

Comment on Karen A. Danielsen, Robert E. Lang, and William Fulton's "Retracting Suburbia: Smart Growth and the Future of Housing"

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Abstract

Hypocrisy abounds in the smart growth movement. Many of its biggest advocates maintain the sprawling suburban lifestyle that the movement seeks to curtail. Smart growth is just the latest label for an exclusionary impulse that divides those Americans who already are enjoying the good life from those seeking to obtain it. Furthermore, smart growth threatens to derail one of the key engines of the national economy: suburban sprawl. Despite its negative image, sprawl is efficient and reflects consumer preference. In a nation where so much developable land remains, sprawl is hardly the environmental threat it is made out to be. The real threat is that the nation might adopt policies that halt development and frustrate the millions of people who seek their share of the suburban dream.

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I hate traffic jams, parking hassles, and crowding. You hate traffic jams, parking hassles, and crowding. Everybody hates traffic jams, parking hassles, and crowding. "Citizens for More Traffic" is not on the lobbying radar, and there is no powerful "PIMBY" ("put it in my backyard") movement. Emerging voter dissatisfaction with traffic backups and overdevelopment, rightly cited by Karen A. Danielsen, Robert E. Lang, and William Fulton in "Retracting Suburbia," seems likely to put sprawl on the national political agenda for the 2000 presidential campaign. Vice President Al Gore, the putative Democratic nominee, is test marketing antisprawl language, while the Republican contenders are either seconding Gore or shying away from the issue. Not even conservatives are scrambling to lock up the PIMBY voting bloc. Nobody has a kind word to say for sprawl.

Surely the arrival of sprawl as a political issue will help advance green space preservation and improve traffic engineering, two quality-of-life objectives that have long been underappreciated in urban and suburban planning. But will sprawl politics lead to fundamental changes in American growth policy? The answer to that

question is less clear, and it is less clear, too, that fundamental changes would be a good idea.

Development should be as “smart” as possible, but the emerging national voter concern about development is in considerable danger of becoming a form of political selfishness. After all, when people complain to political leaders about traffic backups and parking shortages, what they mean is that they want government to get *everybody else* off the roads. They certainly do not mean they want policies that would put them out of their own cars or deprive them of parking. Similarly, when voters oppose construction of new housing subdivisions, what they mean is that *everybody else* should live in higher density circumstances. They certainly do not mean they are willing to have their own lots carved up to put in more housing per acre.

That is to say, as the issue is currently defined, when voters complain about sprawl, what they are really saying is that they want to *preserve* sprawl—at least their own version of it. So voters really do love sprawl after all! They just do not want other people horning in. Many of those actively complaining about traffic and growth really should be called sprawl preservationists because their goal is to pull up the ladders and bar new arrivals from their communities. They seek to keep housing lots large, boulevards uncluttered, and parking slots open. Maybe the best name for them is the “Save Our Sprawl” faction.

A high percentage of the people who are outraged about excessive growth live in single-family detached homes on large lots, drive down broad boulevards, commute by car, and park at work. (That is how Al Gore lived before he became vice president.) But history teaches that if you have something nice, other people will want in. Continuing increases in population and affluence have caused more and more Americans to want the lifestyle we call sprawl, and that spoils the fun for everybody already there.

Save Our Sprawl thinking already has reached its point of self satire, with the recent agreement between the chip maker Intel and the county government surrounding Portland, OR, that Intel will pay financial penalties if it creates too many new jobs. Portland is beautiful, livable, and desirable. Present residents want to keep it that way, which is fine up to a point. But Portland’s chosen technique is to shut newcomers out, first by imposing growth boundaries, and now by adding job penalties. The result of such policies may maintain livability for the people already vested in Portland, but others will be denied the means to join them.

Portland's desire for a protected stasis might be more deserving of sympathy if it were not for the country's increasing population. Smart growth policies designed to preserve green space and improve traffic management are obviously desirable everywhere in the country, because population and automobile ownership are rising. Policies designed to restrict growth, on the other hand, may serve an elitist agenda, walling off desirable areas of first-generation sprawl for those who already have bought in, while shutting out new arrivals, prominently minorities and immigrants. Not coincidentally, antigrowth policies should drive up the value of existing nice communities and large-lot homes through supply and demand. Don't think the Save Our Sprawl lobby doesn't know this!

