

SOME REALITIES ABOUT SPRAWL AND URBAN DECLINE

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Introduction

Suburban sprawl has become a hot topic across the United States, and is even affecting such federal policies as the Vice President's open spaces initiative. I have written one book on this subject – *New Visions for Metropolitan America* – and I am now working with several other analysts on a comprehensive federally-funded study called *The Costs of Sprawl Revisited*.¹ This article presents my overall perspective on this subject – a topic much more complex than most commentators recognize.

Differentiating Sprawl from the Basic American Urban Growth Process

At the outset, suburban sprawl should be defined clearly. Sprawl is not *any form* of suburban growth, but *a particular form*. In our study *The Costs of Sprawl Revisited*, we did not create the definition deductively from some internally coherent concept of “sprawlness.” Rather, we looked inductively at all the criticisms of sprawl in the literature, and derived traits that would cause them. The ten such traits are: (1) unlimited outward extension of development, (2) low-density residential and commercial settlements, (3) leapfrog development, (4) fragmentation of powers over land use among many small localities, (5) dominance of transportation by private automotive vehicles, (6) no centralized planning or control of land-uses, (7) widespread strip commercial development, (8) great fiscal disparities among localities, (9) segregation of types of land uses in different zones, and (10) reliance mainly on the trickle-down or filtering process to provide housing to low-income households. These traits have dominated American metropolitan growth for 50 years. Most analyses of sprawl focus on only one or a few of these traits, thereby adopting an oversimplified approach.

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In theory, *the American metropolitan growth and development process* is not identical to sprawl, which is a particular form of that process. However, sprawl has been so dominant in United States metropolitan areas that most people think the growth process is the same as sprawl. I will try to distinguish between them in this analysis.

Key Problems Allegedly Caused or Aggravated by Sprawl

Why should we be concerned about continuation of “suburban sprawl?” The answer is that sprawl causes, or contributes to, two sets of serious economic and social problems.

The first set occurs mainly in fast-growing areas, but spreads to others too. It includes traffic congestion, air pollution, large-scale absorption of open space, extensive use of energy for movement, inability to provide adequate infrastructures, inability to locate region-serving facilities that produce negative local impacts (such as airports), shortages of affordable housing near where new jobs are being created, and suburban labor shortages. These problems mainly harm people who benefit from other aspects of sprawl.

The second set of problems connected with metropolitan growth occurs mainly in big cities, inner-ring suburbs, and a few outer-ring suburbs. These problems arise because our development process concentrates poor households – especially poor minority households – in certain high-poverty neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods become sites for high crime rates, poor quality public schools, dysfunctional big-city bureaucracies, and low fiscal resources. These poverty-related problems soon spread to inner-ring suburbs too. And many outer-ring suburbs with low commercial tax bases but a lot of low-cost housing have inadequate taxable resources to pay for decent schools and other services.

The first set of growth-related problems has received the most attention during the current national discussion of sprawl, because it directly affects a majority of metropolitan residents – who are also the wealthiest and most influential such residents. The second set of problems related to concentrated poverty has received much less attention, even though I believe it is far more important to the nation’s long-run welfare. It is less well publicized because it directly affects a much smaller group of people, who are also among the poorest and least influential residents of our society. Yet the degree to which

concentrated poverty reduces the ability of these citizens to acquire the skills and incomes need to live well in, and contribute fruitfully to, a high-technology society will have immense impacts on the social, political, and economic welfare of the entire nation.

Some Axioms About Metropolitan Area Growth Patterns and Problems

A basic but rarely-spoken element in the thinking of the most ardent critics of sprawl – such as the Sierra Club – is the desire to halt further population growth altogether in many regions of the United States – if not the whole nation. These opponents of sprawl rightly recognize that rapid population growth almost inevitably brings certain undesirable conditions wherever it occurs – at least initially. (Growth also brings important benefits, but these are de-emphasized by anti-growth advocates.ⁱⁱ) These disadvantages include increases in traffic and often in traffic congestion, in school enrollments and sometimes in overcrowding, in needs for public spending on infrastructures of all types, and in pressures to develop now-open space. Anti-growth advocates hope that slowing or stopping future population growth will minimize these negative conditions.

However, a fundamental reality about life in America is that ***no metropolitan area s existing residents can effectively control the total amount of population growth their region will experience in the future, no matter what policies they adopt.*** Total population growth within each region is determined by the basic traits of that region: climate, position on the continent, demographic composition, topography, the existing industrial and institutional base, etc., and by general economic conditions. True, individual local governments can stop growth within their own boundaries by limiting new development there. But they cannot affect their region's overall growth. Even if all the local governments within a metropolitan area simultaneously adopted stringent zero growth limits – which has never happened – that would not prevent new babies from being born there, or new immigrants from entering the area from abroad or from the rest of the United States. It is unconstitutional for any region to prohibit newcomers from entering its boundaries. Even laws halting housing construction would not necessarily stop immigration, because many poor immigrants are willing to live illegally by doubling- and tripling-up in dwellings meant for a single household. So the hope that growth might be completely

stopped by public policies inhibiting it is a delusion at the regional level, although it may be possible at the local level under some circumstances.

