

20 The Challenge of Urban Sprawl

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The growth of suburbs has been one of the most important features of cities since the 1950s. Early studies documented the negative effects of suburbanization on central cities, such as declining jobs, dwindling tax bases, increasingly expensive services, property abandonment, and the loss of the middle class. More recently, studies have shown that continued growth of the suburbs may create problems for suburban communities themselves.

Thad Williamson, David Imbroscio, and Gar Alperovitz show that unplanned suburban growth (“sprawl”) negatively affects the quality of life, hurts the environment, wastes money and land, and hurts small businesses. They review a number of policy initiatives to discourage future sprawl and to address the economic, social, and environmental costs of existing sprawl.

The third aspect of the triple threat to community in the United States consists of the complex of issues pertaining to spatial development and land use, usually connoted by the term *sprawl*. [The two aspects discussed previously are globalization and the mobility of capital. – Ed.] Sprawl refers both to the fact of continuing outward development on the perimeters of metropolitan areas and to the specific form such development has taken, namely, construction of freeways, strip malls, and other car-centered uses of space. A recent Brookings Institution analysis of data from the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Resources Inventory found that between 1982 and 1997 the rate of outward land expansion outpaced population increases in 264 of the 281 metropolitan areas they examined.

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This trend encompassed both urban areas that grew and cities that declined in population. The population of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, for instance, declined 8 percent, but its land area, as measured by the National Resource Inventory, increased by some 43 percent. In Atlanta, urbanized land increased by 82 percent, even though the area's population increased by only 61 percent – and even though population in the city of Atlanta itself has actually declined since 1980.¹ Nationwide, urbanized land increased by some 47 percent between 1982 and 1997, while population grew only 17 percent. Consequently, average urban density declined by over 20 percent in just fifteen years.² In short, with the exception of those few cities that are hemmed in by physical geographical boundaries, the nation's metropolitan areas have become less dense and more spread out in recent decades.

The explosive growth of suburbia in the United States – the “crabgrass frontier,” as historian Kenneth Jackson evocatively calls it – is generally dated from the postwar construction boom. As veterans returned from the European and Pacific fronts, politicians accommodated the huge pent-up demand for modestly priced, reasonable-quality housing by subsidizing the construction of new single-family suburban homes. Specific mechanisms included tax deductions for home mortgages and the public construction of roads connecting urban centers with outlying communities (a construction boom that culminated in the late 1950s with the creation of the interstate highway system). At the same time, private developers, following in the footsteps of the first Levittowns, promoted single-family suburban living as the new ideal of American life. They energetically marketed the new suburb (ironically) as a site of strong community cohesion combined with the amenities associated with escape from the city: less crowding, less crime, less filth. (Just under the surface of this marketing effort was the suggestion that suburbs would have fewer racial and ethnic minorities and poor people.) In time, suburban living became synonymous first with privacy, and then with privatism and disregard for public space and public goods – with the exception of the road system, and, often, public schools. Feminist critics such as Betty Friedan noted the isolation of women in suburbia and the community-debilitating consequences of rigid separations between home, work, and market, while others pointed to the characteristic alienation and occasional antisocial behavior of suburban youth.³

Historians and policy analysts generally agree that some degree of suburbanization was probably a reasonable response to problems of overcrowding and housing shortages in central cities in midcentury America. In 1950, as today, the most compelling and most frequently cited argument on behalf of outward expansion from cities was the need to provide additional decent, affordable housing. But the suburban housing boom had almost immediate negative consequences for central cities and their remaining residents: As more affluent citizens left, central city tax bases weakened, even as the poorer residents left behind became more isolated. Today, as road construction and further outward development continue to be practiced as the “solution” to the problem of building desirable, affordable housing

in metropolitan regions, a wide range of observers have come to recognize that uncontained sprawl also has a negative impact on the quality of life in the suburbs themselves.

Unplanned Outward Development versus Planned Decentralization

The specific phenomenon of suburban sprawl in the second half of the twentieth century needs to be carefully distinguished from the concept of slowing the growth of cities and encouraging citizens to live in smaller-scale communities. Polls have consistently shown that Americans prefer to live in relatively small communities (100,000 people or less). While there have been few academic studies of optimal city size in recent years, the best extant evidence indicates that smaller cities perform better than large cities with respect to a range of quality of life issues, including environmental quality, crime rates, and traffic congestion.⁴ Recent work by Princeton political scientist J. Eric Oliver indicates that smaller cities appear to be more conducive to participation in local politics than very large cities.⁵ Such findings in part reflect the damage done to existing big cities by sprawl and associated public policies (as discussed below), but they also suggest that small cities may well be – and be subjectively felt to be – preferable human habitats.

The current form of suburbanization is a distorted reflection of an important line of thinking that originated with Sir Ebenezer Howard and a handful of like-minded thinkers in Britain at the close of the nineteenth century. Howard gave birth to the idea of “garden cities,” modestly sized communities organized in circular fashion around the perimeter of large metropolitan agglomerations such as London. Howard’s garden city idea helped spawn the “New Towns” movement in Britain and the regional planning movement in the United States of the 1920s and 1930s.

Howard believed garden cities could be the solution to problems of urban poverty and overcrowding. Under his scheme, citizens would leave cities to move to planned new towns located several miles away from the urban core. These new towns would be explicitly designed to accommodate a mix of socioeconomic classes and would be enlivened by visible public spaces and the provision of ecological amenities. Most importantly, in Howard’s scheme, land in the new towns would be community-owned, and leased to businesses and residents; as the value of land rose with population growth, the resulting revenue would be used to offset the costs of public goods (thereby also reducing taxes and housing costs). Central to Howard’s vision was the notion that the several miles of space between central city and the satellite garden cities would be left undeveloped. Around each garden city, Howard proposed a huge swath of publicly owned, permanent farmland, forests, and pastures, which would demarcate the edge of the city – about 5,000 acres compared with a 1,000-acre town center. Instead of building into this

belt, growth would occur only by “jumping over the farm/parklands and “establishing . . . another city some little distance beyond its own zone of country.”⁶

British followers of Howard succeeded in getting the government to build over two dozen new towns by 1970. None of the new towns maintained Howard’s core socioeconomic institution, local community ownership of land, but observers have credited the towns with helping “[establish] what became a distinctive feature of postwar British planning: the system of towns against a backcloth of open country.”⁷ The new town idea also spread to the United States as well. In the 1930s, New Deal official Rexford Tugwell pushed for the construction of three new “greenbelt” towns in Maryland, Wisconsin and Ohio. In the 1960s developer James Rouse built the new town of Columbia, Maryland, as an explicit attempt to model a multiracial community. The new town experiments in both Britain and the United States enjoyed modest success in providing a relatively high quality of life compared to unplanned suburban development, but even proponents concede that the towns have generally fallen far short of Howard’s lofty vision of using local community control over land as a strategy to simultaneously promote social and ecological goals.

