**Smart-Growth Policies Will Harm Urban Areas**

**By Randal O’Toole**

Urban planners in Portland [Oregon] and many other cities today base their plans on a belief that Americans are too *auto dependent*, and that we have become that way as a result of land-use patterns that force people to drive and discourage transit, walking, and cycling. *Smart growth* is a land-use and transportation planning concept that calls for higher-density, compact urban areas, mixing commercial with residential uses, and emphasizing pedestrian-friendly design and transit-oriented development over automobile-oriented development, all aimed at reducing the amount of driving people need to do.

The term "smart growth" was first used in this way by Maryland Governor Parris Glendening in 1996. As one of Glendening's staff members later admitted, "The name 'Smart Growth' represented one of the Glendening Administration's smartest strategies," because it was "hard to oppose": anyone who questioned smart growth could be (and usually was) immediately accused of favoring "dumb growth." The clear implication is that anyone who wants to allow people to live the way that a majority of Americans actually do live must be dumb.

Before 1996, the concepts known as smart growth were often referred to as New Urbanism. Since then, at least some of the New Urbanists have distinguished themselves from smart growth by saying that smart growth is coercive, whereas New Urbanists simply want to relax existing zoning codes so they can build for those people who would prefer to live in New Urban communities. Although few object to building New Urban projects where there is market demand, many smart-growth advocates want to use coercive policies to shape people's transportation choices.

A major problem with smart growth is that its advocates have badly mistaken the causal relationships that lead people to drive rather than walk or ride transit. Smart growth is based on the design fallacy, the idea that urban design shapes human behavior. In fact, the design features that smart growth would impose on urban areas have little effect on people's travel habits. They do, however, have significant negative effects on such things as congestion and housing prices.

**Downtown Is Back?**

[Sociologist] Herbert Gans pointed out that few middle-class families with children want to live in dense, lively neighborhoods such as [activist] Jane Jacobs's Greenwich Village. But in a typical planner fashion, smart-growth advocates reason that since most residents of dense, mixed-use neighborhoods are childless, therefore most child-free households will be glad to live in such neighborhoods. ([The logical fallacy can be expressed as:] "All dogs have four legs, so anything with four legs is a dog.") They imagine, for example, that as baby boomers become empty nesters, large numbers of them will want to move back to the high-density neighborhoods they enjoyed before they had children.

There is no doubt that some people prefer living in high-density, mixed-use neighborhoods. As Gans hints, they are mainly young singles or childless couples. But between 1990 and 2000, the vast majority of growth of these groups—in fact, in virtually every population group—was in the suburbs, not in cities.

Claims for a recent "downtown rebound" based on changing preferences toward high-density, mixed-use housing, for example, are greatly exaggerated. "'Downtown is Back' seemed to be a common observation in the 1990s," says a [mortgage provider] Fannie Mae study. "This was more than wishful thinking," the study says optimistically, but then adds, "The actual numbers of downtown growth are relatively small."

That's putting it mildly. The study looked at 24 urban areas and found that, during the 1990s, downtown populations had grown in 18 of them. But total population growth in those 18 downtowns was just over 54,000 people, an average of about 3,000 per downtown. During the same period, the cities surrounding those downtowns grew by more than 77,000 people and the suburbs of those cities grew by 5.54 million people, or more than 100 times as much as the downtowns. Considering that at least some of the cities in the study, including Denver and Portland, subsidized their downtown population growth, it is hard to see in these numbers much of a signal that Americans desire to live in smart-growth neighborhoods....

**A One-Way Street**

The fundamental premise of smart growth—that urban design can and should be used to change people's transportation choices—is based on a misunderstanding about cause and effect. Smart-growth planners correctly recognize that there is a connection between transportation and land use; but they fail to accept that it is a one-way street: transportation technology influences land use, but land use does not significantly affect people's transportation choices....

