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From the Selected Works of Michael E Lewyn

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## 2007 CNU blog posts

Michael Lewyn



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/lewyn/132/>

## Getting riverfront access right



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/09/2007 - 10:25am

I just visited one of Tampa's more walkable neighborhoods, Hyde Park. Like Jacksonville's Riverside, Hyde Park is a long walk from downtown, is a well-off 1920s streetcar suburb, and borders a body of water (in this case, Tampa Bay).

One area where Riverside is clearly superior to Hyde Park is water access. In Jacksonville, private homes border the St. John's River, and streets terminate at the river between the homes. Thus, a pedestrian has significant access to the river, since a few "public" feet lie between the private homes.

By contrast, in otherwise walkable Hyde Park, a nasty arterial, Bayshore Boulevard, separates private houses and sidewalks from Tampa Bay. So to get to the bay you have to cross the arterial; thus, Hyde Park residents are somewhat cut off from the bay.

## Why you can't trust liberals on urbanism either



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 07/20/2007 - 8:54am

At CNU XV, Barney Frank argued that smart growth supporters should support liberal Democrats, because Republican support for tax cuts and military spending leaves no room for smart-growth oriented programs such as public transit, HOPE VI, etc. I think this story provides some ammunition on both sides of the argument:

But see the following story from the LA Times (full story at <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-budget20jul20,0,5439437.story> )

State lawmakers appeared to be closing in on a spending plan late Thursday that would divert roughly \$1 billion away from mass transit, forcing Los Angeles to put off plans for extending parts of the Expo light rail line and widening some freeways.

(snip snip)

Democrats said they agreed to the big cut to transit funding in an effort to avoid having to take money away from schools and healthcare programs. Republicans justified the cut by noting that state transportation funding will continue to increase overall.

What grabbed me was the last paragraph: the Democrats wanted to cut transportation to fund public education and health.

This is why I don't think left-wingers are necessarily better than right-wingers on urbanism issues: just as the Right will always pick tax cuts and wars over transit when money is tight, the Left will always pick public education and health care.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 15: Environmental Issues



Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 05/20/2007 - 12:13pm

On Sunday, the last few panelists focused in varying degrees on environmental issues. Denise Scott Brown began with a variety of questions for new urbanists, including the relationship between urbanism, congestion and pollution. She asked us how we respond to the road lobby argument that speedy traffic, by reducing congestion, reduces pollution.

Then Ed Mazria explained global warming to us, answering the following questions:

\*How do we know that global warming is related to carbon dioxide? Government computer models detail world temperatures in the absence of increased CO2 emissions, and world temperatures with such emissions. Since 20th-century temperature trends are closer to the latter model, it seems likely that global warming is linked to CO2.

\*How bad is it? In all likelihood, humanity and much of nature will survive - but there won't be as much of either. Mazria asserted that if the international consensus of scientists (as reflected in the IPCC report) is correct, about 50% of plant and animal species will be wiped off the Earth, mostly species in northern climes. Why? Because animals (and plants) in polar regions will lose habitat, and animals from more temperate regions will migrate to those places and outcompete the first group of animals for habitat.

The results for humanity will be especially dire in coastal regions: rising sea levels mean no more Miami Beach, no more Galveston, and possibly a sharply reduced San Diego or Boston. The resulting mass migrations will destabilize the economy and polity, possibly turning America into a Third World society.

\*What do we do about it? Mazria focused on increasing the efficiency of buildings, since 48% of electricity (if my notes are right) comes from buildings and building-related emissions have been increasing over time.

Scott Bernstein didn't really disagree with Mazria's presentation, but focused on transportation and on possible efficiency gains from more compact building development.

And then (after a brief "open mike" session) we adjourned

## CNU XV Blog, Part 14: Politics at the Plenary



Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 05/19/2007 - 8:41pm

The plenary session Saturday night was devoted to national politics, both British and American.

John Prescott, the British deputy prime minister, spoke about the United Kingdom's progress in promoting urbanism and reducing greenhouse emissions. According to Prescott, Britain has reduced emissions while experiencing rapid economic growth in recent years. Sounds good- but I can't help wondering whether representatives of British opposition parties would agree with Prescott's rosy scenario.

Barney Frank asserted that New Urbanists should favor higher taxes, ending the war in Iraq, and Democratic candidates. He reasoned that government cannot afford the war in Iraq, tax cuts, AND government programs that New Urbanists like such as public transit.

If the federal government had to live within its means, Frank might be right. But in the real world of the Bush Administration, the federal government has increased support for public transit AND a wide variety of other domestic programs while throwing money into Iraq. Why? Because as long as borrow-and-spend economics is popular, government can and does fund everything. (Of course, this might not be good economic policy in the long run ... but that's another conversation!)

Moreover, a more liberal government does not necessarily mean more spending for pro-smart growth policies. Just as a conservative government might defund public transit or HOPE VI to fund war in Iraq, a liberal government might be tempted to do so in order to fund national health insurance or expanded education spending.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 13: fire departments and skinny streets



Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 05/19/2007 - 8:34pm

For most of Saturday morning and early afternoon I was at historic Mikveh Israel synagogue ([www.mikvehisrael.org](http://www.mikvehisrael.org)), site of America's second oldest (I think) Jewish congregation- so I missed more CNU stuff than usual.

Having said that, I saw some interesting stuff Saturday morning, most notably a discussion of how to keep streets skinny while satisfying fire marshals. Dan Burden noted that fire marshals generally prefer 20 feet of space to accommodate fire trucks; he suggested accommodating them through midblock curb extensions; thus, a street can be 20 feet wide for motorists, but fire trucks can find extra space in the middle of the block so they can unload bulky fire equipment. John Anderson was less optimistic, suggesting that New Urbanists may need statewide fire code reforms in order to force public works departments to accept narrower streets.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 12: Duany on cities vs. suburbs



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/18/2007 - 4:49pm

This afternoon, Andres Duany spoke about the relationship between cities and suburbs. He began by noting that contrary to popular myth, New Urbanists are quite involved in urban development; the only reason people think otherwise is that NU development fits into cities rather than sticking out like the proverbial sore thumb.