The United States in fact never undertook explicit planning aimed at easing urban congestion in a rational manner while also preserving the livability of city centers. Instead, policy makers implemented an array of policies that helped push Americans into suburbia – with little regard either for those left behind in central cities or for the character of the new suburban communities.

The Political Construction of Suburban America

Let us look more closely at the major policy initiatives and public subsidies driving suburban expansion:

The home mortgage tax exemption. The central federal strategy to encourage home ownership, this policy allows homeowners to take a tax deduction on the interest costs of mortgages. The policy is almost untouchable politically, and most strongly benefits the wealthy. As Kenneth Jackson pointed out in 1985:

The system works in such a way that a \$20,000-a-year bank teller living in a private apartment earns no housing subsidy. But the \$250,000-per-year bank president living in a \$400,000 home in the suburbs has a veritable laundry list of deductions. All \$38,000 in interest payments would be subtracted from income, as well as all \$7,000 in property taxes. His \$45,000 subtraction would save him approximately \$22,500 in taxes, or almost \$2,000 per month. . . . Thus, it happens that the average housing subsidy in an elite suburb will exceed by several times the average subsidy to a welfare family in the inner city.⁸

Importantly, as Jackson also notes, the tax subsidy to affluent Americans is so enticing that remaining in the city as a high-income renter is often economically

irrational, given the tax savings forgone. The flight of high-income individuals and families into single-family suburban houses in turn has contributed to fiscal problems in American cities. The annual value of the federal mortgage interest deduction now stands at roughly \$66 billion, compared to the \$32 billion budget of the federal Department of Housing and Development.⁹

Federal Housing Administration (FHA) subsidies and redlining practices. The FHA is the lead federal agency in promoting home ownership and is estimated to have helped finance nearly 11 million new private homes built between 1934 and 1972.¹⁰ FHA offers mortgage insurance, which allows buyers to purchase homes with as little as 10 percent (or even less) down. As preservationists Richard Moe and Carter Wilkie point out, FHA criteria for eligibility for mortgage insurance was substantially biased against African-American neighborhoods for decades. "A single house occupied by a black family in an urban neighborhood, even one tucked away on an inconspicuous side street, was enough for the FHA to label a predominantly white neighborhood as unfit for mortgage insurance," Moe and Wilkie note. "Areas that failed to meet the test were considered too risky and 'redlined' on confidential maps shared with bankers, whose lack of investment in those neighborhoods doomed many of them to eventual decline."¹¹ The resulting deterioration and decay of urban neighborhoods hastened the flight to suburbia, first by whites and later by moderate-income African-Americans. Although explicit redlining has now been substantially curtailed, much of America's current spatial development can be traced to the widespread use of such discriminatory practices in the past.¹²

Other federally sponsored institutions that support home ownership via the secondary mortgage market include the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae), the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac), and the federal Ginnie Mae agency, which guarantees mortgages. Until the 1990s, these federally sponsored institutions had no requirements regarding the spatial distribution of its mortgages, meaning they could ignore city homeowners. These institutions, combined with the Farmers Home Administration and smaller federal programs, have a total mortgage portfolio of \$1.8 trillion (as of 1995) – most of which has been used to finance single-family homes in suburbs.¹³

The Housing Act of 1949/urban renewal. This act essentially gave a green light for local officials to break up established neighborhoods in favor of new development, usually involving large-scale commercial initiatives near cities' central business districts. Under this authority, Moe and Wilkie note, "city officials with power of eminent domain could seize property in areas identified as 'slums', purchase it with the help of federal funds, then sell the assembled area to a private developer for redevelopment."¹⁴ Over \$13 billion in federal money went to directly support urban renewal between 1953 and 1986. Urban renewal policies brought about the outright destruction of many urban neighborhoods and destabilized many others, causing massive dislocation and overcrowding, and replacing working communities with high-rise public housing projects. All too often, David

Rusk charges, "the federal urban renewal program created both dull, lifeless downtown areas that failed to pull suburbanites back into the city and high-poverty, high crime public housing complexes that pushed other households into the suburbs even faster."¹⁵

Highway construction/National Highway Trust Fund. Hand in hand with the emphasis on establishing middle America in single-family homes in the suburbs was an unprecedented boom in highway expenditures starting in the 1950s. In 1956, the National Highway Trust Fund was established to pay for ongoing highway construction, using revenues generated by taxes on cars and gasoline. US highway construction was thus supported by an autonomous source of revenues not easily touched by other political priorities – a highly unusual mechanism among advanced industrialized democracies. As Pietro Nivola points out, "With a spare-no-expense approach to highway expansions, the size of the US effort became unique. Great distances between cities or states in this country do not wholly account for the magnitude; US interstate plans called for massive expenditures, not just on transcontinental facilities, but also on urban radial and circumferential arteries designed to enhance intra-metropolitan access. These local webs of roadways have sped the dispersal of jobs and housing within metropolitan areas."¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the percentage of total passenger miles accounted for by public transit in America dropped from 35 percent in 1945 to less than 3 percent today. Between 1977 and 1995 nearly six times as much public funding went to highways and roads as to all forms of mass transit. While critics of Amtrak decry the subsidies needed to keep the intercity rail system in operation, much larger subsidies to highways and automobiles are largely unquestioned politically. Today some 75 percent of federal spending on surface transportation is directed toward highway related projects.¹⁷ Only recently did the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act and the follow-up 1998 TEA-21 legislation begin to take important steps allowing localities some flexibility in promoting mass transit alternatives using federal transportation funds. World Resource Institute economists have estimated that all levels of governments spend over \$80 billion a year (1995 dollars) combined on road-related services such as highway patrols.¹⁸

Low fuel pricing, low taxes on cars, and tax subsidies of parking costs. Suburban growth and sprawl have been driven not only by the massive subsidization of highways but also by direct subsidies to drivers. By international standards, American taxation on gasoline has been exceedingly low: In 1996, gas taxes in the United States totaled 42 cents a gallon, compared with 84 cents in Canada, \$2.31 in Great Britain, and over \$3 in France, Italy, and the Netherlands.¹⁹ Sales taxes on cars are generally much higher in Europe than in the United States – nine times higher in the Netherlands, thirty-seven times higher in Denmark.²⁰ American employers are allowed to provide parking as a tax-free benefit, up to \$170 a month; the benefit for mass transit users totals just \$65 a month.²¹ (The parking provision is estimated to cost the United States Treasury over \$2 billion a year.)²²

