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Regulated Into Automobile Dependence: How City Hall Mandates Sprawl and What Planners Can Do About It

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LAWS THAT CREATE SPRAWL

Thank you for bringing me here. Today, I'd like to talk about
how zoning and other land use regulations create, rather than reducing, sprawl.

Before I go any further, let me define "sprawl". When Americans discuss "sprawl" they mean two very different issues: where we grow (cities vs. suburbs) and how we grow (auto-oriented as opposed to pedestrian-friendly). This speech is about sprawl in the second sense: a type of development that is made solely for cars, and is generally hostile to the interests of pedestrian and transit users.

So for example let's look at this image (10300 San Jose Boulevard in Jacksonville, shown on Google Street View): the streets are eight or ten lanes wide and the shops are far from the street.
Both crossing the street and walking through the parking lot through the
store would take a few minutes apiece- and because the street is so wide, cars
would be whizzing by at 50 mph. All in all, not a pleasant stroll.

Sprawl is a subject that one could make dozens of speeches about. But the issue I'd like to focus on tonight is the relationship between sprawl and government regulation.

Environments see sprawl as like air pollution: an ill effect of the free market that needs to be cured by more regulation. In response, libertarian types and property rights advocates assert that sprawl is just the free market at work, and view any attempts to curb sprawl as more big government paternalism.

But what I would like to argue today is that libertarians and environmentalists can make common cause on most issues related to sprawl. Why? Because to at least some extent, sprawl is a result not of too little government planning but of too much. American cities' land use codes are honeycombed with regulations that, in various ways, create more sprawl instead of less.

For example, nearly all American cities have zoning codes that divide cities into
zones in which some activities are allowed and some activities are
prohibited. The original purpose of this zoning was to protect single-family homes from the noise and traffic caused by heavy industry. But in practice, everything is set apart from everything else- apartments are just as segregated as houses, even though their residents might value proximity to shops more and isolation less.   This sort of separation of uses means that people can't live as close to stores or offices as they might like, which means that they aren't going to be able to walk to those stores or offices.

For example, Champaign's zoning code has twenty districts. In many of
the commercial districts, residential uses are prohibited. The most egregious
offender is the IOP, or Interstate Office Park district, which bans not only residential uses but even restaurants unless they are inside one of the commercial uses (Code 37.130.3). In other words, if your job is in one of these areas, you can't walk to work, and you can't even walk *to lunch* unless its inside the office building. Why not just lock people up in their cubes for 8 hours a day?

Almost as bad as CO, or commercial office district, where not just single-family homes, but even apartments and condos are prohibited. Here too, you may not even be able to go to lunch near the office- restaurants are only allowed as something called a "provisional use" which seems to mean you need special city permission (though the code isn't too clear on this). (37.107)   There's also a "commercial neighborhood" district which is supposed, according to the code, to allow "convenience shopping" (37.111). So how convenient is it? On the positive side, at least retail is allowed. But still, housing is not.

To be fair, single-use zoning alone doesn't prevent communities from being
walkable. If housing zones are fairly compact, maybe a decent number of
people will live close enough to the commercial zones to walk to that commercial zone.

But this sort of compact development is not allowed in large chunks of the USA. For example, in some parts of my hometown of Atlanta, minimum lot sizes are as high as two acres. (image from Whitewater Creek in Atlanta shown from Street View).

How does anti-density regulation create sprawl?
First, if each residence consumes large amounts of land, fewer residences can be placed within a short walk of shops, jobs or each other. For example, in the street shown (Whitewater Creek) there's only one residence visible on the block, so obviously not too many residents can walk to the nearest commercial area, even if it was nearby (which in fact it is not). Thus, anti-density regulation reduces the number of people who can walk to errands or jobs.

Second, in low-density areas, very few people will live within walking distance of a bus or train stop, which in turn means that very few people can conveniently use public transit.