But most of his speech addressed how suburbs outcompete cities, and how cities can learn from suburbs. He focused on the following:

1. Amenities. The suburbs' major amenity is spare land: larger back yards, etc. In the mid-20th century, cities tried to compete by echoing the suburbs, with lower density, more parking, more greenspace, etc. This strategy failed miserably- why have a half suburb when you can have the whole thing? Instead, cities should focus on their chief amenity, the public realm. A healthy city has a better public realm, better streets, than suburbs. This is the one area in which suburbs cannot compete with downtowns. Density is necessary for this, but it is NOT sufficient- high density sprawl with no streetlife cannot compete with low density suburbia, which is why so many older suburbs are fading.

How do you get healthy streetlife? Mixed use. Without mixed use you have lunch-only restaurants in downtowns that die after dark.

Bring in activities used every day. Focus on (and subsidize if necessary) activities used regularly, NOT activities used once in a while. Yes to movies and restaurants used every day. No to football stadia used 8 times a year, or festivals that occur once a year.

2. Comfort- Cities must not only be safe, they must feel safe. It is not even enough to be as safe as 1950 Detroit, with less street crime than today but still plenty of beggars, trash, graffiti etc. Cities must feel as safe as suburbs do today. How does this work? Start with a few blocks; create more surveillance, both with cameras and by individual municipal officials. (On the other hand, in marginal neighborhoods where this is least practical, appeal to the risk-oblivious).

3. Schools- If you want families, you have to have schools which appeal to suburbia. If not, forget about families and appeal to singles and empty nesters. (Duany didn't speak about how to fix schools- wisely, given the complexity of the topic).

4. Predictability- Investors like predictability; suburbs provide predictability by ensuring that if you comply with their master plan, you can build instantly. To be fair, large suburban developments do require developers to run a political gauntlet. But smaller developments are permitted virtually instantly, because there is a master plan that allows development as of right. By contrast, in cities even smaller developments require NIMBY-fighting and lawyers. A strong plan is the remedy for this - cities should create comprehensive plans that allow development as of right and thus ensure that developers don't have to worry about rezoning, NIMBYism etc. In other words, given the ubiquity of zoning, planning actually means MORE property rights, not fewer, in an urban environment.

5. Retail- A lot of New Urbanists deplore out of town chains. But out of town chains often have better product selection and more appealing packaging, lighting etc. than "mom and pop" stores. A business district without national chains can't compete with suburbia. (It is not clear whether Duany thinks this is equally true of "Big Box" retail such as Wal-Mart).

6. Private governments- Suburbs have private governments (homeowners' associations, etc.) that are smaller, and thus more responsive, than city governments. If cities can duplicate this they will be more appealing.

The good news: just as traditional urbanism is infecting the suburbs, good government is infecting cities.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 11: China and India



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/18/2007 - 3:00pm

John Ellis spoke this afternoon on sprawl-producing policies in China and India. Like America in 1900, China has historically suffered from overcrowding. And in response, China has made some of the same mistakes as America in the mid 20th century- such as reckless highway building and superblocks in which buildings are isolated from each other and from the streets.

One of China's unusual policies is rigid "solar codes" which require certain minimum amounts of solar exposure for every building. In the absence of careful design, compliance with solar codes requires buildings to be isolated from each other. However, Ellis pointed out that innovative design can solve these problems.

Similarly, India is also imitating American mistakes. Indian cities are expanding their subway systems - but like many American rail stations, Indian rail stations are often surrounded by parking lots rather than transit-oriented development. Ellis went on to discuss some NU projects he worked on in China and India which seek to create more walkable environments.

More study of Chinese and Indian policies would be useful to respond to the common claim that auto-oriented development in those countries is more evidence of the inevitability of sprawl. If the situations discussed by Ellis are typical, it may be that in India and China, as in America, auto-oriented sprawl is a result of government policy as well as consumer preference.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 10: highways



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/18/2007 - 12:13pm

This morning, there was a great panel on expressways, focusing on the removal of riverfront expressways that cut off downtowns from rivers.

Ingrid Reed spoke about her experience in Trenton, where she was able to challenge the status quo on two grounds. First, removing the expressway would create jobs, housing and prosperity, by freeing up riverfront land for commercial and residential development. By contrast, today riverfront land is cut off from downtown by the expressway, essentially blighting such land. Second, Trenton suffers from minimal traffic congestion, so the arguments against removing the expressway are weaker than they would be in a bigger, more congested city.

Cary Moon spoke about her experience in Seattle, where the city is trying to decide whether to build a new expressway to substitute for one damaged in a 2001 earthquake. Again, the argument against a new highway is based on downtown development: a riverfront connected with downtown is a prosperous riverfront bustling with parks, people and businesses, a riverfront cut off from downtown is Blight-O-Rama. Moreover, the experience of San Francisco (where earthquake-damaged expressways were removed without drastically harmful results) shows that highway removal need not result in gridlock.

Moon pointed out that the anti-highway case is stronger in Seattle than in other cities, because even if the city plans to build a new expressway, it will have a one-year transition between the end of the old road and the birth of the new: so Seattleites will already have had a year to adjust to a status quo without a riverfront expressway. Moreover, Seattle has another expressway running through its very narrow downtown.

Moon argued that the downtown expressway was not necessary to facilitate freight traffic, because only 4% of the expressway traffic was freight; most of the traffic was just local trips seeing a shortcut through downtown. Moreover, recreating the pre-expressway street grid might actually reduce congestion, because drivers idle in traffic waiting to get on and off congestion instead of being able to use the new streets that would emerge from the ruins of the highway. She also suggested building freight-only lanes for freight traffic and bus rapid transit to soak up commute traffic.