Tax codes encouraging the discarding of buildings. Other tax laws have also contributed to the decline of cities in favor of new suburban construction and sprawl. On one hand, some observers have complained that building owners receive what is in effect a tax incentive to allow their buildings to decay. Building owners are allowed to depreciate buildings over a period of just 31.5 years. As Moe and Wilkie note, "If property owners could not deduct such losses, they would do more to preserve the value of their property – as well as the value of the surrounding locations that determine the value of their property."²³

Conversely, other observers have argued that building owners should be taxed less. These writers, following the principles of Henry George, have urged a return to land-based, or "site value" taxation. James Howard Kunstler notes that

our system of property taxes punishes anyone who puts up a decent building made of durable materials. It rewards those who let existing buildings go to hell. It favors speculators who sit on vacant or underutilized land in the hearts of our cities and towns. In doing so it creates an artificial scarcity of land on the free market, which drives up the price of land in general, and encourages ever more scattered development.²⁴

Kunstler argues that ending taxation on buildings will encourage the development and preservation of high-quality buildings, while increasing taxation on urban land will discourage speculative activity. This would reduce the costs of urban land by placing more land on the market (as speculators sell) and, by ensuring that all central city land is put to productive use, help undercut pressures toward sprawl. As it is, the existing tax code provides building owners both a disincentive (in the form of building-based taxation) to construct new buildings that appreciate in value over time and an incentive (in the form of accelerated depreciation) to let existing buildings deteriorate. The combined result is increased decay and unattractiveness in center city locations.

High proportion of local property taxes as a source of local revenue. Few Americans realize that in many other advanced countries, such as the United Kingdom and France, national governmental revenues account for the majority of local government expenditures. In the United States, only one-third of local government expenditures are funded by federal- and state-level taxes. The reliance of local governments on tax revenues from within their own jurisdictions contributes to the competition between localities for new business investment. However, an additional dimension of the sprawl problem derives from the fact that nearly three-quarters of local taxes are property taxes. As Nivola points out: "Local dependence on property taxation can reinforce a low-density pattern of residential and commercial development. Each jurisdiction acquires an incentive to maximize the assessed valuations of its real estate in relation to the expense of providing local services. One way to defend a favorable ratio [between tax revenue generated and public services provided] is to require through zoning restrictions relatively

large parcels of land for buildings.”²⁵ In other words, in order to ensure a strong tax base, suburban localities often seek to bid up taxable land values by promoting not high-density, efficient housing arrangements but large houses and big stores – which in turn implies an auto-dependent design for local communities.

Decreases in federal aid to central cities since 1980. Bruce Katz and Joel Rogers point out that the federal share of municipal budgets declined by over two-thirds between 1980 and 1992 and now stands at less than 4 percent of city budgets. Federal shares of county budgets nationwide have declined even faster, by over 75 percent, since 1980. These cuts in federal aid have taken place at the same time that per capita costs of municipal services have increased. Many state governments also have withdrawn aid for cities. This means local taxes must go up (or city services must be cut back). As Katz and Rogers observe, “The effect of these policies and the resulting income and fiscal dynamics is straightforward. They lower the costs to individuals and firms of living and working outside or on the outer fringes of metropolitan areas, and increase the costs of living and working in the core.”²⁶

This list of public policies that have contributed to suburbanization and sprawl is hardly exhaustive. It suffices, however, to demonstrate that current spatial patterns in US metropolitan areas are to a substantial degree the result both of political choices and of the peculiar structure of governance in the United States, and not only a result of market processes. To be sure, as Robert Beauregard of New School University has recently argued in detail, the decisions of private economic actors, as well as the overall decline of manufacturing, also played a role in the postwar decline of American cities.²⁷ In particular, corporate decisions to relocate production in a “cheaper” location have imposed large costs on the cities left behind and have compelled citizens to leave town in search of better economic prospects elsewhere. We agree with Beauregard that it is misleading to blame only specific public policy decisions for damage to cities while ignoring the larger pattern of private-sector disinvestment in older industrial centers – but this does not make reevaluating those policies any less important. Indeed, [we] suggest a two-pronged policy response to urban decay and instability: on one hand, changing public policies (such as the ones noted above) that have explicitly damaged central cities and encouraged sprawl, and on the other hand, developing a strategy to contain and ultimately alter the patterns of private sector disinvestment in cities that characterized the second half of the twentieth century.

Evaluating Urban Sprawl

Sprawl, then, is a product of both public policy and private market choices. But were these the right choices? What exactly is wrong with sprawl, especially from the standpoint of a concern with community economic stability (in both cities and suburbs)? Sprawl has been commonly critiqued on six distinct grounds:

(1) quality-of-life issues, (2) environmental issues, (3) the waste of public resources via increased infrastructure costs, (4) the effect of sprawl upon cities and their residents, (5) the use of new land to facilitate development of giant corporate-owned superstores, and finally (6) the political consequences of suburbanization. We are concerned about all six dimensions of the sprawl problem, each of which is either directly or indirectly connected to prospects for community economic stability and strengthening local democracy.

Quality of life and civic engagement

When sprawl burst onto the national scene as a potent political issue in 1998, it was largely at the behest of suburban residents themselves. Runaway growth, many suburban residents said, was destroying their quality of life – eating up scenic landscapes, crowding schools, worsening traffic (and lengthening their commutes), and raising taxes.²⁸ Many rural residents, also, feared losing farmland and rural lifestyles to sprawling development.²⁹ Loss of open space, and the loss of the very sense of isolation and quiet that many suburban residents sought when first moving to the outskirts, is an obvious consequence of sprawl. Moreover, the low-density development encourages automobile dependence – and in fact the number of miles driven per year has doubled since 1970, with annual growth of over 4 percent a year, a rate far higher than annual population growth over the same time span. Consequently, congestion has increased markedly and travel times have lengthened. The average speed of vehicles on the Washington, DC-area Beltway fell, for instance, from 47 to 23 miles per hour over the course of the 1980s.³⁰ Since low-density areas are not able to support cost-efficient mass transit options such as buses, cars are often the only way for many suburban residents to get around. Hence, there is literally no escaping heavy traffic and the headaches, lost time, and increased number of accidents it involves.

