

Since the mid-1960s, a lonely chorus of scholars and fellow travelers has contended that many of the nation's challenges need to be discussed in a metropolitan context. Metropolitan areas now contain close to 80 percent of the total U.S. population; half the people in this country now live in just 39 metro areas. These areas are the engines of the American economy, competing with other regions around the world as the global economy evolves. They are complex organisms, each growing around several nodes of economic activities—central business districts, “edge cities,” industrial areas, services clusters, and high-tech or commercial corridors.

The case for viewing, formulating, and sometimes operating policies from a metropolitan perspective has always been logically compelling, but it has had precious little effect on the way America's domestic policies have been designed and implemented. Americans have been content, for the most part, with a public sector that consists of a fragmented maze of local governments and special districts and a private sector that builds mostly unrelated subdivisions rather than integrated communities.

Increasingly, the political configuration of the typical American metropolis lags behind the economic realities. While hundreds of independent jurisdictions still partition most of our metropolitan areas, their economic activities are borderless. More and more of us traverse multiple municipal boundaries, several times a day. Our local media have a regional reach. Our businesses now depend on metropolitan-wide markets for workers, suppliers, and customers. The natural resources we consume—and often contaminate—do not conform to jurisdictional lines. The civic and cultural institutions we enjoy are assets to the broad urban community and depend on it for support.

Since a burst of city-county consolidations in

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The New METROPOLITAN Agenda

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BROOKINGS REVIEW, FALL 1998

the 1960s and 1970s, the metropolitan political front has been relatively quiet. *Until now.* In the past few years, metropolitanism has reemerged as a notable political force in dozens of major metropolitan regions—and it is even beginning to alter market practices.

This sudden reemergence has been caused by the growing unease that many Americans feel about how their communities are developing. They are appalled by explosive sprawl into peripheral farmlands and open space, rising suburban traffic congestion, and slower growth or absolute decline in many central cities and older suburbs.

That unease is well founded. Despite the hoopla over “comeback cities,” the benefits of the 1990s economic prosperity have not been shared equitably among the parts of each region. Rapidly developing new suburbs—built since the 1970s on the outer fringes of metropolitan areas—are capturing the lion’s share of employment and population growth. These jurisdictions enjoy low taxes and high levels of service partly because they limit the development of affordable housing and exclude families with moderate means (particularly racial and ethnic minorities) from living in their neighborhoods or attending their schools.

In many American metropolitan areas, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, central cities and old inner-ring suburbs have been left behind. They have lost millions of residents during the 1990s, particularly middle-class families who are the economic and social backbone of sustainable communities. Consequently, these once-proud places now harbor higher and higher concentrations of the poor, particularly the minority poor, without the fiscal capacity to grapple with the consequences: joblessness, family fragmentation, failing schools, and deteriorating commercial districts.

The costs of peripheral sprawl, moreover, extend beyond fiscal disparities and racial and social separation. All families living in a region are affected as traffic congestion worsens, the price of building new infrastructures and maintaining old ones rises beyond the community’s capacity to pay, open space and farmland become less accessible, and, perhaps most troubling, any sense of community disappears.

In metropolitan areas across the country, these changes are creating an impetus for the formation of new, powerful, sometimes-majority coalitions at local and regional levels. Elected officials from cities and inner suburbs; downtown corporate, philanthropic, and civic interests; minority and low-income community representatives; environmen-

talists; no-growth advocates in the new suburbs; farmers and rural activists; and religious leaders all are realizing that they lose as sprawl accelerates. These constituencies reject the conventional wisdom that current growth patterns are inevitable—the result only of invisible market forces and consumer preferences. Rather, they are focusing more on the role that government policies—spending programs, tax expenditures, and regulatory and administrative actions—play in shaping our communities and, by extension, our lives.

The new coalitions are starting to flex their muscles at all levels of government.

From Chattanooga to Boston to Portland, metropolitan leaders are choosing infrastructure repair, mass transit, and anticongestion strategies over road expansion and more consumption of open space. In fast-growing metropolitan areas like Northern Virginia and Seattle, citizens in outer suburban communities are in a virtual state of revolt over congested roads, overcrowded schools, and loss of open space. They have pushed county governments to curb sprawl by increasing developer fees, scaling back existing plans for residential growth, and purchasing land to preserve open space.

Some states are joining the action. In 1997, Maryland enacted “smart growth” laws to steer state road, sewer, and school monies away from open spaces to closer-in areas targeted for concentrated growth. New Jersey is considering an ambitious plan to preserve hundreds of thousands of acres of open land. Minnesota has upgraded metropolitan governance in the Twin Cities area and expanded suburban obligations for affordable housing. Oregon continues to preserve its landmark land use law, which requires urban growth boundaries to be drawn around cities statewide. This year Missouri, Ohio, and Pennsylvania will debate similar reforms.