The ultimate result: in a recent referendum, voters voted against two expressway proposals (one above ground and one that is 1/3 underground)- partially because of anti-highway efforts, but partially because supporters of each freeway alternative eviscerated each other's proposals.

Norm Marshall (of [smartmobility.com](http://smartmobility.com)) discussed the use and misuse of traffic models. Often, state DOTs use misleading interpretations of models to justify more roads. For example, the Washington DOT stated that downtown Seattle traffic would grow from 110,000 vehicles today to 130,000 in 2030. But buried in an appendix to a DOT report are statements suggesting the contrary.

Even when DOT claims about traffic are not completely false, their data projects are flawed in a variety of ways. Their pretensions of precision overlook the possible adjustments that could take place when a freeway is torn down or not built: in addition to changing routes or using public transit, drivers could take trips at different times of day or forego them entirely. Also, freeways (or their absence) create land use changes that increase or decrease vehicle trips- for example, by facilitating downtown development (if a freeway is torn down) or sprawl (if a new freeway is built). Even if a model could accurately forecast such adjustments, transportation models can't possibly forecast broader social changes such as energy prices or social changes such as telecommuting.

Marshall's bottom line: models might be useful to test different scenarios- but any model that pretends to tell you how many cars will be in downtown Seattle in 2030 is just a pile of rubbish.

Jeff Tumlin asserted that freeways export real estate value from cities to suburbs; their absence maximizes cities' property value. He used Vancouver as an example of life without freeways: while downtown vehicle trips increased in every other Canadian city since 1995, such trips decreased in Vancouver- even while total trips (including walking/transit/bike trips) increased by 22%!

Tumlin suggested that within a downtown, freeways may actually reduce capacity, because preexisting downtown streets are destroyed to build the freeway. In short, a freeway downtown is like a pig in a parlor- the right thing in the wrong place.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 9: Panel on comprehensive plans



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/18/2007 - 10:10am

The CNU panel on comprehensive plans contained two very different perspectives: one on planning for a not-yet-built-out semirural area, and the other on planning for a big city.

Two panelists spoke on the latter, Matt Raimi (who discussed a mature Los Angeles suburb) and Steven Hammond (who discussed Sacramento). Both focused on mapping out existing neighborhood patterns and using visuals to show possible change. They emphasized that in a mature community, comprehensive plans will essentially reflect the status quo (a depressing possibility in many communities!). Raimi noted that his communities didn't react negatively to density as long as the city doesn't increase density in existing residential areas. Although Hammond was less blunt, he pointed out that the Sacramento plan will create numerous "neighborhood types" reflecting the status quo.

Given the planning system's bias in favor of the status quo, how can a plan promote more compact growth? Hammond emphasized (1) identifying "new" (that is, undeveloped) land within the city, and (2) allowing mixed use and higher intensity on streets that are already built for commerce and mixed use. (I wonder if such change would be enough to accommodate market demand for new housing, or whether people would still be forced into suburbia by housing shortages...)

More unusual was Marcela Cambor's presentation on planning in a 28-square mile area at the northern fringe in St. Lucie County- kind of the northern fringe of South Florida (since St Lucie is the county just north of suburbanized Palm Beach County). A few years ago, the county was stuck in an impossible situation due to the stupidity of prior generations of planners: the area in question was outside the urban service boundary, and was zoned for agriculture. So surely the comprehensive plan would be similarly phrased, right? WRONG! Instead, the comp plan provided for "business as usual" sprawl with one acre lots- a fact that incensed existing residents, who moved there precisely to get away from suburbia and to find a rural area.

So how could planners accommodate the collective desire for ruralness? Changing the comp plan to conform to existing zoning was out of the question for legal reasons; apparently, the county had already given developers reason to rely on the concept of SOMETHING being built, which means developers could challenge a "no build" comp plan in court. (I think the county's lawyers could have given a fascinating talk on the legal issues involved).

So the planners chose a smart growth plan as a remedy-allow developers to build, but only in "towns" and "villages" (500 acre parcels, with 60-75% of the land used for open space, and no maximum densities in the rest of the parcel). Cambor asserted that under this plan "sprawl is illegal"- no more 1 acre lots, just building within the towns and villages.

But how could such a plan respect developers' property rights? The plan provides for transferable development rights; if you don't own 500 acres of land, you can sell your right to develop smaller parcels to someone else who can aggregate those rights to build a town or village.

One concern: would this really be able to accommodate all market demand for housing? If density was truly unregulated, the plan might work. But the plan also contains height limits, which is kind of a hidden density regulation.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 8: the NIMBY veto





Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/18/2007 - 8:24am

At a panel of developers, someone pointed out that several cities had neighborhood planning boards, and that they were "institutionalized NIMBYism."\* I knew that Washington and Atlanta have neighborhood planning units, but I had always wondered what their function was. Now I know.

This illustrates a broader problem in planning theory: to what extent should neighbors have disproportionate impact in planning policy? The dominant American practice has been that neighbors should have an almost absolute veto. But this practice (institutionalized in the neighborhood planning boards) can and should be attacked from both the environmentalist left and the libertarian right. Libertarians should oppose the NIMBY veto on development because it means more regulation and thus more infringement on property rights. Environmentalists should oppose the NIMBY veto because it typically means less infill and lower density, thus leading to more sprawl development in outer suburbs with fewer neighbors to object.

The difficult question, for me is: what institutional mechanisms can we create that eliminate the NIMBY veto instead of magnifying the voice of NIMBYism?