While Portland may or may not have a right to declare limits on its population growth, this is not an option for the country as a whole, unless Congress is to legislate fertility limits or severely restrict immigration. Projections call for the U.S. population to peak at around 390 million people in about 2050, roughly a 50 percent increase over the current level. This means the country will have no choice but to construct roughly half again as much sprawl as now exists. Many, many new suburbs are going to be built in the decades to come, in the Sunbelt and elsewhere. These new suburbs should benefit from the lessons learned from existing expansion areas: The next wave of growth must be smarter. But there is going to be a next wave, and it not only will be sprawl, it *should* be sprawl, to grant minorities, immigrants, and others the chance to live in the same favored circumstances the current generation of suburban dwellers now enjoys.

Significant sprawl expansion is not a problem from a land-area standpoint. Despite the mythology of vanishing land, nationally the urban, suburban, and otherwise built-up area of the United States occupies only 3.4 percent of the country's surface. Another half century of continued sprawl at the current development rate (around 400,000 acres per year, in a country of about 2.2 billion acres, or 0.02 percent of the land area consumed per annum) would still leave only about 5 percent of the United States built up when the population peak occurs (Agricultural Resources and Environmental Indicators Updates 1997). Sprawl clearly can exist as a local problem, whenever the desirable land around desirable areas becomes stressed. From a national land-availability standpoint, however, sprawl is a nonissue.

Another nonoption for the country as a whole is to declare some sort of limit on the affluence being acquired in a growth economy. Not only are there more and more Americans every year, there are more and more with the financial means to acquire a detached home, a large-lot home, a second or third car (or, as is now regrettably the

case, a second or third sport utility vehicle [SUV]). Either we are going to tax away that affluence or restrain the economy so that income growth stops, or we are going to face an ever-increasing number of families who can qualify for the mortgage on a handsome home. Creating so much affluence that dozens of millions can live in handsome homes is a fantastic social achievement, not a cause for hand-wringing, as the Save Our Sprawl lobby suggests.

Could the needs of a growing population and the buying power of increasing affluence be met in an antisprawl context by intelligent use of higher density dwellings? This is the question that Danielson, Lang, and Fulton ask. Their article raises many compelling issues and offers numerous important suggestions for civic and suburban planners. But do they pay enough attention to the very market forces that have created the current U.S. housing growth dynamic?

“Given that housing comprises a major share of the nation’s built environment,” Danielson, Lang, and Fulton write, “reducing the land it consumes helps promote more compact regions and preserve open space.” More efficient use of land for housing is an important policy goal, especially when it comes to preservation of green space. But the authors note that smart growth policies also could have a serious downside, including stifled economic growth.

Danielson, Lang, and Fulton advocate combining growth boundaries with incentives for new development in existing built-up areas, noting that “if most regions halt new development at the edge without simultaneously giving the green light to new growth in built-up areas, an affordable housing crisis will result” through simple supply and demand. This, they say, “is our single biggest fear” of smart growth initiatives. They suggest a series of policy tools to encourage developers to build—and purchasers to buy—“higher density” housing that consumes less land while being closer to stores and job sites. One idea they extol is the “location efficient” mortgage, which would favor those buying into higher density housing, on the theory that a buyer could have a better chance of qualifying for a home if there were no second car expense in the family budget, or if other efficiency conditions were met.

Location efficient mortgages sound like a tremendous idea for the right buyers. Generally, whatever gives people market incentives to decide on their own to embrace an efficient lifestyle should make for sound public policy. (I assume here that it is politically inconceivable that Congress would revoke the mortgage interest deduction, which would be by far the most effective way to shift market preferences toward smaller homes.) But would many people truly want

such mortgages, or would they just end up as a subsidy program for people who cannot afford the suburbs?

Americans, including minority Americans, have emphatically voted with their feet in favor of the detached-home lifestyle. In a few cases, such as revitalized downtowns, people have given up the suburbs to shift back into higher density living. And certainly land use policies that steer new commercial development toward existing developed areas, as is done in Maryland, make sense. Yet those moving inward toward core-city areas encounter a much larger flow in the opposite direction.