Such tangible negative effects of sprawl may in time be seen as outweighing the advantages of suburban amenities such as (relatively) more open space, larger and cheaper houses, and the like. From our perspective, an even more important consideration involves the degree to which sprawl also diminishes the quality of the nation's *civic* life. Low-density development discourages informal interactions between residents, and many planners believe that such development also discourages residents from joining civic organizations.³¹ A recent study by Jack Nasar and David Julian, for instance, found that mixed-use neighborhoods generated stronger feelings of community attachment among residents than single-use neighborhoods.³² Data collected by Robert Putnam point strongly to a negative relationship between sprawl and civic engagement: "In round numbers," Putnam reports, "the evidence suggests that *each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 percent* – fewer public meetings attended, fewer committees chaired, fewer petitions signed, fewer church services

attended, less volunteering, and so on.” This finding, added to the fact that large places in general (such as metropolitan areas) are in general less conducive to community life than smaller towns, leads Putnam to conclude that “the residents of large metropolitan areas incur a ‘sprawl civic penalty’ of roughly 20 percent on most measures of community involvement. More and more of us have come to incur this penalty [by moving to suburbs] over the last thirty years.”³³ Finally, it has been widely observed that European cities, with their more compact form of organization, appear to have more vibrant public spaces and a stronger sense of place than comparably sized American metropolitan areas.³⁴

The quest for the suburban version of the American dream – including owning a single-family home in a good neighborhood with good schools – is also closely associated with the search for status within American society and the use of consumption as a marker for social status. The corresponding political and cultural ethos of prioritizing the search for one’s private dream of suburban comfort over provision of public goods and engagement in public affairs is both symptom and cause of the often hollow practice of local-level democratic governance today.³⁵ Much more evidence needs to be accumulated to document fully the impact of different kinds of spatial design upon civic life and civic participation. But there is already good reason to believe that sprawl, by undermining central cities (and, increasingly, older suburbs as well), negatively impacts not only community economic stability per se but also the quality of community daily life – and that more-compact, less car-centered spatial designs would probably be more compatible with a strong civic community.

Environmental concerns

It is little surprise that environmental groups such as the Sierra Club have taken the lead in the national antisprawl movement. Sprawl is synonymous with the consumption of open land, including both farmland and forest habitats, as well as with the greenhouse gas emissions and wasted fuel associated with automobile use and traffic congestion.

There are scores of studies of the environmental consequences of sprawl-like development, many of which have been usefully collected in the Natural Resources Defense Council publication *Once There Were Greenfields*. Space permits only a general overview of the picture painted by the drumbeat of scholarly research over the past decade.

Outward development obviously consumes land – lots of land. According to the American Farmland Trust, between 1982 and 1992 alone, over 4.2 million acres of top-quality farmland – and a total of over 13.8 million acres of agricultural land – were lost to development.³⁶ Land consumption also impacts the overall ecosystem in ways that damage existing wildlife and reduce biological diversity; as existing wildlife habitats are fragmented, they become less capable of supporting a

wide variety of species. The phenomenon is especially true of wetlands, which lost a net 117,000 acres between 1985 and 1995, with development responsible for roughly one-fifth of the decline.³⁷

Next, there is the environmental impact of suburban driving patterns. A recent HUD report notes that “the average suburban household drives approximately 30 percent more annually than its central city counterpart. That is about 3,300 more miles, which translates to an additional \$753 per year per household in transportation costs. Suburban residents spend 110 more hours behind the wheel each year than their urban counterparts – the equivalent of almost 3 full weeks of work.”³⁸ Although many forms of urban air pollution have eased in the past two decades, cars are still a major source of air pollutants, responsible for 62 percent of carbon monoxide releases, as well as 26 percent of volatile organic compound releases and 32 percent of nitrogen oxide releases – two major ingredients in the generation of health-threatening ground-level ozone. A 1998 EPA study estimated that traffic congestion alone generates at least \$20 billion a year in health-related costs.³⁹ While cars have become substantially cleaner in many respects, that gain has been largely offset by the increase in miles driven. Indeed, the trend in Americans’ use of cars is negative, not positive – the number of Americans who drive solo to work increased from 64 percent in 1980 to 73 percent in 1990.⁴⁰ Moreover, the vehicles now on the road are bigger than ever. Trucks, minivans, and sport-utility vehicles, which are not held to the same fuel efficiency requirements as cars, now account for nearly half of family automobile sales – and, as the NRDC notes, “the 10 most fuel-efficient vehicles in the country today account for only 0.7 percent of all vehicle sales.”⁴¹

A problem potentially even more serious than air pollution is the emission of greenhouse gases by motor vehicles. Mobile sources (i.e., vehicles) now account for 32 percent of all greenhouse gas releases in the United States. Carbon emissions are projected to continue to increase at a rate of 1 percent a year if current habits are maintained, with transportation’s share in the total increasing relative to other sources. Simply put, community spatial designs that maximize the amount of driving and gas consumption required to meet the tasks of daily life appear to be fundamentally incompatible with the need to reduce greenhouse emissions in order to forestall or mitigate the potentially disastrous effects of global climate change.⁴²

Finally, sprawl increases runoff water pollution. Whereas natural habitats absorb rainfall easily, with runoff into water bodies commonly taking place at a slow, easily absorbable pace, in built-up areas water collects on man-made surfaces such as rooftops and pavements, eventually passing into water sources at higher speeds and in higher quantity. Such runoff causes erosion, generates increased water pollution, and damages underlying water tables. It is estimated that 40 percent of the nation’s water bodies are now being damaged by runoff pollution. As sprawl increases the amount of paved area, it contributes more and more to damaging forms of water runoff. Particularly damaging are huge parking lots constructed to service superstores on the suburban fringe. It is little surprise, then,

that sprawl-like development has been identified as a causal factor in damage to a number of major water bodies, including perhaps most prominently Chesapeake Bay, along the coast of Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland.⁴³

Infrastructure costs associated with sprawl

Quality of community and civic life and environmental well-being have potentially important long-term effects on communities' economic prospects. There are also, however, very direct and immediate costs of sprawl – especially the cost of infrastructure. It is well established that providing roads, water lines, sewers, electric grids, schools, hospitals, police and fire services, and the like to serve low-density development is, in general, more costly than providing such infrastructure to high-density developments. It is also obvious that it is wasteful to allow existing city infrastructure to decay while simultaneously building new developments requiring entirely new infrastructure. Yet that is exactly what sprawl entails. Minnesota legislator and respected scholar Myron Orfield provides but one illustration of an all-too-common (and understudied) phenomenon: “By 1990, 131,488 acres – nearly one-quarter of [the Twin Cities urban areas served by sewers] – remained undeveloped. Yet between 1987 and 1991 at the request of cities and developers the Metropolitan Council provided sewer access for another 18,000 acres, instead of redirecting new growth into areas with adequate sewer capacity.”⁴⁴

A number of empirical studies have been conducted that attempt to estimate the infrastructure and fiscal costs of sprawl-driven development. A 1989 study by James Frank, for instance, compared the public capital costs (including streets, utilities, and schools) associated with different densities of development. Total public capital costs per dwelling unit for a suburban single-family home on four acres (a very large lot) amounted to over \$77,000 per unit in 1987 dollars. In the more typical single-family-house neighborhood (three homes per acre), costs per unit came to roughly \$31,000. As density increased, costs got progressively lower, including \$17,000 per unit for apartment buildings with fifteen dwellings per acre and less than \$8,000 per unit for high-rise apartments with 30 dwellings per acre.⁴⁵

Another study, by James Duncan and Associates, based on a detailed study of eight communities in Florida, also focused on the public capital costs associated with different forms of development. Duncan calculated the cost to the public per dwelling unit for providing the following services: roads, education, wastewater, potable water, solid-waste disposal, law enforcement, fire protection, and parks. Two communities with scattered development patterns (i.e., low-density and leap-frog) had costs (in 1998 dollars) of \$20,158 and \$31,534 per dwelling, respectively. In contrast, the downtown area, featuring compact development, had costs of just \$12,177 per unit, and two contiguous developments (moderate-density and

built contiguously with existing developments) had costs of only \$12,855 and \$16,706, respectively.⁴⁶

A third study led by Robert Burchell used computer models to project the future costs to the public associated with different types of development patterns in New Jersey. One development pattern built up central-city areas and increased density rates; the other continued sprawl-like development (low-density and scattered). Public capital costs (roads, utilities, and schools) associated with the sprawl-like development were estimated to total \$15.64 billion (1990 dollars) over a twenty-year period, compared to costs of \$14.21 billion for compact development. As F. Kaid Benfield, Matthew Raimi, and Donald Chen of the Natural Resources Defense Council observe, if the state had chosen to develop entirely along a compact spatial model starting in 1990, the savings in capital costs would have amounted to \$1.79 billion (1998 dollars) over the twenty-year period from 1990 to 2010.⁴⁷

Important qualifications to these studies of the infrastructure costs associated with sprawl have been offered by other researchers, most notably Harvard scholars Alan Altshuler and José Gómez-Ibáñez. Altshuler and Gómez-Ibáñez point out that early studies of sprawl such as the Real Estate Research Corporation's 1973 publication *The Costs of Sprawl* showing higher infrastructure costs for suburban housing did not take into account the fact that suburban housing is often of higher quality and provides more space than urban housing. These scholars also point out that high initial infrastructure costs associated with sprawl may decline if infill development occurs, that retrofitting older areas to accommodate higher density patterns may be more expensive than suburban developments on vacant land, and that in some cases suburban developments can achieve cost-saving economies of scale.

Even so, Altshuler and Gómez-Ibáñez conservatively allow that sprawl developments typically will be about 5 to 10 percent more expensive than well-planned, more compact developments.⁴⁸ Moreover, the most recent wave of research by Burchell and other scholars takes account of Altshuler and Gómez-Ibáñez's criticisms of earlier studies and continues to find that compact living patterns are cheaper.⁴⁹ Finally, no one disputes that it is almost always wasteful to abandon already-built infrastructure in central cities and inner suburbs at the same time that entirely new developments on metropolitan perimeters are being built.

Central-city decline and the costs of greenfield development

Advocates of outward growth from central cities often cite the need to provide lower-cost housing as a prime justification for sprawl-like development. But when more affluent residents leave cities (and no one replaces them), they also take their property tax payments with them – thus helping push cities into a fiscal crunch that damages their ability to provide even basic government services. A vicious circle is thus often triggered by suburban flight: As residents leave and the tax

base declines, it becomes more difficult to pay for social services to city residents. New small businesses expand to – or even relocate to – suburbia in order to directly serve the affluent populace there, making it more difficult for cities to increase their tax base or provide new jobs through business growth. And as the quality of services such as pothole fixing, police and fire, and (perhaps above all) public schools declines in cities, the incentive to move (for both rich and poor) increases. Finally, as jobs move to the suburbs, more inner-city residents, lacking adequate access to transportation and social networks to take advantage of suburban employment opportunities, fall into long-term unemployment, with devastating personal and social consequences.⁵⁰ As we have seen, in some cases the destruction of existing center-city neighborhoods has been quite deliberate, as planners razed perceived ghetto areas under the rubric of “urban renewal,” substituting higher-income neighborhoods or commercial development in their place. On occasion, neighborhoods were destroyed to provide the very highways that would carry new residents of suburbia back and forth from city jobs to their new, more spacious homes. The move to suburbia also damages existing social networks within the cities and can lead to a widened income gap between rich and poor within cities when middle-class residents move to the suburbs in force – which in turn heightens social tension.⁵¹

Many defenders of sprawl-style suburbanization point to the tangible private benefits of outward development, holding that the benefits that accrue to business and individuals outweigh these negative social and public costs. However, the most comprehensive and highly detailed cost-benefit analysis to date of the comparative costs of firm location in greenfields (i.e., undeveloped areas on the suburban fringe) versus firm location in cities tells a different story. The recent landmark study *When Corporations Leave Town*, conducted by Joseph Persky and Wim Wiewel of the University of Illinois at Chicago, demonstrates that the *public* and social costs of sprawl-like development are roughly equivalent to the *private benefits* created. In other words, sprawl is a redistributive measure, imposing costs on the public and central-city residents while conferring benefits on suburban firms and residents. [...]