\*NIMBY= Not In My Back Yard

## CNU XV Blog, Part 7: Rybczynski speech



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/18/2007 - 7:26am

Last night at the plenary session, I listened to Witold Rybczynski's keynote speech, which discussed his new book on real estate development (Last Harvest). A few interesting points:

1. He said: "For my generation, housing was architecture and architecture was housing." No wonder mixed use was taboo- if retail isn't "architecture", you're not going to push to put it near the houses!
2. He said that "We use words like 'sprawl' precisely to dehumanize the process." What is more dehumanizing (and less accurate) is sprawl advocates' use of generalities about "the American people" and "the American dream" to describe new sprawl development. How often have you heard the claim: "The people want sprawl! The people want the outer suburbs!" But when sprawl advocates say "The people" they really mean "The people who are now moving to the newest suburbs."

But those "people" are a small segment of the total population; most people are staying put at any given time. For example, when I lived in Buffalo, the newest "hot" outer suburbs, Clarence, Lancaster, and Orchard Park, had less than 10% of the region's population. About 30% still lived in the city of Buffalo, and at least that many lived in the first-ring suburbs adjoining the city (Amherst, Tonawanda, Cheektowaga, Lackawanna, and West Seneca). Are they not "people"? Are only new movers to new suburbs human beings?

And even these "people" don't necessarily want to live in sprawl. They may live in sprawl because they can't afford older suburbs (unlikely in a cheap region like Buffalo, but common in more prosperous regions). Or they may live in sprawl because their older suburb or city neighborhood is decaying (more likely in declining regions like Buffalo, less common in more prosperous regions).

3. He said that both NU and sprawl development are easier in the South than in the Northeast because people are more optimistic about the future, and thus about development. Is it really true that development is easier in the South? Or is development easier in smaller regions with more open land closer in? And is NIMBYism really less common in the South? I'm not sure - interesting avenue for further research, though.

4. He said that buyers in the project he researched (a greenfield NU project) were driven by "community" - that only the most social people were interested in living in this kind of project, and that people who thought they had enough friends were more interested in conventional big-lot suburbia. Is it community that drives people to NU or walkability? I would speculate that Rybczynski is right in describing greenfield NU with not very much within walking distance, less right in describing more urban development. But that's just an educated guess.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 6.5: Does the Trolley Matter?



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/17/2007 - 5:56pm

One issue that came to me after the Girard Avenue trolley tour was: does the trolley matter? Will it really make Brewerytown or Northern Liberties more appealing?

In the short run, I don't think the Girard Avenue trolley adds that much, since there is no major job center on Girard Avenue. The major attraction of Northern Liberties is its proximity to Center City, not its proximity to Girard Avenue (most of which is less appealing than either Northern Liberties or Center City). The trolley is a bit more useful to Brewerytown, since it does facilitate access to the restaurants and bars of Northern Liberties. But even for Brewerytown, the major selling points are still probably access to parks and the Philadelphia Zoo (both within walking distance), Center City (which can be reached by foot or bus but not trolley) and perhaps regional expressways to suburbia.

In the long run, the trolley might be a bit more helpful, by creating more customers for Northern Liberties entertainment and thus facilitating that area's emergence as a significant entertainment district. And if that happens, areas with trolley access to Northern Liberties will themselves become somewhat more appealing. So certainly the trolley does marginally improve Girard Avenue neighborhoods- but is probably not as important as transit that runs to major employment centers (whether urban or suburban).

## CNU XV Blog, Part 6: Girard Trolley tour



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/17/2007 - 4:12pm

This afternoon, we went on a tour of Girard Avenue, which, for the first time in decades, has trolley rather than bus service. Like much of Philadelphia north of Center City, this street (just two miles north of Market Street in Center City) had fallen into an advanced state of disrepair in the 2nd half of the 20th century. However, Girard Avenue is now benefitting from numerous mixed use projects.

We began at the west end of Girard, on 32nd St in the Brewerytown area. In the first decades of the 20th century, Brewerytown, as the name indicates, was the site of numerous breweries. But Prohibition caused the breweries to shut down, which in turn caused Brewerytown to become a wasteland surrounded by slums.

Into this wasteland came an intrepid developer who has built Brewerytown Square, a townhouse project. Brewerytown is not a typical New Urban project: the developer's goal was to combine "suburban style" with urban density and mixed use. The project will, when built out, have 595 units on 16 acres, or 37 dwelling units per acre. The mixed use isn't there yet; right now there is only one restaurant and one minimarket within a 0.3 mile walk, and a few more within an 0.5 mile walk. But after the project is built out, a supermarket and other amenities will (according to the developer) eventually come to the area. The ultimate vision is that density will create pedestrian friendliness: after the rooftops come, the shops will be built around them.

What's "suburban" about this development? The only truly suburban element is the parking; every unit will have at least one parking space, an amenity normal in suburbia but less normal this close to Center City (where even in affluent census tracts, the majority of households don't own cars). However, the parking will be in back of the townhouses, thus allowing people to walk to their homes without trudging through ugly parking lots.

A pseudo-suburban element is the design: the development will consist of "stacked townhouses" which are taller and wider than the traditional Philadelphia townhouse: wider to accommodate parking, taller to accommodate more density (a top unit and a separately owned bottom unit, instead of just one two-floor dwelling unit). The benefit of this design is that it allows for both more density AND more parking, thus accommodating drivers while creating the density necessary to justify placing shops within walking distance. The main disadvantage of this design is that it requires lots of stairs, thus reducing accessibility for wheelchair users.

Then we took the trolley east on Girard Avenue, towards lower street numbers. Just east of Brewerytown on 25th St. is Girard College, which is isolated from the street by a stone wall. The stone wall, I would imagine, makes walking on Girard less pleasant. However, it was not instituted as an anti-urban feature. Instead, it was built in 1829, when the surrounding area was still agricultural. My guess is that the wall was designed not to protect the college against wandering pedestrians but to protect it from wandering cows.

