferred.