

## New Urbanism and Sprawl

It would be difficult to understand the New Urbanism movement without understanding their concept of what “sprawl” means. To say that sprawl is viewed negatively by New Urbanists would be a gross understatement, for it is the antithesis of what their ideal of the right type of planning and living is.

In New Urbanism, sprawl is exemplified primarily by the construction of housing subdivisions which are “unwalkable”, that is, it is necessary to drive a car to buy even the most basic of goods and services.

Sprawl has come about for a number of reasons. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American cities began to experience sprawl as families that became more affluent built homes at the edge of the central core of the city and others continued to leapfrog beyond that, creating low-density developments.

The so-called “push” factor also caused people to move from the inner cities to the suburbs. As the populations in the central core of cities began to increase, so did crime, and the quality of schools declined. The combination of high crime and poor education caused many families to leave the inner city for the suburbs, and as they did, crime and education worsened in the inner cities.

Some New Urbanists believe that government policies also led to the creation of suburban sprawl. New roads (especially the Interstate highway system) that created new access to land led to greater opportunities for development, especially outside of city limits. The home mortgage interest deduction, long considered an important factor in encouraging

home ownership and construction, is also viewed as a leading cause for suburban sprawl by New Urbanists.

And, of course, the automobile gets most of the blame for suburban sprawl, for without mobility, we would not have been able to commute between the inner cities where our jobs were, and the suburbs, where we chose to live.

Finally, and as a practical matter, growth in our population has led people to leave overcrowded inner cities for suburban neighborhoods. According to one source, it was not unusually for densities to be 100,000 people per square mile in the nineteenth century. When mobility became available, whether by rail or by the automobile, these densities declined as families moved to the suburbs, which was seen as a positive thing at the time.

To combat sprawl, New Urbanists began to tout the validity of a new policy called Smart Growth. According to a 2000 joint study done by the Heritage Foundation and the Political Economy Research Center, Smart Growth supporters push four key concepts.

The first is that “Infrastructure projects (public works, such as roads, sewers, water mains, and schools) should be more carefully “targeted” so that they will be more “efficient.” In practice, this means less infrastructure.”

Second, “New development should be more “transit oriented”, with the provision for light rail lines or bus routes.”

Third, “Development should be more “compact,” or built to higher densities than is typical of suburban development today, partly to accommodate the proposed transit.”

And fourth, “Urban growth boundaries – a defined circumference around existing

urban areas beyond which no development is allowed – could be employed.”

The report further stated that, “Although the smart growth critique offers sensible sound bites about reducing planning and zoning regulations and allowing the market to work, in practice the smart growth agenda is highly prescriptive. With its emphasis on such techniques as “targeting” infrastructure, drawing urban growth boundaries, and creating regional governments, smart growth policy would require more centralized power and a planning process that greatly exceeds the scope of existing urban planning...The tendency of smart growth policy to approach social engineering is seen most explicitly in discussions of transportation... At the root of their passion is the attitude that cars are evil – akin to a rolling cigarette – and that building roads is enabling Americans’ dependency on this bad habit...Rail transit is viewed increasingly as a means of reshaping and increasing the density of suburban areas.”

In other words, redeveloping suburbs into higher densities while prohibiting further suburban development will lead to the elimination of sprawl.

Is this sounding familiar to anyone?

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