Superstores versus local business

A fifth dimension of the sprawl problem, not captured by cost-benefit analyses of the kind utilized by Persky and Wiewel or in studies of the infrastructure costs of different forms of development, is the extent to which sprawl-like development has influenced what *kinds* of firms get access to a critical mass of customers and enjoy favorable prospects of success. Specifically, when residents move to the suburbs from central cities, locally owned city businesses are often not well positioned to follow their customer base. Firms with a greater capacity to adjust to changing geographic patterns gain an advantage over firms reliant on a stable,

neighborhood-oriented customer base. In practice, this means that large chains – Wal-Mart, fast-food operators, Circuit City, and the long list of ubiquitous corporate chains – have thrived in strip malls, exurbs, and big box-style superstores located on the edge of town. Suburban shopping centers increased from just 100 in 1950 to 3,000 in 1960 and nearly 40,000 by 1992.⁵² As Stacy Mitchell of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance notes, Borders Books and Barnes and Noble alone now account for 25 percent of all book sales, while independent booksellers have seen their market share fall from 58 percent in 1972 to 17 percent (and dropping) as of 1997. Home Depot and Lowe's together control almost 25 percent of the hardware market. Blockbuster Video has 30 percent of the video rental market. Needless to say, locally-owned retailers have not fared as well. Independent office product stores have seen their market share decline from 20 to 4 percent since the mid-1980s, and an estimated 1,000 community pharmacies close annually.⁵³

In fact, in a few cases, most spectacularly that of Wal-Mart, chains have deliberately tried to kill off local businesses through predatory pricing, often with the help of state and local subsidies (such as assistance in providing roads and other infrastructure needed to bring large waves of consumers to just-outside-the-city-limits superstores). Developers of new malls and shopping centers often gravitate toward nationally known chains in extending lease offers as a strategy for luring customers as soon as possible. Even in the best-case scenario, where such malls do make homes for local, nonchain businesses, they are commonly anchored by corporate chain department stores. Meanwhile, vibrant downtowns consisting of local businesses owned by local people have become increasingly rare.

What exactly is wrong with chain store development, as compared to locally owned businesses? Certainly the American strip-mall-with-parking-lot scene is often a painful eyesore, an aesthetic nightmare. Moreover, in line with a long tradition of American thought, we believe that the sense of independence and liberty associated with individual or family entrepreneurship is an important value. But local entrepreneurship also has a tangible advantage over the typical corporate chain from the point of view of community economic stability: They are more likely to create purchasing linkages with other local firms, which in turn expands a community's economic multiplier as money gets respent many times in the local economy. Similarly, their profits are not siphoned off to a faraway corporate headquarters, but instead are more likely to be reinvested in the community.⁵⁴

The most detailed studies to date of how superstores affect local communities have been carried out by Kenneth Stone of Iowa State University, who for over a decade has continuously tracked the impact of Wal-Mart on rural communities in Iowa. In a 1997 study, Stone compared thirty-four towns with a Wal-Mart in place for ten years or more with fifteen non-Wal-Mart towns. He found that in a context of overall rural decline, Wal-Mart captured a rapidly increasing share of the shrinking pie – causing damage to independent retailers in Wal-Mart towns. They hurt non-Wal-Mart towns even more by drawing customers away. Overall sales

declined by 17 percent in Iowa towns with population between 2,500 and 5,000 in the period between 1983 and 1996, nearly 30 percent for towns with between 1,000 and 2,500 residents, and over 40 percent in towns with fewer than 1,000 people. Shopping at department stores (i.e., Wal-Marts) increased by 42 percent over the same period, whereas drugstores, variety stores, and stores selling automotive parts, groceries, women's apparel, lawn and garden items, hardware, shoes, and men's and boys' wear all suffered significant declines (25 percent or more for all save auto parts and grocery stores) during those years.⁵⁵

These are alarming findings. As Stone concludes, there are strong reasons for seeking to constrict, not accelerate, the growth of superstores – whether the small businesses damaged by the new store are rural or urban. Sadly, it is the fact of widespread economic insecurity that makes low-end retail outlets – whose rise has been predicated not only on sophisticated distribution systems but also on the use of market power to squeeze suppliers – so attractive to many working-class and poor shoppers anxious to save as much money as possible. But the rise of Wal-Mart-type retail only further undercuts the economic security of small towns and their residents. Nor does Wal-Mart compensate for this negative impact by providing good jobs: The retailer considers a 28-hour week full time, virtually all non-management employees earn less than \$10 an hour, and there are few benefits (and no unions).⁵⁶

The political consequences of sprawl

Finally, we call attention to the political culture sprawl has helped generate: namely, a city-suburb divide that has weakened public support for efforts to support community development or to provide other forms of assistance to urban areas. As suburbs grow and central cities lose population, the relative political power of city interests in electoral and legislative politics erodes; presidential and gubernatorial candidates court suburban voters, while urban delegations in both national and state legislatures shrink. More importantly, the creation of largely white suburbs, spatially segregated from lower-class minority groups remaining in central cities, has had an inestimable impact on American political culture and the assumptions of ordinary political debate.⁵⁷ It has allowed politicians to define suburban life as mainstream America and central-city residents as a “problem,” or what some sociologists call “the other.” Lost is the idea that all are in it together. Noted “new urbanist” practitioners Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck make the point this way:

A child growing up in [a] homogenous environment is less likely to develop a sense of empathy for people from other walks of life and is ill prepared to live in a diverse society. The *other* becomes alien to the child's experience, witnessed only through the sensationalized eye of the television. The more homogenous and “safe” the environ-

ment, the less understanding there is of all that is different, and the less concern for the world beyond the subdivision walls.⁵⁸

Recent research by Juliet Gainsborough of the University of Miami has also demonstrated that suburban residence has a powerful conservative influence on both voters and political attitudes – even *after* controlling for race, gender, age, income, homeownership status, and other standard variables used to predict political orientation. Gainsborough's analysis of National Election Study data found that between 1988 and 1992, living in the suburbs made voters substantially more likely to vote for a Republican congressional or presidential candidate, an effect that cannot be explained by demographic factors. In an even more interesting finding, Gainsborough also found that suburbanites are less likely than others to support aid for cities, government spending, and initiatives to help African-Americans, or to have a sympathetic attitude toward welfare recipients – even *after* controlling for the respondents' party identification as well as other demographic variables. In short, living in the suburbs produces more conservative social attitudes even among self-identified Democrats. Gainsborough's analysis also shows that the strength of this association between suburban residence and conservative social attitudes has intensified in the past two decades – precisely as suburbs have continued to claim a larger share of the nation's population.⁵⁹

We rarely face this issue directly. The problem is not simply that metropolitan areas find it difficult to tax suburbs to pay for the central city – or even to tax commuters enough to pay for the costs of the public goods they themselves consume. It is that our policies systematically create a political-economic reality where inequalities favoring predominantly white suburbs become the rule rather than the exception.⁶⁰

The Turning of the Tide?

For years, environmental activists, preservationists, and urban planners who decried sprawl were lonely voices in the political wilderness. Indeed, it was thought all but impossible to do much about the problem in real political terms. In the late 1990s, however – in a manner suggestive of what we believe might be possible with a number of other issues taken up in this volume – a very substantial grouping of state-level politicians “suddenly” caught wind of the widespread public discontent with suburban sprawl, and began to incorporate concerns about sprawl in their political agendas.