Even the federal government has gotten into the act. In 1991, Congress passed landmark transportation legislation that gave metropolitan areas the responsibility for devising regional transportation strategies and some of the resources and flexibility necessary to implement them. Significantly, Congress preserved this metropolitan focus when it reauthorized the transportation law earlier this year.

The Purpose of This Issue

The emerging metropolitan agenda has the potential to affect the physical, economic, and social landscape of much of America. It is already

From the film “Metropolis” by Fritz Lang. Photo Courtesy: Kobal

influencing our policies, politics, and markets. The essays that follow present a sampling of both the academic and practitioner thinking about the new agenda, as well as an appreciation of the obstacles it faces. These essays do not form a single, coherent vision or plan of action; rather, they present a variety of viewpoints and descriptions concerning the nature and importance of the new metropolitanism. Some of the authors are enthusiastic proponents of “metro-think”; others are opponents; still others raise major concerns without adopting clear pro or con positions.

The first series of articles sets out the policy reforms that the new metropolitan coalitions are seeking at the metropolitan, state, and federal level. Anthony Downs of Brookings provides a concise overview of the costs and benefits of current metropolitan growth patterns based on empirical analysis, as well as extensive review of the academic literature. He discusses in particular the complicated relationship between suburban sprawl and the increasing concentration of minority poor in America’s urban cores. Downs outlines the range of general strategies and specific tactics that can reverse these polarizing trends but questions

and governance.

As Johnson notes, many rules of the growth and equity game are set in state capitals and Washington. States, with their power over land use, welfare, housing, tax policy, and local governance, hold many of the cards for meaningful change. David Rusk, former mayor of Albuquerque and author of the influential *Cities Without Suburbs*, explores what he regards as the primary goal of metropolitanism: altering the land use planning rules under which local governments function. Rusk regards land use reform along the lines of Oregon’s landmark growth management law as the vehicle for not only curbing sprawl but also promoting greater equity and opportunity for places and people left behind.

U.S. congressman Earl Blumenauer contends that federal policies should instill a metropolitan perspective into a wide range of programs and policies extending beyond transportation to areas such as water and air quality, housing, and economic revitalization.

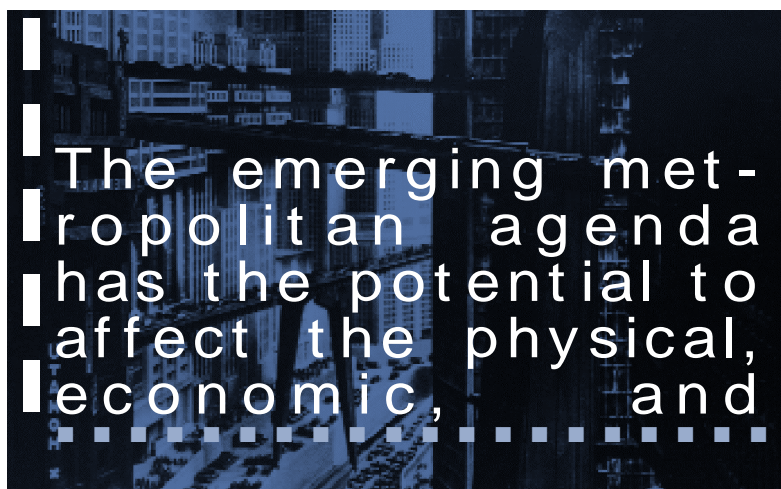
Pietro Nivola of Brookings adds a disconcerting set of wrinkles to the policy picture. Nivola compares American and European growth patterns and

the disparate demographic, market, and government forces and policies that fuel them. He concludes that metropolitan advocates have overlooked a whole series of national policies (agriculture, taxation, small business, and energy) that differ markedly between the two continents. These could be more critical to changing current growth patterns than many of the other policy reforms on the table.

The Johnson, Rusk, Blumenauer, and Nivola essays taken together point to the richness, but complexity, of the metropolitan agenda. The policies they discuss operate at different levels of government, are

administered by separate bureaucracies, cross disciplinary lines, and are subject to major reform. These writers acknowledge that our current growth patterns do not allow for a “big fix”; rather, we should expect reform both to proceed haphazardly—federal change here, state and metropolitan actions there—and to require more sophisticated analyses and strategies than now exist.

Among other possible impediments to the success or failure of the new metropolitan coalitions are differences in racial perspectives. John Powell, of the University of Minnesota Law School, discuss-



whether these reforms are politically feasible or, if implemented, would make a discernible difference.

