

DEMOGRAPHIA

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Opiate of the Planners: Smart Growth and Urban Containment

Had Moses descended Sinai yesterday, the tablets would have contained at least one additional commandment --- one outlawing with urban sprawl (it might not have been stated directly, a simple “Thou shalt not prosper and be happy” would have done the job). Urban sprawl --- the geographical spreading out of urban areas has become the stuff of public policy hysteria. America may have been the “Great Satan” to the Ayatolla Khomeini, but urban sprawl is the great Satan for today’s crusading legions of urban planners.

A well financed (often with our money) anti-sprawl movement (operating under the title “smart growth”) trumps up study after study blaming sprawl for everything from a lack of community spirit to obesity. The movement operates under the moniker “Smart growth,” but a more descriptive one would be the “anti-opportunity” movement. It is anti-opportunity because it would force housing prices up, deprive millions of households, disproportionately minority, of home ownership, while increasing travel times and reducing the number of jobs accessible, again to the disproportionate harm of lower income households, especially minorities. It is perhaps the ultimate irony that this anti-opportunity movement would place barriers in the way of minority economic advancement, when so many of its political forebears marched with Dr. King.

Social engineering is the principal product of anti-opportunity movement --- and the principal strategy is to force people to live in smaller spaces in more dense cities. The movement also wants to improve transit, discourage driving and suspend expansion of roadways. Never mind that U.S. metropolitan planning organizations project that virtually all future increases in urban travel demand will be personal vehicle ---- as in cars and SUV’s. “Some call it Nirvana,” Portland (Oregon) proudly leads in implementing these policies, and its citizens are already reaping the consequences.

Recall how Copernicus, relying on fact, proclaimed that the earth revolves around the sun, challenging an establishment whose livelihood depended upon ignorant religious doctrines to the contrary. Not since Copernicus has the establishment gotten it more wrong.

While this essay employs humor to debunk some of the most misleading claims of the anti-opportunity movement, this is very serious business. It is about the future of the American Dream and the expansion of greater opportunity for all --- opportunity for home ownership and opportunity for being able to inexpensively and quickly access all that an urban area has to offer, including what drives their growth --- employment.

The myths of the anti-sprawl, smart growth, anti-opportunity movement are presented in descending order (in the author's view) of egregiousness.

Myth #1: The “Sun Rises in the West?” Smart Growth Does not Reduce Housing Affordability: Economists of every stripe agree that rationing raises prices. Forcing higher densities, whether through urban growth boundaries, excessive impact fees, down-zoning or other unnecessary restrictions on development rationa land. Of course, this forces prices higher, making housing less affordable. So it is not surprising that Nirvana, with its Berlin Wall urban growth boundary led the nation in the loss of housing affordability over the last decade. Nor does it surprise that Oregon's economics-illiterate anti-growth laws vaulted that state to the same title among the states. Yet urban planners are in denial, commissioning “sun rises in the west” reports by consultants purporting to show that the laws of economics have been suspended in Oregon. And, there is no shortage of Arthur Andersonesque consulting firms clamoring to please.

Myth #2: “One More Passenger Makes More Room:” Myth: Higher Densities Mean Less Traffic Congestion: Both international and national evidence make it clear -- - higher densities increase traffic congestion. True, per capita travel by automobile declines a bit as densities rise, but not enough to keep traffic from getting a lot worse. This is because adding more of anything to a constricted space increases crowding --- adding one more passenger to a crowded Tokyo subway car does not make things less crowded. Of course, it would be possible to keep traffic moving --- Portland, for example, might build a double or even a triple-deck freeway and arterial system. But, of course, the anti-automobile ideologues have no intention of improving roadway systems --- for them the answer is to let congestion get worse. That's why Randal O'Toole labeled them the “Congestion Coalition.”