Steam trains in the 1830s, horsecars in the 1850s, cable cars in the 1870s, electric streetcars and subways in the 1890s, and automobiles in the 1910s each reduced transportation costs and allowed more people to live in their preferred styles of housing. For many, that meant a single-family home with a yard. While early technologies such as steam trains and horsecars were accessible only to the wealthy, electric streetcars helped create a growing middle class while Henry Ford's automobiles were affordable to the working class.

By the 1920s, the suburbs were fast becoming the dominant lifestyle, not only in America but in many other countries as well. "In the days of electrical transmission, the automobile and the telephone," said [architect] Frank Lloyd Wright in 1922, urban concentration "becomes needless congestion—it is a curse." "Cities are doomed," agreed Henry Ford in the same year. "There is no city now existing that would be rebuilt as it is, if it were destroyed." Ford was right: where early-19th-century cities had high population densities with concentrated job centers—think Brooklyn—late-20th-century cities have low population densities with widely dispersed jobs—think Phoenix.

While the Depression and World War II put a damper on suburbanization, it greatly accelerated after 1945. Between the 1950 and 1990 censuses, many major cities lost population while the overall urban areas in which they were located grew. The 2000 census revealed that some—though far from all—cities made a slight recovery, but in most cases their suburbs continued to grow far faster than the cities....

**Demonizing the Suburbs**

While it doesn't threaten rural open space, health, or community, suburbanization did cause a number of feuds that set the stage for the modern anti-sprawl movement. Central city officials resented the suburbanites who seemed to take advantage of the city without paying their fair share of taxes toward it. Downtown property owners resented suburban shopping malls that quickly captured most of their retail business and suburban office and industrial parks that left some downtowns nearly vacant. Neighborhood residents resented the highways that took many homes and imposed noise and traffic on the homes that were left behind. Although most of the leaders of these groups lived in their own single-family homes with large yards, their solution was to demonize the suburbs and anyone who wanted to live in them.

For most people, automobiles provided access to low-cost land where they could afford to own their own homes. Far from causing congestion, the resulting low-density development was actually the solution to congestion. "Suburbanization has been the dominant and successful mechanism for coping with congestion," say University of Southern California planning professors Peter Gordon and Harry Richardson. People in suburbs don't necessarily want to drive more than people in cities. But because the suburbs are less congested, driving costs less, and so they may in fact drive a little more. At the same time, the growth of driving in dense cities has matched and in some cases exceeded driving growth in the suburbs.

**A Weak Link**

If traffic is the problem, then smart growth is entirely the wrong solution. The notion that higher densities lead people to drive less appeals to planners who suffer from the design fallacy, yet there is no merit to this belief. In 1999, a U.S. Department of Transportation researcher reviewed numerous studies on the relationship between density and driving. He found that those who claimed that density reduced driving were "spurious" because they failed to account for differences in such factors as income and household size. When such factors are considered, changes in driving are significant only at very high densities. For example, one study found that increasing suburban densities (1,000 to 2,000 people per square mile) to 25,000 or more people per square mile would reduce driving by only 11 to 25 percent. Another found that increasing densities from 3,600 people per square mile (the average for U.S. urban areas in 1990) to 5,400 people per square mile would reduce driving by less than 3 percent.

The weak link between density and driving can be seen in ... data from the 2000 census on how people usually traveled to work with population densities in the nation's 452 urban areas. In the vast majority of regions, more than 90 percent of commuters take autos to work. This group ranges from Kingsport, Tennessee, with a density of less than 1,000 people per square mile and where 98.5 percent of people drive to work, to Los Angeles, the nation's densest urban area at more than 7,000 people per square mile and where 91.5 percent of people drive to work. If density is a factor at all in these urban areas, it appears that multiplying density by seven times will get little more than 7 percent of commuters out of their cars.

Fewer than 90 percent of commuters choose to drive to work in just 49 of the 452 urban areas measured in the 2000 census. The 49 exceptions are almost all university towns or cities with major job centers in pedestrian-oriented downtowns. The university towns, including Davis, California; Ithaca, New York; and State College, Pennsylvania, have large percentages of young people who walk or bicycle to work. The major cities with large concentrations of downtown jobs, such as Boston, New York, and San Francisco, have many commuters who take transit to those jobs.