This fundamental fact has two crucial corollaries. First, ***each locality's success at reducing future growth within its own boundaries merely shifts that growth to some other part of the region.*** Yet most local growth-management or growth-control policies aim at reducing future growth within the boundaries of the communities adopting them, compared to the growth that seems most likely to occur there under existing conditions and ordinances. This is usually done by decreasing allowable development densities. If growth is considered “bad,” then local growth-limiting policies are essentially a “beggar-thy-neighbor” strategy, shifting that “badness” somewhere else without regard to its consequences there.

A second corollary is that ***the more localities within a region adopt policies that reduce their own future population growth, the more likely that growth will shift outward towards the edge of the region thus, the greater the degree of future sprawl there.*** This corollary assumes the region has no stringent urban growth boundary prohibiting growth at its outer edges – a condition prevalent in over 99 percent of United States metropolitan areas. So local anti-sprawl policies are likely to aggravate sprawl at the regional level.

Another fundamental reality is that ***nearly all major directly-growth-related problems are regional in nature, not local.*** This is most obvious concerning air pollution and traffic congestion. Both involve conditions that arise throughout a region and flow freely from one part to many others. The same conclusion applies to all the other directly-growth-related problems described above. ***Therefore, policies adopted by individual localities cannot effectively cope with these problems, unless those policies are coordinated in some way.***

Nevertheless, most elected officials at all levels want to place control over growth-related public policies in the hands of individual local governments, acting independently. Politicians adopt this attitude because doing so is highly popular with both local officials and most suburban residents, all of whom who want to retain maximum control over who lives in their own communities. In a democracy, politicians are motivated to adopt policies that are very popular with voters, regardless of whether or not those policies have any chance of actually achieving their stated goals. Therefore, ***in most United States***

metropolitan areas, nearly all growth management powers are entirely controlled by local officials, even though that means the resulting policies cannot effectively solve most directly-growth-related problems, which are regional in nature.

How the Basic American Growth and Development Process Leads to Concentrated Core- Area Poverty, Especially Among Ethnic Minorities

It is obvious how sprawl generates the first set of directly growth-related problems. But the American development process also inherently undermines the fiscal strengths of many large cities and inner-ring suburbs in what I believe is a socially unjust and undesirable manner.

Some form of peripheral growth around American metropolitan areas has been – and still is – inevitable because they have grown greatly in population, and will grow more. Purely vertical growth would have been inconsistent with the rising real incomes and transport innovations that have occurred since 1950. Both of those strong trends have caused households to want to live in lower densities with more land area and internal space per unit.

But the particular form which our peripheral growth has taken has resulted in intensive concentration of very poor households -- especially those in minority groups -- in the older, more central portions of our metropolitan areas. This concentration is not an inevitable result of outward expansion, but is caused by several specific policies adopted in America to produce this result, though they are not adopted in most of the rest of the world.

The first such policy has two parts. One is *requiring all new housing to meet very high quality standards* -- standards too costly for most poor households to occupy. Therefore, most poor households can only afford to live in new housing if their doing so is somehow subsidized. (Such subsidies need not involve public funds, as discussed later.) The second part is that *the United States has chosen not to subsidize housing for many poor people in suburban areas*. Since new housing naturally is concentrated on the outer edge of each metropolitan area at any moment, this means very poor people are concentrated in older areas closer to the historic center.

The second policy that generates core-area poverty areas combines *fragmented control over land-uses in many small outlying municipalities*, and their adoption of *exclusionary zoning and other*

policies designed to raise local housing costs so as to keep poor people out of their communities. So suburban behavior is partly responsible for the core-area concentration of the poor.

The third policy is *tying the fiscal support of local governments to the wealth of their own residents as expressed in property values and sales taxes*. When the residents move out, so do many of the resources the government can tap. This means many high-and-middle-income suburbs have much greater tax bases per household than low-income suburbs and most large cities; so the former can provide higher-quality public services such as education than the latter. This policy also creates strong incentives for many localities to minimize the amount of low-cost and multi-family housing within their boundaries. The local government spending generated by such housing is greater than the local tax revenues it produces; so most localities have a fiscal motivation for being exclusionary in addition to the social motivation.