Myth #3. “It's Better to Guess than Look:” Lower, Suburban Densities are Associated with Higher Government Costs: A stack of anti-opportunity reports suggests that we can “no longer afford” our low density life style --- the higher taxes and fees that are purportedly caused by lower densities. But even if one is inclined to believe them, calculating the projected costs per capita per year yields only modest sums, small in relation to annual average income increases. But there is a more fundamental problem --- the actual evidence says otherwise. Actual data indicates that lower density cities have *lower* expenditure levels than higher density cities, and cities with newer housing stock (read second and third ring suburbs) have *lower* public expenditures than central cities and first ring suburbs. Sometimes it is necessary to climb out of the ivory tower and look at things as they are.

Myth #4: “Two Tail Pipes is Better than One:” Higher Densities Mean Less Air Pollution: United States Environmental Protection Agency research says that air pollution emissions are higher where traffic speeds are slower (at least at urban speeds) and that emissions are higher where there is more “stop and go” traffic. Higher densities mean more traffic congestion (above), which in turn means slower traffic speeds and more stop and go operation. More tail pipes do not emit less pollution.

Myth #5: “Cities as Victims:” Central Cities Are the Victims of Suburban Growth: America’s central cities have lost population, while suburbs have gained. It does not, however, follow that city losses occurred because of suburban growth. Over the past half-century, America has become more and more urban as rural residents have moved to urban areas, where they have accounted for much of suburban growth. But more importantly, the cities have driven away many who would like to have stayed. There was urban renewal, higher taxes, substandard and unreliable services, political corruption and crime. Then there was forced busing, which during its heyday decade of the 1970s saw half of the 50-year central city population loss occur. It was not the cities that were victims, it was their residents who felt constrained to leave. It is even worse for the unfortunate who remain captive in some cities to governments that apparently use failing third world urban areas as their models.

Myth #6: “The Cost is the Benefit:” Rail Transit Reduces Traffic Congestion: This enduring myth is the first refuge of the “railvangelists,” romantics and carpet bagging rail builders who try to sell their elixir from Portland to Sioux City (yes, Sioux City). In fact, there is no evidence that new rail transit has materially reduced traffic congestion in any urban area, US or Western Europe. Building rail is justified principally by an irresistible urge to spend money --- our money. The cost is the benefit. Of course, the historic rail systems serving the pre-automobile cores of New York, Chicago, Paris, London, Tokyo or Hong Kong are essential. But Sioux City is not Hong Kong. Neither, for that matter, are Phoenix or Portland.

Myth #7: “Picking Winners:” Rail Transit for “Transportation Choice:” From Cincinnati to Austin, transit spending advocates quickly abandon their baseless claims that rail reduces traffic congestion when challenged. They Rasputinly return with what they call “transportation choice” --- the idea that building rail transit provides choices for people. Choices for whom? At most, it is choices for the small percentage of people who work downtown, which is the only destination to which transit provides what, can be considered automobile competitive service (whether Phoenix, Paris, New York or Nirvana). To provide genuine transit choice for all, rather than “picking winners,” would require annual expenditures that rival the gross income of any U.S. urban area.¹ Would an attempt by Portland to limit what is perceived to be superior education opportunities to students living close to Interstate Avenue or Powell Boulevard, while ignoring the needs of others?

Myth #8: “Maternity Wards Make Babies:” We Can’t Built Our Way Out of Congestion: This proceeds from the belief that new roadway capacity creates new traffic

¹ See “The Illusion of Transit Choice,” www.publicpurpose.com/illusion.pdf.

(the “induced traffic” effect) --- suggesting a corollary that building more maternity wards would increase the birth rate. This leads to a further conclusion that, given enough road capacity, Americans will eventually spend 36 to 72 hours per day behind the wheel. More rational minds, however, at the Federal Highway Administration found little induced traffic effect, and even that withers away when travel time is considered (instead of distance).

