

MANAGED GROWTH IN RESPONSE TO SUBURBAN SPRAWL: MERITS, NEGATIVES, AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Suburban sprawl is generally defined as rapid, low-density development of the land near, but not within, urban areas that is often marked by segregated land usage, a general dependence on cars, residential subdivisions, and strip commercial development. The trend, one involving a population changing its location, is not a new one in America. As far back as the mid-19th century, when great changes in transportation technology, agricultural production, and manufacturing led to unprecedented levels of urbanization, population shifts have triggered controversy. The population issue of today, rapid suburbanization, presents many of the same problems as the urbanization of yesterday. In the past, “truly striking inequalities developed in the cities, where a small fraction of the people owned a huge share of urban wealth”(Boyer et al. 286). Along with this economic stratification, environmental destruction played a role in urbanization. One visitor to the city of Louisville in the mid-1800s observed that the city ““by nature [was] beautiful, but the handy Work of Man [had] instead of improving destroy’d the works of nature and made it a detestable place”(Boyer et al. 281). These two trends, and their debated association with suburbanization, are even more pressing today. Suburban sprawl has its roots in a set of past events. In the early 20th century, cities began to establish zoning ordinances in order to segregate industrial areas from residential areas (Sahlstrom). With the framework for growth established, post-World War II government loan programs “directed at new single-family suburban construction” (Duany, Plater-Zyberg, Speck 5) combined with “a 41,000 mile interstate highway program”(Duany et al. 8) and the rise of the affordable automobile led to a mass immigration to the suburbs. Whether a good thing or bad, the sheer size of the immigration and the growth it causes cannot be disputed. As the suburbs grew in size to become cities in their own right, “[b]etween 1960 and 1990, the amount of developed land in metro areas more than doubled, while the population grew by less than half” (Benfield, Terris, Vorsanger 3). “In Maryland, more open space will be converted to housing between 1995 and 2020 than during the last 350 years...[T]he suburbs of Atlanta now sprawl for a linear distance of 110 miles”(Nickens, par. 12). The magnitude and nature of growth present an important question to American policymakers: Should suburban sprawl be curtailed by planning the future growth of cities?

Those who support planned growth as a method of rectifying the problems associated with suburban sprawl contend that the myriad problems associated with the unchecked growth of communities could be ameliorated by additional government planning. Those who oppose planned growth claim that such planning would be detrimental to Americans, and would cause many of the same problems that advocates of planning hope to avoid. Furthermore, they claim that sprawl can often have positive impacts. Common ground might be reached if local governments begin to enact planning that both protects the environment and allows for growth, while preventing social stratification.

Advocates of controlled growth claim that suburban sprawl causes significant problems. The extremely rapid and unchecked growth of suburbs, these advocates claim, has led to increased traffic congestion and time spent in cars- something that suburban dwellers hope to avoid.

In fact, according to United States Census Bureau statistics published in the Christian Science Monitor, the average American commute time during the 1990s increased by three minutes as more Americans moved to less populated areas (Belsie, “Even with Jobs...” par. 5). Another factor in the increased driving time, the fact that workers often “can’t afford to live near their work” (Belsie, “Even with Jobs...” par. 9), provides evidence for the claim that suburban sprawl leads to the separation of people by income. This segregation “is a phenomenon that was invented by developers who, lacking a meaningful way to distinguish their mass-produced merchandise, began selling the concept of exclusivity”(Duany et al. 43).

Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich “calls this phenomenon the ‘secession of the successful’”(Duany et al. 45). Those who work against suburban sprawl claim that the trend has been also unfair for the poor in other ways. Forced to spend thousands of dollars on the commute to their jobs- which fled to the suburbs with the middle class- if they can even obtain one, the inner-city poor, the majority of America’s poor, struggle because of sprawl, according to James Kunstler. But furthermore, because those in the middle class have found it necessary to purchase one or more cars to function in their sprawling society, it has become difficult for some to find *any* housing that they have enough money left over to pay for. While “[i]n 1970, about 50 percent of all families could afford a median-priced home; by 1990, this number had dropped below 25 percent”(Duany et al. 55). So suburban sprawl, its opponents contend, has had negative



(Fig. 1). A higher number of highways and traffic congestion are considered both causes and effects of suburban sprawl.