Elmer Johnson represents the leadership of the Chicago business community. His contribution is not just a theoretical exercise; he heads the Metropolis Project, an effort by Chicago’s business leadership to review regional challenges and opportunities for the coming decades. Johnson contends that a region hoping to thrive in the new economy needs to devise and implement integrated strategies on schools, workforce, welfare, housing, transportation, economic development,

es the complex interplay between race and metropolitanism. On one level, race helps drive the growth patterns that we inherit. On another, race presents a major obstacle to building and sustaining majority coalitions, both because of the attitudes of suburban residents and because of the (often ignored) attitudes of African-American city residents who view metropolitan solutions as a ploy for diluting their power. The implications of powell's work are stark: policy fixes that do not address the complexities of racial politics will either operate on the margin or fail to win majority support.

Peter Gordon and Harry W. Richardson, of the University of Southern California, question the very underpinning of the new metropolitan coalitions, namely that the costs of sprawl decidedly outweigh its benefits. They challenge some of the favored arguments of metropolitan advocates: that sprawl has reduced air and water quality, dramatically worsened congestion, and undermined economic efficiency. If the metropolitan agenda is going to have legs, these critiques need to be answered objectively, empirically, and persuasively.

Janet Rothenberg Pack, a visiting fellow at Brookings, questions whether the metropolitan area is the correct level of analysis and action. Pack argues that larger regional distinctions—Northeast, Midwest, South, and West—may be more important than the intrametropolitan trends at the heart of current metropolitan debates. Her empirical analysis warns against making rigid metropolitan-oriented policies at the federal level and ignoring specific regional characteristics.

Policy reforms of the magnitude being discussed here—concerning state land use, federal spending of all types, and local regulations—do not occur in a vacuum. They require political coalitions that cross spatial, partisan, ideological, and disciplinary lines. By their very nature, coalitions of such breadth and diversity are difficult to build and sustain.

The potential for and impediments to metropolitan coalition building are now being fiercely debated. Myron Orfield, one of the leading metropolitan-oriented state legislators in the country, recounts Minnesota's four-decade experience in pursuing metropolitan governance, tax sharing, and other solutions for the Minneapolis–St. Paul area. During those 40 years, advocates of metropolitanism experimented with the politics of consensus (“we are all in this together”) and that of confrontation (“the privileged suburbs should share the benefits of growth”). Although Orfield's experience has

been that confrontation is most effective, the question of which approach works best is far from being settled among metropolitan advocates nationwide.

The heavy policy and political focus in this *Review* is warranted, given the impact of government policies on growth and development. Yet growth patterns do not result solely from government policies—and will not be altered solely by changes in them. Citizens “vote with their feet” every day in housing and job markets in response to the failures of cities and other jurisdictions to provide quality schools and services.

The marketplace also has its own internal dynamics. Real estate developer and consultant Christopher Leinberger outlines how the real estate industry has adopted uniform, simplified approaches to building commercial projects and housing subdivisions and how these approaches themselves have contributed to the sprawling environment we live in.

Changing these market practices will require a new way of thinking about the costs and benefits of current growth patterns. Michael Cohen, of the World Bank, argues that neither the government nor the marketplace adequately captures the benefits of reusing existing infrastructure and investing in older communities. He believes both the whole nation and specific regions could realize enormous productivity gains by focusing on improving the existing stock of infrastructure rather than simply (and predictably) building new.

Watch the Metropolitan Space

As the essays in this *Review* illustrate, the metropolitan agenda, like the American metropolis itself, defies easy definition. Unlike many areas of domestic policy, metropolitan initiatives do not conform to traditional partisan or ideological lines. Governor Parris Glendening, a Democrat, pushed through Maryland's metropolitan efforts, and Republican Governor Christine Todd Whitman is spearheading New Jersey's. These state leaders recognize there is substantial common ground between the cities and a good portion of the suburbs on growth and development issues.

The factors precipitating metropolitan action also vary markedly among regions and states. Smart growth in Maryland, land use reform in Oregon, and Florida's planning laws were precipitated by deep popular concern about possible environmental losses. In Michigan, the current growth conversation arises from worries about loss of farmland and open space. In Ohio, several

political currents are present: farm preservation, inner suburban decline, and traditional big-city concerns. In Pennsylvania, advocates for reform invoke the state's heritage of small towns and cities, threatened by unsustainable growth. These precipitating factors cannot be manufactured on demand or easily replicated; they reflect the unique natural, demographic, and market characteristics of each region and state. Thus the metropolitan agenda will not develop in a uniform fashion throughout the country.

Finally, metropolitan issues do not invite traditional or simple programmatic responses. There is no "silver bullet" that can be designed and implemented by one level of government or one sector of the economy. To grow differently—to grow in a way that promotes reinvestment and reuse over sprawl, equity and fairness over division, access to opportunity over barriers to mobility—requires the pursuit of integrated public- and private-sector strategies that must be sustained and nurtured over a long time. The effort has an immense way to go, but at least it has begun. As the old billboard advertisements invited us, you would be wise to "watch this space"—it may be coming to your town. ■