Myth #9: “Herding Cats:” The Jobs-Housing Balance. This is one of the most fervently held doctrines. The idea is planners should design transportation and land use so that the distance between work and home is minimized. This may be the most bankrupt, and surely the most arrogant concept in the entire smart growth confession of faith. Census data indicates that barely 20 percent of households consider proximity to the location as the principle reason for selecting their neighborhood. This suggests that herding cats would have at least as high a probability of success. The problem is that a jobs-housing balance requires other balances as well --- a jobs-housing-education balance, a jobs-housing-interest balance and so on. In fact, there are hundreds of thousands of jobs closer to home than the one filled by the average American worker in a large urban area. And things are no different elsewhere. Hong Kong, the high-income world’s most dense urban areas (6,000,000 population in 75 square miles) has an average journey to work distance of six miles (at Hong Kong densities, the entire population of the city of Portland would be clustered within 1.5 miles of NE 23rd and Burnside). In Houston, with densities slightly less than even Portland, the average work trip travel distance is only 13 miles --- little more than double that of Hong Kong, with an urban land area more than 20 times as large. This folly of the jobs-housing balance cries out for an urban planner’s retraining program. Each devotee should be required to work, for at least a year, at the closest job, whether a convenience store, the custodial service or the fast food restaurant. That would put an end to this silliness.

Myth #10: “How Much is the Motor?” The Cost of Living is Lower Where Densities are Higher: Periodically, anti-opportunity studies emerge claiming that household transportation expenditures are higher where densities are lower. But there is more to life than transportation. The same principle can be applied to buying cars. Few price conscious buyers make their decision based upon the cost of the motor --- the issue is the cost of the car. Housing and food expenditures are so much lower where densities are *lower*, that any transportation cost advantage for higher density areas is more than erased.

Myth #11: “Why Can’t We Be Like Paris?” Europe Doesn’t Sprawl: Urban planners pilgrims have frequented sidewalk cafes across the street from the Louvre in Paris, wondering why Phoenix or Boston looks so different. What they fail to realize is that little of Paris looks like what they see. The few square miles of central Paris in which the myopic rail-bound sit is in the middle of 1,000 square miles of urban sprawl. The situation is similar throughout Western Europe where virtually all growth in urban areas has been suburban growth, and where virtually all major cities have experienced population losses (except for those that have annexed, combined or had large swaths of undeveloped land). In fact, urban population densities have fallen faster in Europe and Canada than in the United States since 1960. But to see the European urban area in its

entirety would require a mortal sin --- renting a car. At least European planners don't come over here and presume that all of the country looks like Disney World.

Myth #12: "No More Hot Dogs:" Urbanization is Consuming Agricultural Land:

It's 2030. You have been invited to a friend's house for a Saturday evening bar-b-que. The chef runs out of hot dogs and asks you to go to the store. There, the meat manager soberly explains that the last acre of agriculture production was recently consumed by a greedy developer and that there will be no more hot dogs. Sound ridiculous? Until the Clinton Agriculture Department set them straight, this was one of the principal anti-opportunity tenets. In fact, some 400 years after Jamestown, as Ron Utt reminds us, only three percent of the nation is urbanized --- 97% of it is rural. Yes there is less agricultural land than before, not because it has been consumed by urbanization, but because agriculture has become more productive. Since 1950, agricultural production has doubled, and more than the area of Texas and Oklahoma combined has been returned from agricultural use to emptiness --- open space. And this is after accounting for expanded urbanization.

Myth #13: "Literary Digest Syndrome:" Things are Going Our Way: Anti-

opportunity types often project their personal experiences into universal truths. In 1936, *Literary Digest* magazine predicted that Alf Landon would defeat FDR, using a telephone poll of its subscribers. But most households didn't have telephones then, and *Literary Digest's* subscribers were not a representative sample, as FDR's landslide was to prove. "Literary Digest" syndrome is rampant among the anti-opportunity crowd. Transit ridership increases on a miniscule base are reported as if they represented a major switch in travel behavior, even where hundreds of years of similar sustained increases would leave transit with a small share. Friends moving into the chic new urban developments lead others to suggest that people are forsaking suburbs for the city. Someone should train these people to use simple reference books, like *The World Almanac*, which can be easily obtained at the nearest big box store. Such reference volumes are as rare on anti-opportunity bookshelves as auto-owning transit riders to destinations other than downtown.



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