The fourth cause of inner-core poverty concentrations is *racial segregation in housing markets*. Racial discrimination in housing markets by owners, Realtors, and lenders is still widespread. And the unwillingness of most whites to move into neighborhoods where more than about 25-33 percent blacks already live is a key factor. Reducing residential racial segregation is hard because even if both whites and blacks desire integrated living, the different ways they define it causes almost total segregation to emerge from free choices.ⁱⁱⁱ

The poverty concentrations resulting from these policies contribute to adverse neighborhood traits in many core areas. These include high rates of crime, drug abuse, broken families, unemployment, gang violence, and non-supportive attitudes towards education. Those negative conditions “push” many middle- and upper-income households of all races – mainly those with children -- and many businesses out of central cities into suburbs.^{iv} When these middle-and- upper-income households and viable business firms leave core areas because of such conditions, they take their fiscal resources with them. Consequently, many core areas are left with disproportionate burdens of providing costly services to poor households, because of the poverty concentrations within them. This creates a self-aggravating downward fiscal spiral that weakens the ability of core area governments to provide quality public

services. That results in grossly unequal environments in which children are reared across our metropolitan areas.

In theory, sprawl's specific traits help produce core-area concentrations of poverty. For example, unlimited extension of new development into space removes new jobs from accessibility by inner-core residents, and fragmented controls over land uses permit exclusionary policies.

Testing Whether Urban Decline is Causally Linked to the Traits of Sprawl

I have attempted to test statistically whether urban decline is related to the specific traits we have defined as comprising suburban sprawl. I used the 162 urbanized areas with over 150,000 residents in 1990, using data from 1980 and 1990.^v

To measure sprawl, I defined nine different specific sprawl-related variables, such as the overall geographic size of the urbanized area, the gross population density in the urbanized fringe, and the ratio of central city density to outlying fringe density. To measure urban decline, I used both central city percentage population change from 1980-1990, and an index of urban decline based on nine variables like poverty rates, crime rates, income per capita, percentage of older housing, etc. Using various combinations of over 150 independent variables, I ran hundreds of regressions relating these two measures of urban decline to both the individual measures of sprawl and a "sprawl index" constructed by combining those measures.

My basic conclusion is that ***there is no meaningful and significant statistical relationship between any of the specific traits of sprawl or a sprawl index and either measure of urban decline.*** This was very surprising to me and went against my belief that sprawl had contributed to concentrated poverty, and therefore to urban decline.

This outcome forced me to re-examine the likely causes of concentrated poverty. I now believe they lie in the four basic traits of the general growth process I mentioned earlier. Those traits would produce concentrated minority-group poverty in many large cities even if sprawl did not exist – which could only happen if some more compact form of urban development were prevalent. And from concentrated minority poverty would come the inner-core problems that I believe are the most serious of all long-run threats to our political stability and economic prosperity. ***So it is the basic traits of our***

growth and development process that produce our most serious urban problems, not sprawl. Even compact growth would produce the same problems.

Coping with Directly Growth-Related Problems Associated with Sprawl

However, sprawl probably does help cause many of the directly-growth-related problems associated with it, such as traffic congestion and large-scale absorption of open space. But most of these problems produce costs borne mainly by the people who also benefit from sprawl, because sprawl surely has many significant benefits. Such benefits include more private open space, cheaper housing on peripheral land, shorter commuting times for people both working and living in suburbs, easier access to open space, creation of high-quality suburban school districts free from concentrated poverty, and a broad choice of combinations of local services and local tax rates. These benefits are clearly valued highly by millions of American house holds, or sprawl would not have become so totally dominant.

Many urban economists perceive these growth-related problems as caused mainly by “market failures.” That means failing to charge people who benefit from sprawl the true costs of the decisions they make that contribute to sprawl. This “under-prices” those decisions and thereby encourages over-expansion into low-density settlements. Three examples are (1) failing to charge high enough land costs for new low-density peripheral subdivisions to take account of the real costs of adding the infrastructures required to service those subdivisions, (2) failing to charge commuters a money toll for driving during peak hours to offset the time-loss burdens they impose on others in the form of congestion, and (3) failing to charge residents of low- density suburbs the full social costs of removing land from open space and agricultural uses.^{vi}

The remedies to these “market failures” proposed by such economists all involve charging households specific additional prices to discourage such behavior. These would be (1) impact fees on all new developments, (2) peak-hour road tolls on major commuting arteries, and (3) a development tax on land converted from agricultural to urban uses. In theory, if people had to pay such higher fees in order to live in far-out new subdivisions, fewer would be willing to do so, and future sprawl would be reduced.