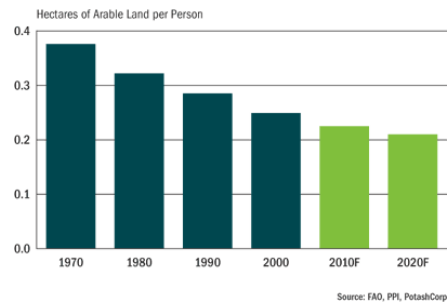
effects on both the poor and the middle-class. According to the authors of *Suburban Nation*, car-dependent suburbia socially cripples two groups generally without driver's licenses- the elderly and children. Some studies have also shown a correlation between sprawl and poor health. According to a study conducted by Smart Growth America, those who live in areas defined as sprawling are more likely to have weight and heart problems. "Researchers used Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Data to look at health characteristics of more than 200,000 individuals living in 448 U.S. counties in major metropolitan areas"(King, par. 3). While "[r]esidents of...large, compact cities tend to be thinner and at lower risk of high blood pressure"(King, par. 2), "[t]hose living in the outlying suburbs of mid-sized cities...were likelier to be out of shape"(King, par. 2). Additional studies released in conjunction with the health study show that "[s]prawl costs much more than managed development in terms of the loss of natural resources and the financial impact on local services"(King, par. 9). Not only has sprawl been harmful to people, its opponents claim, it has also had serious repercussions for the environment. Though the damaging effects of air and water pollutants from the higher levels of cars and roads are obvious, species of animals have also lost habitats to human growth, and therefore many species have either gone extinct or have become in danger of doing so over the past half century. For example, while there are "roughly 60 adult Florida panthers remaining in the world"(Nickens, par. 3), their remaining habitats have been encroached upon by building projects- resulting in the National Wildlife Federation filing a lawsuit against a group of federal agencies on the grounds that they have funded building that encourages sprawl, "in clear violation of the Endangered Species Act"(Nickens, par. 28). The destructive effects of sprawl have so outraged some that a few have engaged in terrorism to fight it. The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) has moved its attacks to more densely populated areas since 2000 (Hettena, Wides pars. 1, 10, 11) because, according to self-proclaimed ELF spokesman Rod Coronado, some of the new environmental activists are "doing the only thing they know to do and that is strike a match and draw a whole lot of attention to their dissatisfaction"(Hettena, Wides par. 8).



(Fig. 2) An artist's rendering of the potential damage to be done by the building of the Legacy Highway in Utah, thereby increasing sprawl, demonstrates the passion of sprawl's opponents.

In the eyes of less radical opponents of suburban sprawl, its negative effects have been damaging enough to warrant government action to slow its progress. The movement to implement such action refers to controlled growth as “smart growth,” and the darling of the “smart growth” movement is the city of Portland, Oregon. Portland, in one of America’s most extreme measures to curtail sprawl, “established an urban growth in 1980 that protects farmland...and tightly limits development in outlying areas”(Schmidt, par. 22). Many communities around the country have opted instead to pursue the encouragement of planned, high-density, mixed-use development, and some have installed more mass transit systems to complement this development. Another popular course is to restrict development in certain areas by setting aside certain land.

Opponents of controlled growth claim that the many supposed problems with sprawl are either overemphasized or unsubstantiated. A few even take issue with the generally accepted causes of suburban sprawl. In the view of Peter Gordon and Harry W. Richardson, “[c]ities around the world have grown outwards for almost all of recorded history... But the strong demand for new housing in the late 1940s made the expansion appear new”(Gordon, Richardson par. 2). They argue that the “notion that American is rapidly running out of farmlands” (Gordon, Richardson par. 10), for example, is baseless because as time has passed, “agriculture has become considerably more productive”(Gordon, Richardson par. 10). Moreover, according to a study conducted by the politically conservative Heritage Foundation, concerns over treasured national land falling victim to sprawl are without significant merit due to the fact that “only 5.2 percent of the continental United States is defined as ‘developed’”(Utt, par. 1). Furthermore, according to a USDA report cited in the study, “Urbanization and the increase in rural residences do not threaten the U.S. cropland base or the level of agriculture production at present or in the near term”(Utt, par. 31).



(Fig. 3). Though the amount of fertile land in America is undeniably decreasing, opponents of managed growth claim that increased productivity and the large amount of land still available nullify this supposed problem.

