

Preservation of Open Space

For the nature-oriented Sierra Club, the prime value of high-density development is that it protects farms, forests, and open space. But rural open space is not in short supply in this country. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (1995), all developed lands, both urban and rural, occupy just 5 percent of the lower forty-eight states. According to the 1990 census, urban lands alone occupy just 2 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993, table 8).

What is in short supply is urban open spaces: the parks, golf courses, urban farms, and even the large backyards regularly used and enjoyed by urban residents. Smart growth targets these urban open spaces for redevelopment. In the Portland urbanized area, for example:

- Clackamas County is considering the redevelopment of a golf course that had been zoned as open space into 1,100 homes and 250,000 square feet of office space—all needed to meet the region's density targets.
- The city of Portland has actually sold city park lands to developers on the condition that they develop them as high-density residential areas.
- More than ten thousand acres of prime farm lands have been targeted for development.
- Some three dozen neighborhoods of mainly single-family homes have been targeted for redevelopment into high-density centers (Metro 1998, map). The large backyards of these homes are all considered developable building sites.

Despite these measures, there is no certainty that smart growth will protect large rural open spaces from fragmentation and development. If smart growth leads to congested, polluted cities, many residents may flee to rural areas. A few hundred ten- to forty-acre exurban home sites can occupy as much land as thousands of quarter-acre suburban lots.

Sense of Community

Community is difficult to quantify, but at least one urban sociologist is convinced that high-density cities produce no greater sense of community than low-density suburbs. In the 1950s, Herbert Gans spent two years living in a high-density Boston neighborhood, then two years living in Levittown, New Jersey. Gans (1967) found a great deal of community involvement in Levittown, particularly involvement in zoning and planning decisions. Gans (1982) found no stronger sense of community in Boston's West End. Indeed, he concluded that West Enders felt a loyalty to their ethnic or

social group, but “the West End as a neighborhood was not important to West Enders” (392–95; quotation, p. 104).

Gans (1961) also challenged those who claim that suburbs are “lifeless.” He observed that in inner-city working-class neighborhoods “the home is reserved for the family, so that much social life takes place outdoors. . . . The street life, the small stores that traditionally serve ethnic groups and other cultural minorities, and the area’s exotic flavor then draws visitors and tourists” (172). Meanwhile,

in middle-class [suburban] neighborhoods, there is no street life, for all social activities take place inside the home. . . . Such neighborhoods look dull, notably to the visitor, and therefore they may seem to be less vital than their ethnic and bohemian counterparts. But visibility is not the only measure of vitality, and areas that are uninteresting to the visitor may be quite vital to the people who live in them. (172)

Hidden Agendas

If smart growth performs so poorly, then why does anyone support it? A close examination of smart growth’s supporters reveals that most have hidden agendas. Major advocates include central-city officials eager to restore or maintain the prominence of their cities over the suburbs; downtown interests desiring to reverse the decline of their businesses relative to those in suburban malls and edge cities; transit agencies and employees seeking ever bigger budgets despite transit’s falling market share of commuting and other urban trips; “new urban planners” interested in trying their theories out on various cities; urban environmentalists opposed to more freeways and the automobile in general; and engineering and construction firms seeking federal dollars to spend on urban public works such as rail transit.

All of these groups would benefit from suburban congestion. Congestion in the suburbs would make central cities and downtown areas relatively less unattractive. Congestion also is used to justify larger transit budgets, even though transit’s market share in most cities is so small—typically under 5 percent of urban trips—that it has little effect on congestion. Increasing congestion leads to demands for planning and new public works to solve the problem. Environmentalists who dislike autos hope that congestion will lead people to choose some other mode of transportation. Congestion is thus a natural goal of smart growth. We should not be surprised if smart-growth proponents make statements such as “congestion signals positive urban development.”

The Move to Regional Government

In most U.S. cities, the smart-growth coalition described in the preceding section has little political power over the suburbs. Most suburbs have a long history of resisting

annexation or merger with their central cities. To overcome that resistance, smart-growth advocates support regional government agencies with authority over both the central city and the suburbs.