The axial truth of this issue is that most Americans want a detached home with a lawn. Portland's experience, in which multifamily dwelling zones have become market favorites of upscale buyers, is likely to remain the exception; probably the main reason multifamily housing has become upscale in Portland is that growth boundaries have rendered high-density housing essentially the only new housing stock available, and lots of people are eager to buy into Portland by hook or by crook. Citizens may be well served if their detached homes are intelligently designed and sit in a region with green space and smart growth transportation. But programs such as location efficient mortgages could end up shunned by the middle class and the affluent, resulting in just another policy tool that groups the less well off and minorities in dense core-city areas.

To the extent lenders can work with developers to encourage new housing that is more efficient in its use of land, everybody will benefit. Most sprawl thinking, however, misses the fact that many developers already have become more efficient in their use of land. Land, after all, is an expensive resource; the market rewards builders who use it wisely and penalizes those who do not. Early in the postwar suburban growth phase, enough relatively low-cost land was available around most U.S. cities that a subdivision or mall developer might not have needed to pay close attention to land use efficiency. Rising land prices have changed that equation. A little-understood result is that the trend in American development already has shifted toward higher densities. McMansions clearly do exist, but on the whole, per capita metropolitan land use is in decline. In 1950, the metropolitan and suburban footprint of the United States was about 133 million acres populated by 84 million people—1.6 acres per person. By 1990, the sprawl footprint was 220 million acres populated by 159 million people—1.4 acres per person (Rusk 1998).

That is to say, during the very building binge phase during which, it is conventionally assumed, land has been wasted for willy-nilly sprawl indulgence, the density of American metropolitan and sub-

urban life has been increasing. This is what would be expected, given that developers have financial incentives to become more efficient in their use of land. Talk to one of those odious shopping mall developers and you will hear more than you ever wanted to know about the art of space-efficiency calculation. Town house developers intensely study how to cram parking spaces into smaller and smaller areas and how to add square footage while shrinking footprints. Although American mall and supermarket developers have not yet started using roofs as parking areas, as the Europeans do, most obvious steps to reduce land waste are already common practice.

In that sense, sprawl is already in decline. The reason sprawl seems to be rising is because of the automobile, not the house. (Or perhaps I should say the “wheeled dreadnought,” considering the inexplicable SUV craze.) As the United States closes in on one car per person, every year affluence puts more vehicles on the road, with each one driven more miles. It is vehicle explosion, not construction trends, that creates the impression of unbridled sprawl.

Danielsen, Lang, and Fulton further laud the notion of designing communities to place homes, shopping, and employment close together. This goal, while worthy, is likely to prove quixotic in an economy as fast changing as America’s. Housing lasts for decades; employment patterns currently do not last anywhere near as long. The continued shift toward an information economy ought to make it easier to relax the home/commercial/industrial zoning distinctions that have dictated the configuration of most postwar sprawl. Why couldn’t the campus of a high-tech company be integrated with, or adjacent to, pleasant housing? Surely there will be instances in which this works. But as for the notion that lenders or government agencies can encourage density by planning combined housing/employment development packages, no thanks. Economic trends change too fast and too unpredictably; planning agencies would be lucky to bat .250 with such projects.

Danielsen, Lang, and Fulton have done an admirable job of framing the issues while cautioning against the pull-up-the-ladders effect that smart growth might have. But impressive as their article is, I left it thinking that neither they nor anyone in the antisprawl movement had yet thought through the possibility that sprawl is not just a symptom of American economic success but a contributing cause.

Yes, it is infuriating to be stuck in traffic, but roads, cars, and trucks, for all their foibles, enable huge numbers of people to move relatively quickly and to make rapid adjustments in their destinations to meet changing employment and economic demands. These

things tend to promote a successful economy. Nice houses with nice lawns do consume space and resources, but they are also the sort of rewards that encourage people to be highly productive. Malls may be stupefying, but they are furiously efficient distribution mechanisms for goods and services, as well as a reliable source of entry-level employment.

Running throughout the sprawl debate is the notion that suburbs and traffic are not just exasperating (no doubt there) but actively bad, to be opposed by policy. There is a much greater likelihood that continuing American metropolitan expansion is a social good, correlated positively, not negatively, with the economy and with social progress. The period of postwar sprawl has coincided with unprecedented improvements in standards of living for almost all U.S. citizens, including most minority-group members; unprecedented reductions in institutional discrimination; unprecedented increases in education levels for almost everyone; a closing of the black/white wage gap; and other equally grand achievements. Has the growth of sprawled-out suburban life worked against these trends? More likely it has been a contributing influence. The real reason to Save Our Sprawl is that it is good for us.

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