**Job Distribution and Concentration**

Unless planners outlaw middle age, they are unlikely to have much of an influence on the age distribution of individual urban areas. So the best opportunity they have to reduce auto commuting is by influencing the job distribution. Yet job distributions are influenced more by history than by government planning or regulation. American cities were built in three periods:

* Before 1890, cities were designed for pedestrians because few people could afford to travel except on foot. They had highly concentrated populations close to or intermingled with highly concentrated jobs.
* Between 1890 and 1930, streetcars were a dominant form of travel, especially for the middle class. Cities built during this period tended to have dense residential areas of single-family homes on small lots, but they were not necessarily close to the jobs. Jobs also spread out a little more and could be located in multiple centers instead of just downtown.
* After World War II, the automobile was the dominant form of travel. Cities built during this period tended to have low-density residential areas of single-family homes on large lots, and jobs were widely distributed throughout the area. These cities often lacked traditional downtowns unless the city had gone out of its way to subsidize high-rise construction.

Today, the only American cities with significant remnants of the pedestrian era are Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington. These urban areas still have concentrated job cores and a dense central-city population, surrounded by younger, lower-density suburbs. Most other cities that had been densely built before 1890 lost so much of their populations to the suburbs after 1945 that they no longer qualify as pedestrian cities. St. Louis, a once-dense city that lost 60 percent of its population to its suburbs after 1950, is a classic example.

The remnants of a classic streetcar city—a dense city of single-family homes—can be found today in much of Los Angeles. Many other northern cities such as Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Seattle retain significant characteristics of the streetcar era. These urban areas have multiple job centers, but their population densities are much higher than the densities of their suburbs.

Many cities that have grown since World War II have virtually no characteristics of pedestrian or streetcar cities. They include Atlanta, Houston, and other Sun Belt cities that did not really start growing until air conditioning became affordable. These regions tend to have low densities and numerous job centers, and the central cities are often no denser than the suburbs....

Las Vegas, Miami, and San Jose have greatly increased their densities in the past two or three decades, yet with both populations and jobs evenly spread out, transit plays a minimal role in commuting and travel. The overall densities of Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington are low, but with dense concentrations of jobs and people at their cores, transit plays a much larger role in commuting than in regions with denser populations but no significant job concentrations.

These numbers tell us that job concentration, not overall population density, is the key to making transit work. Even if the overall population density is low, it helps if a dense central city is located next to the concentrated jobs. This is confirmed by research in Montreal, one of the densest cities in Canada. "Denser areas have lower [per capita] auto ownership," the research found. "But it takes a large increase in density to reduce the number of vehicles a household owns." Moreover, because "people who don't want to drive are likely to choose locations where they don't have to," merely increasing population density won't reduce driving. The most important influence on reducing car ownership was "having a central-business district worker in the household." Overall, "centrality [of jobs] has more effect [on auto ownership] than population density."

**A Mobile Society**

Despite this, smart-growth planners do not call for concentrating jobs downtown. Instead, they seek a "jobs-housing balance" so that every part of an urban area has enough jobs to meet the needs of the residents of that portion of the area. This way, planners hope, people will live close enough to their jobs that they can walk or cycle to them. The problem is that, in a mobile society, people no longer consider proximity to work a high priority when locating their homes. In fact, one University of California study found that people actually prefer to live some distance from work. So it is not surprising that University of California planning professor Robert Cervero found that jobs and housing in many San Francisco Bay Area communities "are nearly perfectly balanced, yet fewer than a third of their workers reside locally, and even smaller shares of residents work locally."

Smart growth is based on fundamental misunderstandings of how people, cities, and urban areas work. Yet it has become a dominant paradigm in many cities and regions that rely on urban planners to help them prepare for their futures. The results are proving to be even more disastrous than the effects of the urban renewal programs of the 1950s and 1960s.

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