Some writers are explicit that the purpose of regional government is to prevent local areas from democratically resisting smart-growth proposals. Douglas Porter (1991) of the Urban Land Institute writes "about the gap between the daily mode of living desired by most Americans and the mode that most city planners and traffic engineers believe is most appropriate" (65). He supports "regional agencies [with] substantial powers to influence local decision making on land use issues" (74) and cites Portland's Metro as an example of such an agency. Metro was created in 1992 by a ballot measure misleadingly titled "limits regional government." The agency has ultimate land-use and transportation planning authority over twenty-four cities and three counties. It has used that authority to give those cities and counties population targets that they must meet by rezoning existing neighborhoods to higher densities.

Though not a smart-growth supporter, the economist Anthony Downs of the Brookings Institution recognizes that a regional government made up of local government representatives "can take controversial stands without making its individual members commit themselves to those stands. Each member can claim that 'the organization' did it or blame all the other members" (Downs 1992, 133). Downs's description fits what has happened in Portland. It is a truism in planning that most members of the public will not get involved until it directly affects their own neighborhoods. Metro was able to write its plan for the Portland area with little public notice or involvement. But cities are encountering fierce opposition from neighborhoods that do not wish to be densified. The cities say that Metro is forcing them to densify. Metro replies that it is not forcing cities to densify any specific neighborhood, only to meet certain goals.

Neighborhood residents are confused and uncertain about how to stop rezoning. Voters in one suburb recalled their mayor and members of the city council, but the new council still must meet Metro's targets. Another suburb voted to ignore Metro's targets, though the vote has no legal effect.

The 1992 Metro ballot measure won partly because its supporters promised that a regional planning agency would prevent Portland from becoming like Los Angeles, which is the most congested city in America (Texas Transportation Institute 1998, table 1). Just two years later, Metro planners compared the nation's fifty largest cities to see which was most like their goals for Portland: high densities with few miles of highway per capita. They discovered that Los Angeles is the highest-density urbanized area in America, with a density 30 percent greater than that of the New York urbanized area (which includes northeastern New Jersey and southwestern Connecticut). Moreover, Los Angeles also has the fewest miles of freeway per capita—about 50 miles per million people compared with an average for U.S. urban areas of about 120. Crowding combined with inadequate highways explains why Los Angeles is so congested.

Metro (1994) admitted that "in public discussions we gather the general impression that Los Angeles represents a future to be avoided." Yet "with respect to density and road per capita mileage it displays an investment pattern we desire to replicate" (7) in Portland. Metro has approved its plan to "replicate" Los Angeles in Portland. But implementation is proving difficult. Portland suburbanites are unwilling to accept the restrictions on their freedom that smart growth demands.

Michael McCormick (1997), the author of smart-growth legislation recently passed by the Washington state legislature, lamented such resistance recently at a conference held in Vancouver, B.C. "I like British Columbians because of their willingness to be governed," he admitted. "They accept regulation and I just think, wouldn't it be great if we could have that south of the border?"

The Environmental Protection Agency thinks it has the way to overcome resistance by suburbs that don't want to be under the thumb of a regional government. Harriet Tregoning (1998), the director of the EPA's urban affairs division, endorses regional government and will help to give it teeth by withholding federal transportation funds from local governments that refuse to cooperate. Meanwhile, the open-space funds proposed by Vice President Gore are to be a carrot that will be given only to communities that adopt smart-growth policies.

Conclusion

Smart growth is a threat to freedom of choice, private property rights, mobility, and local governance. Although smart-growth policies seem drastic, they are really a natural extension of the zoning laws that cities have adopted since the 1920s. Those zoning laws have been made increasingly restrictive over the years, and smart growth will make them even more prescriptive. Smart growth is clearly an example of creeping social regulation, if not creeping socialism.