It could be argued that none of this matters, that zoning essentially mimics market demand. However, an excellent book called Zoned Out, by Jonathan Levine, contains a survey addressing this issue. The survey, conducted by a developers' organization named the Urban Land Institute, asked developers about alternatives to conventional, low-density suburban development. 85% of developers surveyed agreed that the supply of this kind of development was inadequate to meet market demand. 78% of developers agreed that government regulation was a significant barrier to this kind of development.

A third sprawl-creating requirement is minimum off-street parking requirements. If you want to build an apartment, office or restaurant, you also have to give drivers a parking lot. In Jacksonville, Florida, where I used to live, Big Brother requires that apartments have 1.75 spaces (almost two parking spaces) per one bedroom unit. For most offices and retail uses, Champaign's regulations are typical: between 3 and 4 parking spaces per 1000 square feet of land for most retail and office uses (37.359).   Each parking space typically takes up about 300 feet of space - so this means that an office building has to provide as much space for parking as for people.

This parking is usually in front of buildings, partially because such parking is more convenient for drivers, and partially because other government regulations require commercial buildings to be 20 or 30 or even 50 feet from the street. (Again, Champaign is a bit more lenient, providing for 15-20 feet setbacks).

The side effects of parking requirements have been discussed in great detail in a book by Donald Shoup, called The High Cost of Free Parking. But to summarize briefly, minimum parking requirements create sprawl in three ways.
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First, strip mall landscapes are visually unappealing for pedestrians. Just imagine yourself walking through a parking lot to get to these shops (showing Street View image of 9900 San Jose Boulevard in Jacksonville). Does this look fun to you? Me neither.

Second, parking lots in front of buildings lengthen pedestrians' commutes by increasing the distance between streets and shops or offices.

Third, minimum parking requirements discourage walking and transit use by reducing the density of population and jobs, because land devoted to parking cannot be used for apartments or commerce For example, in 1961, Oakland began to require one parking space per dwelling unit for apartment buildings. Within just three years, the number of apartments per acre fell by 30%. And by reducing residential density, minimum parking requirements reduce the number of people who can live within walking distance of shopping, jobs or public transit.

Now of course, the common argument for these kind of rules is that government-mandated free parking is necessary to prevent parking shortages.

But of course, if you order business to provide free parking, you'll have lots of people wanting to drive and park everywhere -which in turn creates the shortages. To draw an analogy: if you told businesses to give people free pizza, wouldn't you have pizza shortages?

Another sprawl-producing regulation is wide streets. In Jacksonville, there are streets with as many as eight or ten lanes wide. To be fair, the street I'm showing on the screen (San Jose Blvd.) is a state road. But even if it wasn't, it would probably be that wide because Jacksonville's comprehensive plan requires major arterials to be 160 feet wide, which (after you take out 40 feet or so for sidewalks and greenery) usually equals about ten lanes.

And what impact do wide streets have on sprawl? Quite simply, the wider the street, the harder it is for a pedestrian to cross. A wide street takes more time to cross, and is also more dangerous because the pedestrian is exposed to traffic for more time.

And if the widened street successfully improves traffic flow, the dangers for pedestrians are even greater: obviously, a car traveling 50 mph poses more of a danger to a pedestrian than one traveling 20 mph.

And a smaller side effect of wide streets is that they reduce the land that is available for shops and offices and housing, which means they reduce density, which, as I mentioned earlier, reduces walkabilty.

So what do we do about all this? Basically, these regulations just should be treated like a roach: squash them till they are dead.

But sometimes this is impractical; for example, I can't imagine too many cities abolishing zoning, since I'm not sure anyone wants to allow big smelly factories next to single-family homes.

Given that assumption, we can still do a lot to make our cities more walkable. Even if you don't want shops near houses, why not allow shops and offices near apartments? Renters aren't as invested in peace and quiet, and may value the convenience of being near shopping. So one option might to be say that apartments are always allowed in commercial and retail zones - essentially merging multifamily housing and commerce.

In sum, government often encourages, rather than discouraging, sprawl. Any questions?