Some opponents of controlled growth also contend that suburbanization helps to ameliorate, rather than exacerbate, traffic congestion by spreading out residences. Others admit the existence of increased congestion due to sprawl, but believe that the issue could be easily thwarted with common-sense measures

such as building more access lanes to major roads and not building so many driveways from businesses to the roads (Holcombe 4). Some even go so far as to claim that suburban sprawl can have positive effects on the environment because the many yards and trees in the subdivisions integral to sprawl absorb pollutants (Holcombe 4). Opponents of controlled growth also argue that sprawl is an outgrowth of and a catalyst for economic development. Leapfrog development, for example, a type of growth in which developers build homes far from a city and leave empty space between the new homes and the city, “nurtures compact commercial development”(Holcombe 3) because land that has been hopped over is then ideal for businesses.

Opponents of controlled growth also claim that the government planning of growth has caused serious problems. According to the aforementioned Heritage Foundation study, growth management policies hurt middle class efforts to live in desirable homes in that they tend to raise the price of single-family, low-density housing in order to encourage high-density living. Moreover, the practice of raising prices for homes hurts the efforts of minorities to purchase homes. An earlier Heritage Foundation study found that “[t]hose who are harmed by escalating prices are those who are not yet owners, and this group consists largely of those with household incomes below the median, especially minorities”(Utt, par. 53). Furthermore, according to a 1997 study conducted by Tufts University, “[i]n sprawled areas, black households consume larger units and are more likely to own their own homes than in less sprawled areas”(Utt, par. 55). Therefore, the conclusion drawn by promoters of “dumb growth” is that controlled growth, rather than sprawl, leads to segregation, stratification, and the squeezing of the middle class. Defenders of sprawl also see efforts to control growth as oftentimes wasteful. As Gordon and Richardson note, “[a]fter more than \$350 billion of public spending on mass transit since the early 1960s, both use per capita and miles traveled are at historic lows”(Gordon, Richardson, par. 14). Perhaps most importantly, opponents of controlled growth argue that Americans *prefer* low-density living, and that to hinder their ability to live as they desire to would be an assault on their freedom. As land usage law expert John M. Codd put it, “[i]t’s American dream, which... includes a piece of green lawn attached to your living unit. I think there will always be a large segment of the population who will want to live in suburbia and, it’s kind of stupid, but it’s one of the things that’s nice about America”(Codd).

Although suburban sprawl and how to deal with it is clearly a controversial issue, compromise is possible. However, those on the extremes of the debate will most likely not be satisfied with potential solutions. As Codd explains, “I don’t think you’re going to get the developers to sit down across the table from the environmentalists and work something out. It’s just not going to happen. I think you need to have a third party step in... I think it requires governmental action, if that’s what society wants”(Codd). Any government action that takes place, though, must be localized and limited. It must allow for continued high-quality, noninvasive development. If, as many claim, “the two elements of the suburban pattern that cause the greatest problems are the extreme separation of uses and the vast distances between things”(Kunstler 117), then the greatest problems can be mitigated with such projects as the one that took place recently in a suburb of Chattanooga, Tennessee. City planners there converted a declining mall and its large parking lot into a full-fledged town center with restaurants, a corporate call center, a YMCA, a subsidiary campus of the Chattanooga State Technical Community College, an open air ice-skating rink, and bus access (Benfield et al. 100). However, its success was only possible because of “the convergence of public initiative and private investment”(Benfield et al. 100) that took place, according to observers. Such development maintains the elements of suburbia its inhabitants enjoy, while supplying the spirit and charm of a small town. Another potential route for continuing development in a nondestructive way is to pursue “urban infill,” or building on unused or abandoned areas of the city. Maryland’s Montgomery County, for example, has implemented a system called the “transfer of development rights” in which landowners in protected areas can sell areas of land in an urban area to developers. As both sides want to prevent social stratification, steps must be taken in order to do so when planning growth. Solutions to the growth controversy are possible and steps have been made around the country to curtail environmental destruction and unnecessary sprawl while still allowing for the growth necessary in a healthy economy.

Though population shifts are not new, America’s rapid suburbanization presents unique issues that can only be overcome through compromise. Proponents and opponents of controlled growth must be willing to make sacrifices in order to protect the environment and the American way of life. Although the fact that “[p]eople do like to be out of the city”(Belsie, “Rural America’s New...” par. 13) cannot be denied, there is no reason why this desire should lead to utterly car-dependent suburbs that fundamentally alter how Americans live and how the land is affected.

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Figure 1- <http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/population/whitepaper.asp>

Figure 2- <http://www.stoplegacyhighway.org/images/monster2.gif>

Figure 3-

http://www.potashcorp.com/common/images/content_images/markets/industry_overview/2004/graphs/04AG_05-LandAvailPerPerson.gif