Obviously, something quite powerful had already been quietly building below the radar of the mass media. In November 1998, nearly two hundred state and local ballot initiatives on curbing sprawl won approval, as voters set aside more than \$7 billion to purchase land or development rights for preservation.⁶¹ In New Jersey, for example – the only state to be technically defined in its entirety as a

metropolitan area,⁶² and a state that loses 10,000 acres a year to development – a two-thirds majority of voters approved Republican Governor Christine Todd Whitman’s proposal to invest \$1 billion over a decade to protect one million acres of undeveloped land, half the state’s total.⁶³ Similarly, Florida voters made permanent the state’s land conservation bonding authority – which will likely lead to \$3 billion in additional financing for land conservation.⁶⁴ In Arizona, a measure to spend \$220 million over an eleven year period to buy open space won approval.⁶⁵ Programs to preserve farmland and open space were also approved in Minnesota, Michigan, Oregon, and Rhode Island.

At the local level, dozens of cities – including seven in California – passed referendums and other ballot measures to impose clear boundaries on future development. Because of a series of such boundaries approved in Ventura County, California, about 80 percent of the county has been preserved from further development. On Cape Cod, voters in the fifteen towns of Barnstable County, Massachusetts approved a “local-option three percent property tax assessment to finance community land banks.” In Austin, Texas, voters approved a bond issue of \$76 million to support parks and greenways; Austin residents had previously voted to pay \$65 million in increased water rates to preserve 15,000 acres of land outside the city.⁶⁶ And in New Jersey, in addition to the statewide measure, forty-three cities and six counties approved separate tax increases to finance additional preservation measures.⁶⁷

To date, the most committed anti-sprawl elected official at the state level has been Maryland governor Paris Glendening. During his first term (1995–9), Glendening succeeded in passing several antisprawl measures, including the Rural Legacy program (which “earmarks more than \$71 million over the next five years to purchase development rights on environmentally valuable land”) and the Smart Growth Areas Act (which “restricts state funding for road and sewer projects to those in older communities and areas already slated for growth”).⁶⁸ Glendening stressed these policies and continued to spread the antisprawl word during his successful 1998 bid for reelection: “We cannot continue to go on with the old patterns of development,” he said. “It doesn’t make any financial sense. It doesn’t make any environmental sense. It destroys the sense of community.”⁶⁹ In his second term, Glendening moved to tie state assistance to counties to how aggressively each county provides open space and curtails sprawl.⁷⁰ State funding for school infrastructure also shifted dramatically in Maryland, as the state now commits 80 percent of the school construction budget to established areas, whereas in the early 1990s over 60 percent of school construction funds were spent in newly developed areas.⁷¹ Other state agencies such as the state Department of Transportation have also undergone major shifts in policy (as well as their internal culture): transportation planners in the state are now encouraged to take into account the needs of pedestrians and the impact of transportation projects on community well-being, instead of bulldozing and laying pavement in every direction.⁷²

The antisprawl movement now involves not only environmentalists decrying the loss of habitat and auto exhaust, liberals seeking to stave off inner-city decline, and suburbanites and rural residents seeking to preserve their quality of life, but also members of the business community who believe that sprawl is “bad for business.” The Bank of America, for instance, published a comprehensive critique of the impact of sprawl in California in 1996. In 1999 *Governing* editor Alan Ehrenhalt, reporting on Atlanta, noted that antisprawl sentiments there “have spread through [the] entire business community with remarkable speed and intensity....Everybody in Atlanta seems to be against sprawl now – developers, bankers, utility companies, all the interests that have profited from it for five decades. ‘You think back two years,’ says John Sibley, chairman of the environmentalist Georgia Conservancy, ‘and the change in the mind-set is stunning.’”⁷³ Another 1999 study by the National Association of Local Government Environmental Professionals documented nineteen business-led “smart growth” initiatives nationwide.⁷⁴ For instance, the influential Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group has actively promoted high-density development, public transit, and additional low-income housing both in California and nationally.⁷⁵

Former vice president Al Gore also embraced the idea of smart growth during the second Clinton term. The Clinton administration created a Livable Communities Initiative within the Environmental Protection Agency, and established several modest antisprawl policies, such as a home loan pilot program to encourage housing near mass transit, and a \$17 million program to buy 53,000 acres of farmland nationwide.⁷⁶ The 2000 Democratic platform endorsed the idea of Better America Bonds, which would have provided tax credits to states and localities on bond issues aimed at building “livable communities” (that is, containing sprawl) by preserving open spaces, farmland, and parks and acquiring more land for preservation and recreation purposes.⁷⁷

Antisprawl momentum continued into the 2000 campaign, as Arizona voters considered a statewide antisprawl proposition (which was strongly opposed by the real estate industry), and a similar measure was proposed in Colorado. The Arizona legislation would have established strong growth boundaries statewide, while the Colorado legislation, following the lead of Oregon, would have mandated that localities develop and receive voter approval for comprehensive land-use plans.⁷⁸ Both the Colorado and Arizona measures were defeated by wide margins, but activists in both states have claimed that the initiatives helped alter the public debate about growth in each state.

The Imperative of Community-Controlled Land

We are sympathetic to most of the policy measures now being implemented in Maryland and other localities that aim to contain sprawl. But we remain skeptical about the long-term effectiveness of sprawl-fighting policies that fail to address

one of the underlying structural realities driving sprawl, namely, control of land by powerful private actors, not only in rural areas but in urban areas as well. As we have already seen, the principle of using public funds to buy undeveloped, often rural, land for conservation purposes is now broadly accepted across party lines. Equally critical is establishing a measure of community control over *urban* land – not as a means of directly stalling outward development but to ensure that sprawl-stopping measures do not perversely disadvantage low-income city residents by raising housing costs.

Here a major problem must be noted: As already experienced in the growth-boundary city of Portland – which has been rated by the National Homebuilders Association as the second most expensive housing market in the nation – over time we can expect urban land values to rise in cases where outward development is curtailed. The rise in land values translates into increased rents, which in turn make city living unaffordable for low-income renters – who are often replaced by higher-income residents in a gentrification process.⁷⁹ While some analysts sympathetic to growth boundaries have noted that housing prices have also risen in fast-growing metropolitan areas without growth boundaries – a recent econometric study concluded that Portland's urban growth boundary is “probably not” primarily responsible for rising housing prices in the city – most acknowledge the theoretical point that limiting the supply of available land on which to build housing is likely to place upward pressure on housing prices.⁸⁰ The obvious antidote to this consequence of antisprawl public policy is to make direct provision for low-income housing. This might happen by expanding publicly subsidized housing units or by rehabilitating existing housing stock that has fallen into disrepair. Stable low- and middle-income housing can also be secured by means of urban community land trusts. In the latter, units, blocks, or conceivably entire neighborhoods are placed in a trust. Low-income residents can rent or own units on land controlled by the trust, but owners must resell housing back to the trust, not an outside buyer. This effectively takes the units in question out of the private housing market and guarantees that rising land values and urban rebirth do not displace poor residents. There are over one hundred urban land trusts now operating in the United States, and the number is steadily growing.