As we headed further east towards Broad Street (also known as 14th), we saw numerous rowhouses- some in bad shape, but most (especially between 20th and 25th Sts., in the Fairmount neighborhood) in good shape. One of the advantages of the rowhouse form is that it lends itself to painting: though most rowhouses are basically red or brown, some have beautifully painted doors, etc. As we headed into the teens, the neighborhood got poorer: the blocks between about 20th Street and 14th Street seem low-income but by no means deserted. Just south of Girard around 13th Street lies new subsidized housing. A few years ago, I remember reading that these projects were "suburban" and thus evidence that even in older cities, municipal officials bowed before the public desire for sprawl. This claim, however, is an overstatement. The houses are not rowhouses, but are not single-family houses on half-acre lots without sidewalks either. Rather, most of the houses seemed to be two-family (or small single-family) houses on small lots: a form which may seem suburban in North Philadelphia, but which is typical of urban Buffalo or Cleveland.

East of Broad Street, Girard deteriorates for a few blocks. The blocks between 8th and 13th Street are dominated by parking lots in front of buildings; they looked more like Phillips Highway in Jacksonville than like a neighborhood two miles from Center City, and (like Phillips Highway) looked pretty unappealing. However, the city official traveling with us reassured us that these blank spots in the urban fabric would soon be replaced by actual buildings.

But at Girard's eastern edge, the neighborhood improves again. At the intersection of 6th and Girard, the city has created a "bump out" - a piece of sidewalk extending out from the rest of the sidewalk, thus reducing the length of pedestrians' intersection crossing. This traffic calming technique both calms traffic AND discourages jaywalking, by telling pedestrians they can cross the street more rapidly if they cross at the intersection.

We finished our tour at 2nd and Girard, in a zip code that had experienced a 556% house price appreciation in the last 10 years, and a 65% increase in the last three years alone. (By contrast, prices in the five Center City zip codes have increased by between 188 and 395% in the past ten years, in stable Northwest Philadelphia by between 73 and 213%, and in middle-class but nontrendy Northeast Philadelphia by 77 to 112% depending on zip code). We saw the Liberties Walk development, named after the Northern Liberties neighborhood. Northern Liberties is another industrial area on the rise (though unlike Brewerytown, Northern Liberties had experienced limited gentrification in the 1980s).

Like Brewerytown Square, Liberties Walk is a mixed-use development two miles from Center City.

The developer of Liberties Walk chose a very different path from the developer of Brewerytown, in three ways. First, Liberties Walk has modern architecture, with lots of bright colors. The developer's goal was to create an "edgy" image that would appeal to young commuters searching for an urban experience; by contrast, Brewerytown (perhaps because it is near a more dilapidated neighborhood) chose a design that would look familiar to ex-suburbanites. Liberties Walk screams to the would-be resident: "This is a hip, cool urban experience." Brewerytown screams "This is a suburb just two miles from Center City, a few blocks from the Zoo, and a few blocks from the highway too!"

Second, Liberties Walk is all-rental. The developers believe that the neighborhood will not hit its peak value until every unit is built and the neighborhood has been functioning for a few years. When that happens, the developers will convert the units to condos and then sell them.

Third, Liberties Walk already has mixed use. The developer built retail space next to the rental units, and has evidently been able to find tenants.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 5: LEED-ND and accessibility for the disabled



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/17/2007 - 10:42am

The LEED-ND rating system contains a credit for "universal accessibility" for the disabled. This morning, Eleanor Smith spoke on this concept, addressing the following issues:

1. Why bother? Why should New Urbanists support accessibility beyond the bare minimum required by the Nanny State? Because walkability should mean walkability for everybody - not just for the most fit. In

particular, Smith pointed out that any of us could become temporarily disabled in a second- for example, if a car crash or a fall forced someone into a wheelchair, either temporarily or permanently. If NU houses are not accessible, someone might essentially be forced out of a NU community as soon as he or she became a wheelchair user: hardly a desirable result.

2. What's the difference between LEED-ND and the Fair Housing Act (FHA)? FHA is limited to multifamily dwellings; LEED-ND applies to single-family houses, row houses, etc.

3. Do most developers provide universal accessibility? According to Smith, no. She says that 98% of new homes are built with two major barriers to accessibility: steps surrounding houses (as opposed to "zero-step entrances" which wheelchair users may reach without ramps) and bathrooms too narrow to be accessible to wheelchair users.

4. How do you reconcile the aesthetic advantages of steps with accessibility? LEED-ND does not require that every entrance be accessible, so if a house had a front entrance with steps and a back entrance with no steps, that arrangement would be eligible for a LEED-ND credit. (Smith noted that rowhouses over stores present more difficult issues that she would address in other venues).

Smith also made a couple of points relevant to FHA, pointing out the social costs of inaccessibility. When homes do not have basic accessibility, older people might be forced into nursing homes (which are expensive enough to require federal subsidies) and are isolated from the broader community. Thus, inaccessible design may impose costs on taxpayers.

During the question period, someone made an interesting point: that builders of retirement/assisted living facilities sometimes consciously discriminate by including inaccessible features, in order to avoid creating buildings that would be stigmatized as for the disabled. Assuming this scenario is in fact common (a big if), this sort of situation presents an argument for government regulation: sometimes, what's rational for the individual builder or consumer is not rational for the public as a whole.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 4: BosTroit



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/16/2007 - 4:33pm

At one of the NextGen small group sessions, I heard a wonderful phrase describing what's going on in Philadelphia and some other cities: "BosTroit"- like Boston downtown (i.e. walkable, prosperous) and like Detroit in most of the outer neighborhoods between downtown and suburbia (i.e. poor, losing population).

For example, Philadelphia has a very strong downtown (like Boston) but is not quite as prosperous in the rest of the city, except for neighborhoods like Chestnut Hill just a mile or two from the city limits- thus, it is a "BosTroit" city.

