

## YES TO DENSITY by Michael Lewyn

Every so often, I read the following story in the pages of a local newspaper: Developer (colloquially known as “greedy developer”) wants to build houses or apartments or condos. Whether the development is in a venerable city neighborhood or a not-so-venerable suburb, the neighbors are outraged. They complain that the new development is too dense, and therefore will change the character of the neighborhood, increase traffic congestion by overburdening neighborhood roads, and eventually cause the Earth to spin off its axis, thus ending life on this planet. The newspaper parrots the neighbors’ complaints without much skepticism. And because zoning laws give cities ample discretion to veto development in response to neighborhood complaints, the city sometimes vetoes the development or reduces its density- a seemingly happy ending.

Or is it? What happens when government won’t let landowners build housing in existing neighborhoods? One option is for cities to simply refuse to allow the construction of new housing. But when housing supply fails to keep up with increased population, housing costs go up. For example, in metropolitan Boston, local governments reduced the amount of new housing permits by more than half between the 1960s and 1990s (issuing 172,459 permits in the 1960s and just over 84,000 in the 1990s). By an odd coincidence, housing prices exploded. Housing prices increased by over 200% during the 1980s and 1990s, and the average house costs over \$400,000.

In more developer-oriented cities like Jacksonville, cities tend to allow new housing- but primarily in the places with the least political resistance, where there are few neighbors to complain. Usually, these places are thinly populated rural areas, which are eventually transformed into suburbs by development. At first glance, such suburban sprawl might seem like a pretty good idea- after all, if nobody wants more housing in their neighborhood, why not build the new housing where nobody lives?

But this strategy has had a variety of negative side effects. Sprawl means more people driving more miles, as development shifts further and further away from our historic core (and from older areas with adequate bus service). Between 1982 and 2003, the amount of miles driven in Jacksonville more than doubled (from 13.7 million to over 30 million), while population increased by only 50%.

And more miles driven means, other things being equal, more congestion and pollution- not just in new suburbs but in older neighborhoods, as suburbanites cut through those communities on the way to jobs and shops. For example, San Jose Boulevard, the main street of my Mandarin neighborhood, is clogged not just by the cars of my neighbors, but by cars coming in from St. John’s County a few miles to the south. So if we Mandarinites think we are stopping congestion by limiting development, we are just dead wrong; when we force development into suburbs to our south, the residents of those developments drive through our streets just as if they lived there. So the “Not In My Backyard” (NIMBY) strategy of shifting development to newer suburbs has simply failed to reduce traffic congestion, even in Mandarin.

In fact, more compact development might actually reduce traffic congestion. If development was concentrated in Jacksonville's older neighborhoods, Jacksonville might be densely populated enough to support better transit service, thus reducing the number of cars on the road. How so? Because the more people live within walking distance of a bus stop, the more people will walk to the bus stop, which in turn means enough ridership to support decent transit service.

Of course, it is a cliché that “[fill in the name of group] will never give up their cars”- but in fact, there is a pretty strong correlation between population density and transit ridership. For example, New York City, the most transit-friendly city in the United States, has over 20,000 people per square mile. The five big cities where 1/4 to 1/3 of commuters take a bus or train to work (Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC) have between 9000 and 17,000 people per square mile, and Jacksonville (where only 2% of commuters use transit regularly) has about 1000 people per square mile.

Another argument for NIMBYism is that new development changes the character of neighborhoods, thus frustrating homeowners' reliance on the status quo. But when the absence of new development forces households to outer suburbs, such sprawl also changes the character of older neighborhoods - not just by clogging those neighborhoods with traffic as on San Jose Boulevard, but also by draining prosperity from those neighborhoods. Today's new suburbs are mostly outside Duval County- so by shifting development to outer suburbs, NIMBYism accelerates the shift of the region's middle-class tax base to other counties, thus reducing Duval's ability to compete, and degrading the quality of life in all Duval neighborhoods.

Given that NIMBYism creates more harm than good, Jacksonville should welcome residential development in existing neighborhoods, rather than forcing it into outer suburbs. Of course, not all development is created equal. Development that is oriented solely towards cars rather than people has a more negative effect on traffic congestion than development that facilitates walking, biking and public transit use.

Thus, we should especially welcome development dense enough to support good public transit (at least 8 units per acre, according to some scholarly articles I have read) and development with streets narrow enough to be easily crossed on foot and sidewalks that make walking safer. By contrast, under current policies new development is most likely to be allowed if it fits in with existing density patterns, thus ensuring that Jacksonville continues to be too thinly populated for any form of transportation other than spending half an hour in your car.

But even ugly, sprawling development is in some ways better than nothing, insofar as it keeps Jacksonville affordable by increasing housing supply and helps Jacksonville retain its tax base by keeping taxpaying households within Duval County. Thus, Jacksonville may wish to adopt broader protections of property rights, by deregulating density entirely. Today, the city has a wide variety of residential zones ranging from high to low density. But a more pro-landowner, pro-development policy would collapse them into just one or two residential zones, allowing landowners to build any form of housing (or at least any form of single-family housing) in a zone designated for homes. (Of course, both property rights and walkability would be improved even more if landowners could build shops in those zones . . . but that's a subject for another essay).

Of course, smarter growth policies are easier discussed than implemented. Even if we all benefit in the long run from more compact development, most homeowners benefit in the short run when restrictive zoning reduces the supply (and thus increases the cost) of housing. But if gas prices continue to rise, this strategy may be economically ruinous for Jacksonville in the long run: if gas costs \$10 a gallon a few years from now, is anyone going to want to do business in a city where intown housing is so scarce that 20-mile commutes are routine?