It is likely that the next decade will see the further development of land trust mechanisms both to preserve open space and to take increasing increments of urban land off the market. Possibly some cities may experiment with site value taxation of the sort advocated by Kunstler, in which land is taxed more heavily than buildings in urban areas, thereby dampening land speculation activities. In the longer term, we also think it makes sense to reconsider the vision Ebenezer Howard laid out at the end of the nineteenth century – cities (be they old cities or new towns) in which the public directly owns both urban land and immediately outlying areas, and can take effective steps to shape land development. Over time, treating land not as a simple commodity but as a community resource that should

be under substantial democratic control will be a crucial lever in a serious long-term attack on sprawl-like development. It will also be critical to the restoration of substantive local-level democracy, in which private developers and other land-oriented businesspeople do not have overwhelming political power, especially with respect to urban planning decisions and the use of public resources in economic development.

Strategies and Solutions

Urban sprawl clearly will have a lasting place on the national agenda. Leaving aside the long-term goal of bringing more land under direct democratic control, which short-term and medium-term policies and strategies hold the best prospect of actually containing fringe development and preserving existing communities (both urban and suburban)? Following Persky, Wiewel, and Sendzik, the available strategies can be summarized and grouped into four categories: policies intended to stall “deconcentration,” redistributive policies aimed at mitigating the consequences of sprawl, policies to develop mechanisms of regional governance, and policies aimed at revitalizing urban centers.⁸¹

Containing deconcentration

Policies to raise the costs of deconcentration include a range of approaches that fall under the rubric of growth management. Specific tactics to limit growth through land-use planning include zoning rules intended to constrain new development, impact fees that charge developers for the public costs incurred by new development, and public intervention into land markets to deliberately limit new development. The paradigmatic example of growth management is Portland, Oregon, which has essentially prevented development in outlying areas by establishing and enforcing a growth boundary. As noted above, a number of states have recognized the obvious fact that buying undeveloped tracts of land for preservation purposes (or arranging for nonprofit preservation groups to do so) can help prevent undesired outward development.

More common than direct intervention into land markets is the use of impact fees: Developers and businesses are charged a fee to help cover the estimated costs to the public (roads, sewers, etc.) of new development projects. Various studies suggest that impact fees appear to be moderately effective, but insufficient empirical evidence exists to make firm judgments. Impact fees have been criticized for essentially providing a windfall to existing residents of a community, since by raising the cost of new housing, such fees also raise the value of existing land and buildings within a community. There is also uncertainty over the best method of

calculating how high impact fees should be. Impact fees will almost certainly continue to be used as a check on sprawl, but they are a relatively weak tool and unlikely on their own to seriously constrain or reverse outward growth. (Ironically, as more communities adopt impact fees, their relative effectiveness as an anti-growth measure in any particular place is likely to decline, since the competitive disadvantage of developing in an impact-fee-imposing locality disappears if all localities have such fees. Impact fees would still be defensible and desirable in that eventuality, however, as a way to force private developers to pay a larger share of the costs of new growth, and if *all* suburbs adopted such fees and cities did not, that could increase the attractiveness of cities to developers.)

Another available approach is congestion pricing. Congestion pricing simply refers to increased tolls on rush-hour traffic in congested driving areas, to compel drivers to pay more of the actual social cost of using roads at peak hours. In principle such pricing schemes could raise the cost of travel sufficiently so that firms would be compelled to locate on sites that can be accessed without causing additional traffic. Congestion pricing has been attempted only on a limited basis in the United States, although several cities worldwide have implemented such schemes.⁸²

Redistributing costs and benefits

A second set of policies attempt to redistribute the benefits associated with suburban growth. Such policies include:

- “Reverse commuting” policies, which seek to subsidize transportation for central-city residents to suburban job opportunities
- Constructing low-income housing in the suburbs (which implies overturning often exclusionary zoning practices)
- Tax-base sharing in which cities and suburbs effectively share revenue from property taxes, as has been practiced in the Twin Cities area in Minnesota for the past three decades
- Special regional governance bodies, which have authority over a specific issue involving both urban and suburban areas (such as water supply).

None of these policies is capable of seriously redressing urban sprawl; the intent is to make the best of the current situation through modifications that benefit low-income residents. Unfortunately, such programs face the same political obstacles encountered by other programs to help poor citizens, and tax-base sharing is especially unlikely to be accepted politically, since suburban residents by and large do not want to pay for “urban problems.”

Regional governance mechanisms

A third antisprawl tactic is the development of formal regional governance authorities, on the model of the Unigov system of combined city and county governance practiced in Indianapolis. Such authorities provide the same benefits as tax-based revenue sharing schemes (allowing suburban tax money to be used to combat urban problems) but may be more efficient in providing public infrastructure and in imposing policies such as impact fees. Regional governance approaches suffer from the same problem of political feasibility that tax-sharing schemes face. Nonetheless, the emergence of regional governance mechanisms would be highly desirable and would make a coordinated antisprawl effort much more plausible. Establishment of such mechanisms, however, would ultimately depend on new city-suburb alliances, based on the realization, as Wiewel and colleagues note, that “suburbs with strong central cities fare better themselves in terms of income and home values.”⁸³ Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf, and Todd Swanstrom have called upon the federal government to actively promote regional-level governance and cooperation by making metropolitan regions the operational unit for many federal programs.⁸⁴

Revitalizing cities

A final set of strategies focuses less upon changes in the rules governing suburban expansion than upon making central cities more attractive. When urban neighborhoods gain economic stability and become more attractive places to live, some of the distributive effects of sprawl can be countered (such as lack of access by urban residents to suburban jobs). Equally important, there is less impetus for flight to the suburbs on the part of middle-class, high-revenue citizens, as social costs and dysfunctions associated with central-city decline are reduced. As we have noted, making use of existing infrastructure and buildings also has advantages over the construction of new buildings and infrastructure in an effort to escape inner-city decay.

Notes

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