There is much truth in this analysis, but there are several practical reasons why I doubt if the remedies it proposes would greatly inhibit future sprawl. High impact fees per new housing unit have long been used throughout California, but they have not stopped huge regional population growth there. In the 1990s, most of California's growth has been caused by natural increase and by the immigration from abroad of poor people who are not deterred by high housing prices, since they are willing to live in overcrowded slums. Peak-hour road tolls are both very difficult to implement on a metropolitan-wide scale (doing so has never even been tried) and politically impossible to pass. Most Americans regard them as just another tax, and believe such tolls would benefit only other households wealthy enough to pay daily. No one knows what the social value of open space is; so it would be hard to determine what an open-land-development-tax ought to be. Thus, these suggested remedies have severe practical difficulties, or might not work well if adopted, or both – though they might be worth trying in at least some regions.

Moreover, the belief that sprawl is caused primarily by “market failures” is based on the false assumption that there is a freely-operating land-use market in United States metropolitan areas. No United States metropolitan area has anything remotely approaching a free land-use market because of local regulations adopted for parochial political, social, and fiscal purposes. Most suburban land-use markets are dominated by local zoning and other regulations aimed at excluding low-income households that distort what would occur in a truly free market.^{vii} A universal example in American urban areas is prohibiting the construction of new low-quality housing – including shacks – in new-growth suburbs, even though many poor households can afford only such units. Such low-quality new construction is the main source of urban housing for the poor in most of the world. This prohibition contributes to poverty concentrations in older, closer-in United States neighborhoods where deteriorated or overcrowded older units – therefore low-cost units – can be found. It also encourages sprawl by limiting residential densities in many individual suburbs, thus pushing regional growth – which is beyond the control of any individual localities – farther outward. This analysis does not imply that new shoddy construction should be legalized, but that poverty will remain concentrated in inner-core areas until housing subsidies are widely available to poor households in suburban communities.^{viii}

Thus, as noted earlier, it is mainly the basic political and legal structure of United States land-use markets – plus racial discrimination – that cause poverty concentrations to arise, not “market failures.”

The Excess Costs of Growing Through Sprawl Rather Than in a More Compact Manner

Robert Burchell of Rutgers University, one of the principal authors of *The Costs of Sprawl Revisited*, has conducted extensive studies of the relative costs of continuing future growth through sprawl vs. adopting more compact growth patterns. His studies cover New Jersey, South Carolina, parts of Kentucky and Michigan, and several other communities.^{ix} He has consistently estimated that continuing to grow via sprawl will cost about 20 percent more for roads and land, and lesser additional percentages for schools, housing, and public services, than adopting more compact forms of growth. The main reason for these cost differences is that more compact growth puts higher percentages of future population on in-fill sites in existing built-up areas, thereby using less now-open land and saving on the construction of new roads, sewer and water systems, schools, and other public facilities. Over long periods, the resulting savings in just one state can amount to many billions of dollars. Achieving these savings in public outlays creates a potentially strong incentive to substitute more compact growth for future sprawl. In fact, state and local officials confronted with the estimated future infrastructure costs required to continue sprawl growth just to accommodate future populations they are now projecting are appalled by the total amounts involved. They do not believe they can raise the money required to build those new infrastructures without forcing drastic under-maintenance of existing street and highway systems in older areas for decades to come – if then.^x

Nevertheless, Burchell’s studies do not quantify any of the benefits that millions of Americans believe they receive from sprawl – and for which many may be willing to pay notable additional costs. These widely-perceived benefits were described earlier. At present, house holds receiving such benefits are probably not paying the full social costs of doing so. But they might very well be willing to pay some or all of the higher costs that Burchell has estimated are associated with continued sprawl just to keep receiving these benefits. Thus, even if Burchell’s cost estimates are correct, they do not necessarily imply that more compact forms of growth should be substituted for sprawl in the future. Rather, they might imply that different means of charging for the benefits of sprawl should be employed.

That implication resembles urban economists' arguments that markets should be adjusted to make marginal prices households face closer to the marginal social costs their decisions create.

Moreover, adopting more compact forms of growth throughout a metropolitan area would almost surely require new regional land-use planning and decision-making agencies with considerable authority, as in Portland or the Twin Cities. This raises the issue of what alternatives to sprawl might be adopted.

Are There Alternatives to Continuing Sprawl?

If suburban sprawl generates or aggravates some or all the problems I have mentioned above, what alternatives to sprawl might avoid such problems? These alternatives can be stated in two ways. One way consists of *major alternative development strategies* involving quite different overall development patterns. The other way sets forth *specific tactics to overcome sprawl's deficiencies*. In this analysis, sprawl can be considered as *spatially unlimited low-density development*.

—*Alternative overall development strategies*. There are three main alternative development strategies.^{XI} The first is *tightly bounded higher-density development*, as in many Western European areas. It features close-in urban growth boundaries, prohibition of almost all urban development outside them, relatively high-density residential growth within the boundaries (though that does not require high-rise dwellings), great stress on public transit, centralized coordination of land-use plans, and widely scattered subsidized new housing (or use of housing vouchers) for low-income households. I do not believe this alternative will be given serious consideration in many – if any – United States metropolitan areas. It departs too far from our long-established development patterns, greatly restricts local government sovereignty, requires radical changes in cherished American means of movement, and involves large-scale housing subsidies to the poor (though such subsidies would not necessarily involve public funds).