By contrast, Buffalo exemplifies another postwar model: a weak downtown, and a city that gradually gets more and more prosperous (at least in one direction) the further from downtown you get.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 3: Nextgen 4



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/16/2007 - 9:50am

Just finished seeing most of the morning presentations at CNU Nextgen (by Russell Preston and Faith Cable).

Preston pointed out that the Transect may set the bar for pedestrian-friendly development too low, because so much development (both NU and conventional) is T3 (the suburban, relatively low-density zone). In a T3 neighborhood, some services are within walking distance, but fewer than in more intense neighborhoods. Preston's vision of the Transect is not a spectrum but a birthday cake: T4 and T5 are the cake that holds everything together, T3 merely the sweet icing, T1 the table upon which everything rests, and T6 the flaming candle at the top. All are important, but T4 and T5 are the bulk of the cake.

Preston's vision resonated with me, because I live in a city (Jacksonville) that doesn't have much T4 and T5 - the walkable intown neighborhoods are arguably T3, the downtown is a lame parody of T6, and everything else is conventional sprawl.

Preston also asserted that 1/3 of demand for new development is for walkable neighborhoods, but only 5% of new development fits this mold. If he's right (a big IF) then we have a huge gap between supply and demand. Maybe this is an argument for pro-smart growth government regulation: the omnipresence of local zoning artificially limits compact development, so we need other regulation to counteract the effect of this regulation and bring supply in line with demand. (Of course, a libertarian would argue that the free market would be preferable to either this system or the status quo - but even so, smart growth regulation might be a "second best" alternative if abolishing zoning is politically impossible).

Faith Cable focused on environmental issues. One chart in her presentation really grabbed me: a chart listing energy consumption in various metropolitan areas. According to her chart, sprawling cities such as Houston consume the most energy, with compact American cities (such as NYC) producing less, and European and Asian cities producing less still. If these statistics are correct, they put the lie to the common pro-sprawl arguments that (1) pro-sprawl transportation policies reduce energy use by reducing traffic congestion and facilitating traffic flow, and/or (2) that increased fuel efficiency has made fuel waste a non-issue.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 2: birdies



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/16/2007 - 8:41am

I walked from South Philly to the Lowes [conventional hotel-ML], and the one noise that really grabbed me was: the birds. When my brother visited me in Philadelphia a couple of years ago, he asked his daughter, "Wouldn't you rather be at home [in suburbia] with the birdies tweeting?" But on the street I walked on, I heard the birdies as loudly as in any suburb. Cities can coexist quite well with [audible] animals as long as

they are not overwhelmed by car noise. Thus, a walkable city is more in tune with nature than a suburb overwhelmed by fast traffic.

## CNU XV Blog, Part 1: bad neighborhoods



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 05/15/2007 - 4:54pm

A few hours ago, I got off the plane and took the 37 bus to South Philadelphia (where I am visiting a friend for my first couple of days here). My bus went through some of the depressed neighborhoods in Southwest Philadelphia - places that are by no means as badly off as the city's deserted slums, but which are nevertheless not prosperous either.

I asked myself: what's wrong with these places? What makes them immune to the twin lures of suburban prosperity on the one hand and intown gentrification on the other?

One factor is beyond anyone's control: they are not close to downtown. The major advantage of an urban neighborhood is proximity to major job centers (such as Philadelphia's Center City or suburban satellite downtowns such as Silver Spring and Bethesda near Washington).

Moreover, the south side of Philadelphia has traditionally been industrial and working class, while Philadelphia's prosperous northwest fringe has always been prosperous. So that's two strikes against the neighborhood.

But another problem is their urban fabric. While these places have fairly old (1920s I would guess) housing stock and walkable residential neighborhoods, they have been mutilated by wide, auto-oriented streets such as Lindbergh Blvd. In essence, Southwest Philadelphia has the worst of city and suburb: the ugliness of suburbia and the distance from downtown of suburbia, combined with housing stock that is not quite old enough to be historic (by Philadelphia standards) but is not new either. Not too different, in a way, from Jacksonville's ugly, declining inner suburban neighborhoods. In Jacksonville, the oldest, most walkable, areas near the St. John's River are high-value gentrifying areas- just like Center City Philadelphia. And the furthest out, newest suburbs are too. Most places in between those extremes, the not-too-walkable inner suburbs, are struggling- just like Southwest Philadelphia.

Part of our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to figure out how to save the Southwest Philadelphias all over this nation.

## more evidence that smart growth isn't just for liberals



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 04/05/2007 - 7:43pm



"Sanford seeks sprawl control."

That's the headline in a recent issue of the Columbia (SC) State (<http://www.thestate.com/154/story/19190.html>). Mark Sanford, the state's impeccably conservative governor, was "omnipresent" at a conference on sprawl, moderated by Andres Duany. It isn't quite clear what Sanford accurately plans to do about sprawl- but clearly, the issue is on his priority list.

And this story isn't unique. I did a google search for websites containing both "Mark Sanford" and "New Urbanism" and got 309 hits.

Presidential candidate Mitt Romney was also a smart growth supporter in Massachusetts; a google search of "Mitt Romney" and "smart growth" got 27,900 hits. By contrast, fellow governor and presidential candidate Mike Huckabee of Arkansas ended his term in office with a legislative package that emphasized "the three H's of health, higher education and highways".

## Yes, a city can get families



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 03/22/2007 - 10:20pm

Some people have argued that even if compact cities are terrific at attracting single people, they will never attract well-off families. But an article in today's N.Y. Times (at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/23/nyregion/23kid.html>) suggests that if a city is attractive enough and compact enough, it can get affluent families back. Money quotes:

"Since 2000, according to census figures released last year, the number of children under age 5 living in Manhattan mushroomed by more than 32 percent. And though their ranks have been growing for several years, a new analysis for The New York Times makes clear for the first time who has been driving that growth: wealthy white families.