References

- Calavita, Nico. 1997. Vale of Tiers: San Diego's Much-Lauded Growth Management System May Not Be as Good as It Looks. *Planning* 63 (3):18-21.
- Chiot, Daniel. 1991. What Happened in Eastern Europe in 1989? In *The Crisis of Leninism and the Decline of the Left: The Revolutions of 1989*, edited by Daniel Chiot. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Cox, Wendall. 1999. New US Light Rail Volumes Compared to Freeway and Arterial Lanes. <http://www.publicpurpose.com>.
- Downs, Anthony. 1992. *Stuck in Traffic: Coping with Peak-Hour Traffic Congestion*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Fentress, Aaron. 1999. Beaverton Pays to Save Round. *The Oregonian*, July 23, C1.

- Fishman, Robert. 1988. The Post-War American Suburb: A New Form, A New City. In *Two Centuries of American Planning*, edited by Daniel Schaffer. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1961. City Planning and Urban Realities: A Review of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. *Books in Review*, pp. 170-73.
- . 1967. *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*. New York: Pantheon.
- . 1982. *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian Americans*. Updated edition. New York: Free Press.
- Gordon, Peter, and Harry Richardson. 1997. Are Compact Cities a Desirable Planning Goal? *Journal of the American Planning Association* 61 (1):95-107. Available at http://www.smartgrowth.org/library/apa_pointcounterpoint/apa_sprawl.html.
- Hall, Dee J. 1995. The Choice: High Density or Urban Sprawl. *Wisconsin State Journal*, July 23.
- Inskip, Steve. 1997. Commuting IV. Washington, D.C.: National Public Radio. Available at <http://iris.npr.org/plweb-cgi/fastweb?getdoc+npr+npr+21403+1+wAAA+congestion>.
- Kay, Jane Holtz. 1997. *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took over America and How We Can Take It Back*. New York: Crown.
- Keats, John. 1956. *The Crack in the Picture Window*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kunstler, James Howard. 1993. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Manmade Landscape*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ladd, Helen. 1992. Population Growth, Density and the Costs of Providing Public Services. *Urban Studies* 29 (2):273-95.
- McCormick, Michael. 1997. Speech to the joint convention of the Washington Chapter of the American Planning Association and the Planning Institute of British Columbia. Vancouver, B.C., April 23.
- Metro. 1994. *Metro Measured*. Portland, Ore.: Metro.
- Metro. 1996. *Regional Transportation Plan Update*. Portland, Ore.: Metro.
- Metro. 1998. *Region 2040 Plan*. Portland, Ore.: Metro.
- Metropolitan Council. 1996. *Regional Transportation Plan*. St. Paul, Minn.: Metropolitan Council.
- Mowbray, A. Q. 1969. *Road to Ruin*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.
- National Association of Home Builders. 1999. *Consumer Survey on Growth Issues*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Home Builders.
- Natural Resources Conservation Service. 1995. *Natural Resources Inventory*, table 1. Available at <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/NRI/tables/1992/table.1.html>.
- Nelson, Robert. 1977. *Zoning and Property Rights: An Analysis of the American System of Land-Use Regulation*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

- Porter, Douglas. 1991. Regional Governance of Metropolitan Form: The Missing Link in Relating Land Use and Transportation. In *Transportation, Urban Form, and the Environment*. Washington, D.C.: Transportation Research Board.
- Real Estate Research Corporation. 1974. *The Costs of Sprawl: Environmental and Economic Costs of Alternative Residential Development Patterns at the Urban Fringe*. Washington, D.C.: Council on Environmental Quality.
- Sierra Club. 1998. *The Dark Side of the American Dream*. San Francisco: Sierra Club. Available at http://www.sierraclub.org/transportation/sprawl/sprawl_report/.
- Texas Transportation Institute. 1998. *Urban Roadway Congestion Annual Report 1998*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Tregoning, Harriet. 1999. *Becoming Regional: A Federal Role*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at <http://www.smartgrowth.org>, an EPA web site.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1993. *1990 Census of Population and Housing 1990 CPH-2-1*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.