The second overall strategy is *loosely-bounded moderate-density development*. It lies between sprawl and tightly-bounded higher-density development. It has a more loosely-drawn growth boundary, permits some development outside the boundary, raises densities somewhat above sprawl levels, has some increase in public transit and car-pooling, has centralized coordination of local land-use planning, and provides some new subsidized low-income housing in growth areas. This is similar to what has

been established in Portland, Oregon. So far, very few other areas show much inclination to adopt this approach, but more might in the future.

The third alternative strategy is *new outlying communities and green spaces*. It has a tightly-drawn urban growth boundary, can incorporate the other features of either of the other strategies, but permits substantial growth outside the boundary only within designated new communities centered on existing outlying towns. This is similar to what has been established in the Lexington, Kentucky, region. When this was suggested in the Portland region, residents of the outlying towns on which new communities would be built strongly objected, since this strategy would greatly alter the present rural character of those towns.

Will any of these alternative strategies become widespread in the United States? On the one hand, it is clear that continuation of sprawl will surely not solve the problems I described earlier. Yet it is not even theoretically obvious, nor has it been proven in practice, that *any* of these strategies will largely solve those same problems. Thus, *the advantages of these strategies have not been demonstrated enough to the American people to persuade most to give up the benefits they perceive in sprawl*. Until such demonstrations are made, these alternative strategies are not likely to be adopted in many metropolitan areas – unless existing conditions there get bad enough to constitute what is widely perceived as a “crisis,” as discussed further below.

—*Specific anti-sprawl tactics*. Therefore, another way to attack those problems is with specific tactics aimed at them. However, some of these tactics are aimed at the basic American growth process, not just at sprawl. I will identify them as I describe them.

The first tactic is *some type of urban growth boundary* to limit the outward draining of resources from core areas. This is mainly an anti-sprawl policy. It need not be air-tight to produce benefits. But it should be linked to public provision of key infrastructures, which should not be publicly provided outside the boundary. But no boundary will have big impacts unless strong controls limit growth outside the boundary. Moreover, an urban growth boundary that is the “accidental” sum of many separate boundaries adopted by individual communities is not likely to work.

The second tactic is ***regional co-ordination and rationalization of local land-use planning***, done by some regional planning body – such as the Metropolitan Council in the Twin Cities. This is a policy aimed at the basic metropolitan growth process, not just at sprawl. Yet all local government officials resist this. They want to retain control over growth management efforts and policies that affect them. But experience suggests that individual communities will nearly always adopt growth-management plans that lock in low density, rather than trying to ***raise*** densities to achieve more compact development in the region as a whole. Each locality will seek to shift multi-family housing elsewhere, and will adopt exclusionary policies aimed at protecting home values and keeping poorer people out. This will force growth either to more outlying areas, or into inner-city areas through illegal overcrowding of older dwelling units. As a result, purely localized growth management will cause sprawl to increase.

The third tactic is some form of ***regional tax-base sharing***.^{xii} This is also aimed at the basic growth process, not at sprawl in itself. Some percentage of all ***additions*** to commercial and industrial tax bases would be shared among all communities in the region, not just captured by the places where those development are built. This would reduce fiscal disparities and provide more equal opportunities, as it has in the Twin Cities region – the only large area to adopt this approach.

The fourth tactic is ***region-wide development of subsidized housing for low-income households***. This is also aimed at the basic growth process, not mainly at sprawl. It would be designed to reduce the concentration of poor minority households in inner-core areas through their voluntary movement into suburban communities. This could be done through regional vouchers, or regional new subsidies, or by requiring all residential developers to build a share of affordable housing in each new project, as in Montgomery County, Maryland.^{xiii} This tactic is very controversial, but it is vital to begin deconcentrating the poor.

David Rusk has proven that focusing on improving core-area poverty neighborhoods themselves through community development has almost universally failed to prevent such neighborhoods from falling farther and farther behind the region.^{xiv} Therefore, some type of voluntary deconcentration is probably necessary to improve those communities in the long run.

A fifth tactic is *regional operation of public transit systems and highways*, including new facility construction. A final tactic is *vigorous regional enforcement of anti-racial-discrimination laws*. This is a reform of the growth process.