At least half of the growth was generated by children who are white and non-Hispanic. Their ranks expanded by more than 40 percent from 2000 to 2005. For the first time since at least the 1960s, white children now outnumber either black or Hispanic youngsters in that age group in Manhattan.

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What those findings imply, demographers say, is not only that the socioeconomic gap between Manhattan and the other boroughs is widening, but also that the population of Manhattan, in some ways, is beginning to look more like the suburbs — or what they used to look like — than like the rest of the city.

"We knew Manhattan was having a baby boom," said Andrew A. Beveridge, a demographer at Queens College of the City University of New York, who conducted the analysis. "Now we know who's having the babies."

Children under 5 now account for more than 1 in 20 Manhattan residents, about the same proportion as in Queens and Staten Island. Married couples in Manhattan are just as likely to have young children living at home as in the rest of the city and the metropolitan area."

Of course, the interesting question is: why NYC? Partially NYC's low crime rates, but surely there's more to it than that. My spin: density creates its own momentum. When density is high enough, city residents have lots of amenities that they wouldn't have in, say, downtown Jacksonville.



## George Will on transportation



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 03/13/2007 - 10:04pm

George Will wrote a column at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/09/AR200703...>

which to some extent parrots the conventional road lobby wisdom. My thoughts on the relevant parts of his column:

The usual scolds -- environmentalists, urban "planners," enthusiasts for public transit (less than 5 percent of the workforce uses it) -- argue that more highways encourage more driving ("induced demand") and hence are self-defeating.

The "5 percent" argument is a self-fulfilling prophecy. For 40 years (1920s-60s) the federal government supported roads but did not support transit. For 40 more (1960s-2000s), the federal government spent 4 or 5 times as much on roads as transit. Now, if you spend more on A than on B, don't you think more people are going to use A? Or to put the question another way: if the government spent 40 years subsidizing transit to the exclusion of roads, and 40 more subsidizing transit to a much greater extent than roads, does anyone still think 90% of commuters would be in their cars?

"But as Ted Balaker and Sam Staley respond in their new book on congestion, " The Road More Traveled," among the 10 largest metropolitan areas, Los Angeles has the least pavement per person; Dallas has twice as much per person and half as much congestion."

First of all, it is pretty sloppy to quote one book's reference to only two cities as gospel truth on this kind of fact-intensive issue. More importantly, Dallas is catching up with Los Angeles in the congestion derby. In 1982, Los Angeles residents lost more than three times as many hours per peak period traveler to congestion (47 to Dallas' 13, according to the Texas Transportation Institute). In 2003, the ratio was only 93-60; congestion rose in both places, but much faster in Dallas. Obviously whatever Dallas is doing is not working.

"Furthermore, when new schools are built because old ones have become congested and then the new ones fill up with children from families attracted by new schools, who argues that building the new ones was a mistake?"

I don't quite get this analogy, for two reasons:

First, since when are new schools built because old ones become congested? In most of America, the old schools become deserted as families move to suburbs for newer, whiter, more upscale schools.

More importantly, there is a huge difference between schools and roads. A child can only use one school at a time; so when a child transfers to another school there is no net increase in school "congestion." By contrast, if you build a new road, a driver may use both the new roads AND other roads, thus increasing congestion on both. For example, suppose that Willville builds the new Sprawl Tollway, extending from a central city to Sprawl Valley (an outer suburb). Before the tollway was built, Mr. X lived and worked in the central city, driving 3 miles to work. After the tollway was built, X's job moved to Sprawl Valley. He now drives a dozen miles to work -3 miles on central city streets, AND 9 more on the Tollway. X drives just as much as he did on central city streets, AND is driving on the Tollway as well, thus congesting BOTH the "old" central city street and the new Tollway.

## Kotkin bashes urbanism



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 02/06/2007 - 3:33a

Joel Kotkin is one of America's most prolific commentators on urban affairs. At first glance, he appears to support something very much like New Urbanism. According to one newspaper story quoted on Kotkin's website, he favors "suburbs that are not defined by sprawl but a sense of community. He wants village-like suburbs that combine parks, restaurants and some retail within walking distance of single-family homes." ([JoelKotkin.com](http://JoelKotkin.com)) Similarly, New Urbanists have created suburbs such as Celebration, Fla. which combine stores and housing.

Despite the apparent similarities between Kotkin's "New Suburbanism" and New Urbanism, Kotkin has inexplicably attacked both New Urbanism and "Smart Growth" reforms that seek to promote infill development. Kotkin insinuates that New Urbanism is only relevant to cities, that cities are essentially obsolete, and that smart growth reforms are responsible for every conceivable ill from suburban sprawl to deindustrialization to low birth rates. His arguments rest on a mass of factual errors.

Myth #1: New Urbanism is only relevant to cities.

In a July 2006 Newsweek article, Kotkin wrote: "the new urbanism, built around downtown revival and beloved by the celebrated starchitects, will cede pride of place to the new suburbanism." ([http://joelkotkin.com/Urban\\_Affairs/Newsweek%20Building%20up%20the%20Bur...](http://joelkotkin.com/Urban_Affairs/Newsweek%20Building%20up%20the%20Bur...)) Kotkin's statement that New Urbanism is "built around downtown revival" implies that New Urbanists are only interested in downtowns.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Two of the earliest New Urbanist developments were in suburbs: Kentlands near Washington, D.C. and Celebration near Orlando. A recent "Guidebook to New Urbanism in Florida" lists 35 suburban New Urban communities in Florida alone. Like Kotkin, New Urbanists seek to mend suburbs rather than to end them: to make them communities not just for drivers, but for pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users. The SmartCode, a New Urbanist model zoning code, contains not only a "downtown" zone (referred to as a T6 zone) but also a "suburban" zone (the T3 zone) and two intermediate zones (the T4 and T5 zones), which, like most neighborhoods between a city's downtown and its suburbs, are less dense than the former and more compact and intense than the latter.

