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# New Urbanism and the Apologists for Sprawl

There is an increasingly vocal group of sprawl apologists, land-use libertarians and property rights advocates who are questioning the viability of any form of development that deviates from standard sprawl.<sup>1</sup>

Their basic argument is that the problems of sprawl are either overstated or easily repaired and that there is little need to change in our patterns of development. They claim that land is plentiful and congestion can be solved with more roads. They argue that the free market efficiently expresses people's housing preferences in the form of sprawling subdivisions, that growth management drives housing prices up, and that everyone should have the right to develop their land freely. Don't mess with the American dream, don't impose more regulations: People like the suburbs the way they are.

## **This Land is Your Land**

Consider each assertion separately. Yes, land in America is plentiful. Even if we were to preserve environmentally sensitive areas, there would be more than enough space for us to sprawl as we like.

But this quantitative analysis begs the qualitative question that troubles most citizens: Even if there is plenty of land in Kansas, do we want to lose the open space and farmland in our region? The people have answered: More than 150 ballot initiatives to limit development and preserve open space were passed in 1998. All over the country there is a rebellion against leapfrog development and the loss of open space.<sup>2</sup>

Conserving land does not have to be draconian as it is made out to be. A recent regional plan for the Salt Lake City area showed that by responding to the exist-

ing market demand for rental housing, redeveloping underutilized areas and reducing the average single-family lot size by less than ten percent, the total land area needed to accommodate the next one million people would drop from 420 square miles to 167. Such a balanced approach does not mandate apartment towers for all or involve a new form of social engineering. It is simple land conservation mixed with a recognition of reasonable market forces in housing.

The apologists for sprawl contend that we could solve the traffic congestion problem by building more roads. But increasing numbers of people oppose this strategy, recognizing that it would only be a temporary fix. More roads lead inevitably to more auto-oriented development, which consumes more open space and leads to more congestion. A University of California, Berkeley, study showed that for every ten percent increase in new freeway miles, a nine percent increase in traffic would be generated within five years.

More importantly, we can no longer afford to keep building new freeways. It has been estimated that California needs to add approximately 720 new lane miles per year to keep up with its growing auto demands. The maximum ever built was 573 miles in 1967; current budgets only allow about 50 lane miles a year.

Roads are only one part of the cost. The Salt Lake study compared low-density development with more roads to a compact, transit-oriented regional future and found the former cost the new home buyer an average \$30,000 more for backbone infrastructure and services. The wealthy may be happy to pay these costs,

**Peter Calthorpe**

**The apologists for sprawl resort to oversimplifications to make their case: "developed land only represents five percent of the country—there is plenty of room," "the alternative to sprawl is high-rise living," "cars are**

# flexible, transit is not," "sprawl is the people's choice" development patterns that expand people's choices. providing a full range of housing options? What if we flexibility to walk, bike or use transit? What if we could designing complex, multifaceted communities? What

or would likely pass them on to the next generation of home buyers. But many may be priced out of living in the Salt Lake area if such a sprawl future materializes.

Why not let the users pay? Build toll lanes on existing highways, say the land-use libertarians (and, ironically, the Environmental Defense Fund). But this approach creates a very exclusive future; the next ring of sprawl will be accessible to the wealthy, who can speed down economically segregated highways while the working poor and young families without disposable income poke along in the slow lanes. Congestion solved for some, fewer choices for others.

The apologists for sprawl criticize transit as a solution to congestion. They argue that even doubling transit ridership (for example, from 2.5 percent of trips to 5 percent) is slight compensation for increased density. They're right: transit alone will not solve the congestion problem. What they overlook is there are a range of alternatives to auto use. In most of Europe, walking and biking are much more significant alternatives to auto use than transit. In Sweden, with a cold, wet climate, more than 50 percent of trips are made on foot or bike, with just 10 percent by transit and 37 percent by car.<sup>3</sup>

The key is building more walkable environments, which not only reduce the necessity of using cars for local trips but also support the use of transit for longer trips. Walkable neighborhoods coupled with good transit can have a large effect on Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT). In Portland, for example, there is a three-to-one variation in VMT per capita between its auto-oriented suburbs and walkable urban neighborhoods. In the Bay Area it ranges from 8,000 VMT per household in San Francisco to 32,000 in Contra Costa County.<sup>4</sup>

The real goal, of course, is improving people's mobility and access, not just reducing auto congestion. And this depends more on promoting different land-use patterns than building new roads. Pedestrian-oriented, mixed land-use patterns coupled with a range of transit alternatives (trains, buses, jitney, car pools, etc.) can provide much-needed choices in environments now completely monopolized by cars. Simply put, locating everyday destinations closer to home or closer together may be a better strategy than building bigger roads to connect increasingly distant places.

## Don't Mess with the Market

Supporters of sprawl contend that everyone wants a detached home in the suburbs and that any form of growth management will frustrate this natural market. But the claim that people have voted with their dollars for sprawl is simplistic. In fact, one could argue that the reverse is true.

In our ubiquitous form of growth management called local planning, many communities practice exclusionary zoning by allowing only large-lot homes to be built. This effectively excludes housing that meets the needs of many household types (singles, single moms, some empty nesters and the elderly) or lower-income people. Property rights advocates rarely decry constraints on this segment of the market. Their perspective is biased toward one segment of the population, middle-class families with kids, which accounts for only 25 percent of new home buyers.

The compelling fact is that one size no longer fits all. The 1990 census showed that only 11 percent of U.S. households are families with children and one-wage earner. Some of the other 89 percent may want single-family homes, but many may want more housing choices than current zoning allows. The inertia of our zoning regulations and banking policies constrains the options we have and therefore the expression of our needs. The truth is that the range of choices offered by the market has yet to catch up with economic and demographic changes.

If more choices were available — bungalows in walkable villages, townhomes in real towns, lofts in vital urban neighborhoods or affordable housing just about anywhere — the housing market might embrace the diversity. If we allowed zoning for more compact communities that offer urban amenities and street life, we might find that the market actually supports more density not less, more housing diversity, not less.

People fundamentally like small towns more than sprawl, and they are moving back to older urban neighborhoods and even central cities. Wherever New Urbanist communities are built in the suburbs they sell faster and for a premium, compared to standard subdivisions. Recent studies by Market Perspectives and the Urban Land Institute, comparing New Urbanist developments