It is likely that effectively adopting all these tactics, or even most of them, would require a strong region-wide implementing body. As noted above, very few United States metropolitan areas have been willing to consider this, especially where rugged individualism is dominant. Most of the few areas that have adopted such regional bodies have done so in response to some condition perceived as a crisis by state leaders. Examples are the threat to develop the Willamette River valley in Oregon, threats to develop the Everglades in Florida, the threat of withdrawal of federal highway funds because of air pollution in Atlanta, and the threat of state courts ordering suspensions of zoning in New Jersey in order to encourage more suburban low-cost housing. Unless leaders in other areas also perceive such crises, they are not likely to adopt strong enough regional authorities to carry out most of these tactics. Up to now, traffic congestion in itself has not been considered a serious enough crisis to generate support for strong regional planning, nor would such planning cure congestion.

In some metropolitan areas where large counties act as the main local government bodies (as in parts of the South, such as the Washington D.C. area), it might be possible for voluntary cooperation among these bodies to create effective regional land-use planning.^{XV} For example, each of the counties surrounding a central city could adopt a rural preservation zone on its outer perimeters where growth was very limited, and create strong incentives for developers to concentrate new projects in closer-in portions where public infrastructure finance was provided. (Montgomery County, Maryland, has done this.) The boundaries of these separate rural preservation zones taken together might form an effective urban growth boundary for the entire region, without any formal adoption of such a regional boundary. But this approach will not work well where a central city is surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of small localities, each controlling its own land-use – even if each locality adopts a local urban growth boundary of its own. It is very unlikely that so many separate, parochially-adopted boundaries would together form a regional pattern that would lead to rational land-use development across the entire region.

Even if all the tactics described above were adopted, it is not certain that they would overcome the ill effects of core-area concentrations of poverty. Nor is it certain that these tactics would overcome growth-related problems. But unlike continued sprawl, they have at least a chance of doing so if they are carried out at a large enough scale over a very long time.

The Impossibility of Greatly Reducing Traffic Congestion

The single most widely-aggravating growth-related problem associated with sprawl is rising traffic congestion – particularly in suburban communities. Citizens across the land are strongly fighting additional population growth and development in their communities in the belief that doing so will limit future traffic congestion there – or at least stop it from getting worse. Unfortunately, this belief is a delusion based on failure to understand the nature and true causes of traffic congestion.^{xvi}

True, future growth will cause more congestion. The nation will add 47 million more people from 2000 to 2020. From 1980 to 1995, 1.29 more automotive vehicles were added to the United States vehicle population for each 1.0 person added to the human population. That means millions more vehicles will be with us over the next two decades. Local governments cannot stop this from happening, as explained earlier. Each may limit growth within its own boundaries, but it cannot notably affect the overall future growth of its entire region.

Adopting more compact forms of growth in the future will not help much either. About 85 percent of the total urban development that will exist in 2020 is already here. So even if future growth occurs in very dense forms – which is not likely – we will still have a very spread-out nation in 2020, and transportation will still be greatly dominated by private automotive vehicles.

But the most important thing to understand about peak-hour traffic congestion is that, once it has appeared in a region, it cannot be eliminated or even substantially reduced. ***There is no effective remedy for traffic congestion because it is essentially a balancing mechanism that enables firms and people to pursue key objectives other than minimizing commuting time.*** Business firms have two such objectives. One is having most people work during the same hours so they can interact efficiently. That means they have to travel to and from work at about the same hours each day. The second objective is locating firms on relatively low-density sites spread out through each region for easier movement, more

space, and better access to suburban workers and markets. Households have five key objectives. The first is having a wide range of choices of where to live and work in different types of communities, especially if they have more than one worker in the household. Second, they want to be able to combine different purposes on each individual trip to be efficient. Third, most want to live in relatively low-density communities. Fourth, most households want to travel in their own private automotive vehicles. Doing so is faster, more comfortable, more flexible and convenient, more private, and often cheaper than using public transit. Fifth most households want to separate their own family dwellings spatially – and particularly regarding public schools – from other households with much lower incomes and social status, and often from people who are in different racial groups.

It is not possible to pursue all these objectives effectively without generating a lot of traffic congestion, especially during peak hours. In reality, waiting in traffic jams is the balancing force we use to ration road space as we pursue all of those objectives, since most Americans are unwilling to use price-rationing for that purpose. Yet Americans do not want to give up any of these objectives enough to change their behavior. They prefer to endure a certain amount of traffic congestion, even while complaining about it. If congestion becomes unacceptable, they can move closer to where they work or live closer to where they work, which many people in fact do. ***But this means there is no such thing as a solution to the traffic congestion problem. Traffic congestion is not a disease that can be cured. Rather, it is an inherent condition in the quality of modern metropolitan life based upon our pursuit of those cherished objectives described above.*** This situation is not confined to the United States; in fact, it is worse in most of the rest of the world, and will become even more so. Consequently, neither sprawl nor any of its alternatives will alleviate traffic congestion much in the future.

This analysis does ***not*** mean that no reductions in future traffic congestion are ever possible. Under many conditions, it is quite sensible to build additional roads and streets or widen existing ones. Creating high-density settlement nodes around transit stops may also be worthwhile. But these tactics will not fully offset future increases in vehicle use rooted both in the behavior of both the existing population and additions to that population.^{xvii} Once significant peak-hour traffic congestion has arisen in a metropolitan region, it is there to stay.

Some Practical Conclusions

In the long run, *the most important social problems now being connected with the sprawl issue arise from the concentration of the poor especially poor minorities in older core areas.* The difficulty of educating children in schools with such high concentrations of poor students is the most serious. But resolving those problems probably requires some significant deconcentration of poor people out of those areas into subsidized suburban housing – preferably in ways that do not cause suburban resegregation – either economic or racial. Doing that is highly controversial, and is opposed both by most central-city politicians and by nearly all suburban residents and politicians.

Their negative attitudes are strongly influenced by the fact that high fractions of the poor people who might be so deconcentrated are minorities – especially African-Americans. Many suburban whites oppose these people entering their neighborhoods, and central city minority politicians oppose the resulting loss of their political support within city electorates. An example of such deconcentration is HUD’s suggested policy of “moving to opportunity” just a few poor central city residents into the suburbs. This policy has worked well in the Chicago area under the court-ordered Gautreaux program – though at a relatively small scale.^{xviii} It was bitterly opposed by elected officials everywhere else it was suggested. So there is little chance of solving these problems directly, even though doing so is strongly in the national interest.

Moreover, these inner-core problems are not really caused by the specific traits of sprawl, but by the underlying nature of the American growth process. Hence policies aimed at sprawl specifically – like setting aside a lot of open space bought with federal money – will not affect inner-core problems at all.

The most politically powerful problems connected with the sprawl issue arise from rising traffic congestion and other largely suburban ailments, which impact middle-and-upper- income households who have political influence. I believe these problems are not as important to the long-run welfare of the nation, but have a much better chance of having major resources applied to them. But those resources are most likely to be applied in tactics that do not attack the concentration of the poor. Nor are those tactics likely to remedy the growth-related problems associated with sprawl – especially traffic congestion, which has no cure.

A challenge facing people interested in solving our most important urban problems is how to take advantage of current suburban rage against sprawl to shift more resources into redeveloping core areas, and into opening up more opportunities for affordable housing in exclusionary suburbs.

It is impossible and undesirable to halt all further outward expansion, because metropolitan areas are going to keep rising in population. But peripheral densities could be raised, and the outward extension slowed down, by deflecting more growth into in-fill development and generating higher average densities in built-up areas. This would not require really high densities anywhere. But it would probably require much stronger regional authorities influencing land-use patterns. If more growth were shifted into in-fill and inner-core areas, that would raise land and housing prices there. Demands for housing in closer-in neighborhoods would rise, helping reinvigorate those areas.

But the resulting gentrification would compel many low-income households now living there – and future poor immigrants into the region – to live elsewhere. If no provisions were made to create subsidized housing for them in the suburbs, they would start overcrowding existing units in older areas or older suburbs and would generate large-scale slums there. This is already happening in California because housing costs are so high and many immigrants from abroad are very poor. Both the advocates and opponents of suburban sprawl are not willing to face this huge need for low-cost housing, which has traditionally been met in part by inner-core slums.

A strong economic and moral argument for changing sprawl is that many households moving into far-out subdivisions are not being required to pay the full social costs of gaining the benefits of living there – which include building infra-structure trunk lines and increased social costs in inner-city areas. Charging them more fully for the costs they generate might encourage more of them to locate in closer-in areas. The most persuasive part of this cost-based argument is that merely continuing current sprawl densities for future growth will require massive additional infrastructure spending that is not consistent with adequately maintaining existing roads, sewer and water systems, and other infrastructures.

Altogether, there are no simple remedies or solutions to the problems associated with sprawl because those problems are generated by the fundamental legal, political, and social structure and growth processes of American metropolitan areas. Moreover, that structure and those processes provide a majority of metropolitan-area residents with what they perceive as major benefits. They do

not want to attack these problems in ways that would work effectively, because doing so might jeopardize their continued receipt of such benefits. Hence they probably will not do so – in spite of a lot of rhetoric to the contrary. There will be numerous studies of sprawl and a lot of thrashing around about sprawl-related policies. But when all is said and done, vastly more will be said passionately than will be done effectively.

This does not mean those of us who want to reduce the ill effects of concentrated poverty should give up. Fundamental social change occurs through persistent and steady efforts over long periods, but it often does occur – sometimes to a surprising degree. So we should hang in there, but base our persistence on a realistic and patient understanding of the basic forces involved.

NOTES

ⁱ Anthony Downs, *New Visions for Metropolitan America* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1994). The first volume published as part of the costs of sprawl revisited project is a review and analysis of the existing literature on sprawl entitled Robert Burchell and others, *The Costs of Sprawl Revisited* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, Transportation Cooperative Research Program Report 39, 1998).

ⁱⁱ Such benefits include a larger and more diverse labor force, greater demands for nearly all types of goods and services, including more urban development, economies of scale in certain types of activities, the elements of a larger tax base, and provision of more young workers to help support the elderly when they retire (since most immigrants from abroad are relatively young).

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of why segregation often occurs even if both African-Americans and whites prefer integrated living, see Anthony Downs, *Neighborhoods and Urban Development* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1981), pp. 94-95, and Thomas C. Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 137-166, and Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), chapter 4.

^{iv} An outstanding analysis of concentrated poverty in United States metropolitan areas is Paul Jargowsky, *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City* (New York: Russell Sage, 1996).

^v Anthony Downs, *Relating Suburban Sprawl to Urban Decline*, unpublished manuscript, April 1, 1998.

^{vi} These three examples are taken from an unpublished paper by Jan K. Brueckner of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign entitled *Urban Sprawl: Diagnosis and Remedies*, no date. The suggested remedies are also taken from this paper.

^{vii} For a discussion of such regulatory barriers, see the Advisory Commission on Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing, *Not in My Back Yard* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1990).

^{viii} Housing subsidies for affordable units need not be financed by public funds. A community or county can require developers of new subdivisions to include some percentage of “affordable” units – say 15 to 20 percent – in return for which the community permits higher densities for the entire project than were originally zoned. The developer finances the affordable units at below-market prices by being able to build more units on the land in the project. This policy has worked well in Montgomery County, Maryland, and in many New Jersey communities.

^{ix} For example, see Robert W. Burchell and others, *Impact Assessment of the New Jersey Interim State Development and Redevelopment Plan Report II: Research Findings* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: New Jersey Office of State Planning, 1992), pp. vii to xii. The specific national data used in this section are from Robert W. Burchell, “The Impacts of Continued Sprawl: Growing Another Way and Its National Cost Savings,” Speech delivered at the Colorado Forum, August 4, 1999, available from the Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University.

^x However, the total “extra” cost of sprawl development for the entire nation, as compared to more compact development, preliminarily estimated by Burchell is about \$250 billion over the next 25 years, or \$10 billion per year. The gross domestic product of the United States in 1998 was \$8.5 trillion. Thus, the “extra” costs of sprawl development amounted to only 0.12 percent of gross domestic product as of 1998, and would be only .06 percent at the end of 25 years if gross domestic product

expanded 2.5 percent per year, on the average. In relation to national wealth or incomes, these are relatively small amounts that American beneficiaries of sprawl might be quite willing to pay to continue enjoying its benefits.

^{xi} These alternatives are taken from Anthony Downs, *New Visions for Metropolitan America* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1994), chapter 7.

^{xii} The development of the Minnesota tax-base sharing program is described in detail in Myron Orfield, *Metropolitics* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1997), chapters 6 and 7.

^{xiii} Requiring developers to provide affordable housing as a certain percentage (say, 10 to 20 percent) of all the new units they build creates subsidies for the occupants of such housing without the use of direct public funding. See endnote 8 above.

^{xiv} David Rusk, *Inside Game, Outside Game* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1999), chapters 2-7.

^{xv} I am indebted to Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institution for suggesting this possibility.

^{xvi} For a more in-depth analysis of traffic congestion, see Anthony Downs, *Stuck in Traffic* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1992).

^{xvii} Widening existing roads congested during peak hours may produce initial reductions in congestion there. But as soon as the community perceives that moving on those improved roads has speeded up, people will start shifting onto those faster roads from other routes, from earlier or later times they have been using to avoid congestion, and even from buses or rail transit. This “triple convergence” will soon cause the improved roads to be just as congested during peak hours as before. True, the peak hours on those roads may be shorter, and more vehicles may move on those roads during the peak periods. But an automatic process of commuter adjustments producing traffic equilibrium in the entire region will prevent any complete removal of peak-hour congestion, once it has arisen. This equilibrium process will also act in the same way to prevent other additions to peak-hour capacity from ending congestion – including more transit facilities, light rail systems, staggered work hours, telecommuting, and even new expressways. For a detailed discussion of this equilibrium process, see Anthony Downs, *Stuck in Traffic* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1992), pp. 27-31.

^{xviii} See James E. Rosenbaum, “Black Pioneers – Do Their Moves to the Suburbs Increase Economic Opportunity for Mothers and Children?” *Housing Policy Debate*, Volume 2, Number 4 (1991), pp. 1179-1213.