Myth #2: Cities are obsolete.

Kotkin's recent work reveals an almost obsessive focus on declaring cities dead or irrelevant. In his Newsweek article, Kotkin writes: "In Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia, growth is spilling out of urban centers, even in places that boast extensive mass-transit systems. In London, the center has been losing population since at least the 1960s . . . In Japan, too, high prices and congestion have propelled an exodus [from Tokyo]." ([http://joelkotkin.com/Urban\\_Affairs/Newsweek%20Building%20up%20the%20Bur...](http://joelkotkin.com/Urban_Affairs/Newsweek%20Building%20up%20the%20Bur...))

Kotkin's "facts" are simply out of date. Although London and Tokyo lost population for a couple of decades in the mid-20th century, both cities have rebounded in recent years. Since 1981, the population of Inner London (the former city's 123 square mile core) increased from 2.5 million to 2.9 million, an increase of about 15 percent. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inner\\_London](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inner_London) By contrast, Outer London (the city's inner-ring suburbs) population increased by only 6 percent (from 4.25 million to 4.48 million). ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outer\\_London](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outer_London))

Similarly, Tokyo's inner core has become more populous in every year since 1997.  
(<http://www.mlit.go.jp/english/white-paper/mlit02/p1c2s1.pdf> )

Kotkin writes in a January 2006 Wall Street Journal article: "nowhere is the commitment to low-density living greater than the U.S."

([http://joelkotkin.com/Urban\\_Affairs/WSJ%20The%20War%20Against%20Suburbia...](http://joelkotkin.com/Urban_Affairs/WSJ%20The%20War%20Against%20Suburbia...) ) So one might think that even if London and Tokyo are growing, American cities must be declining. But in fact, even American cities have also grown in recent years. 17 of America's 20 largest cities gained population between 1990 and 2000, including even a few cities which, like New York, are trapped within their 1950 boundaries and thus unable to annex suburban territory. Kotkin tries to minimize the importance of this fact by pointing out that mid-decade Census estimates have led to slightly different results; three of the 17 (Chicago, Memphis and San Francisco) allegedly lost population between 2000 and 2005, and some other cities may have grown slowly during the early 2000s than in the 1990s. (See THE WORLD ALMANAC AND BOOK OF FACTS 2006 at 480 for population changes).

But even if the mid-decade estimates are valid, 14 of the nation's top 20 cities kept gaining population between 2000 and 2005, including two (Indianapolis and New York City) that had lost population for at least part of the late 20th century.

Moreover, the Census estimates are just that- estimates- and thus may well be wrong. In the 1990s, mid-decade Census estimates tended to underestimate urban population, and were thus essentially worthless. For example, Census Department estimates showed that Memphis had only 604,000 people in 1998, while the actual 2000 Census showed that Memphis had 650,000 residents - 40,000 more than in 1990, and 46,000 more than the 1998 estimate. Similarly, 1998

Census estimates showed that Minneapolis had continued to lose population, while the actual 2000 Census showed that Minneapolis's population had grown to 382,000, 30,000 more than the estimate.

(See <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/statab/sec01.pdf> at page 40 for 1998 Census estimates, 2006 World Almanac above for 2000 Census data)

To be fair, Kotkin's claims have a grain of truth: even if a city grows, its suburbs typically grow faster because they have more undeveloped land. The difference between Kotkin and New Urbanists seems to be that New Urbanists favor balanced growth that benefits city and suburb alike. In a healthy region, city and suburb both grow and flourish, giving consumers a wide range of housing choices.

By contrast, Kotkin has suggested that any efforts to promote downtown development are part of a "War against Suburbia." In a January 2006 Wall Street Journal by that name, he writes that "there is a drive to use the public purse to expand often underused train systems, downtown condominiums, hotels, convention centers, sports stadia and star-chitect designed art museums." Of course, government has been subsidizing such public works for decades - but to Kotkin, any public support for any form of cultural amenity in a downtown is evidently part of a "newfangled War" against everyone else. Kotkin's language implies that urban policy as a zero-sum game: that anything that is good for a downtown must be bad for its suburbs.

Kotkin also relies on poll data to bolster his views. For example, he writes that "70 to 80 percent of Americans prefer a single-family home and only 15 percent, an apartment in a dense urban area." Kotkin does not bother to say where this survey came from, or how it was worded. But other consumer preference surveys yield radically different results, depending on how survey questions are worded. For example, a 2003 survey of Houston residents asked:

"Would you personally prefer to live in a suburban setting with larger lots and houses and a longer drive to work and most other places, or in a more central urban setting with smaller homes on smaller lots, and be able to take transit or walk to work and other places? "

55 percent chose the "more central urban setting." Only 37 percent chose the "suburban setting with larger lots and houses." ([http://www.blueprintheouston.org/BH\\_Reports.php4](http://www.blueprintheouston.org/BH_Reports.php4) )

It thus appears that as long as home ownership is an option, a majority of consumers will prefer something other than conventional suburban development if they have the choice.

Myth #3: Any efforts to reform sprawl will lead to a wide variety of disasters.

Kotkin's most aggressive attacks are against "smart growth" policies that seek to protect cities and older suburbs from being depopulated. Portland's urban growth boundaries, in particular, have generated Kotkin's

most inflammatory rhetoric, including a wide variety of charges - mostly inconsistent with the facts, and sometimes even inconsistent with each other.

### Myth 3-A: Limiting Sprawl Leads to More Sprawl

Kotkin claims that "Strict growth limits have driven population and job growth further out . . . Suburbia [in the Portland region] has not been crushed, but simply pushed further away."

Between 1980 and 2004, the city of Portland's population grew from 368,000 to at least 533,000- an increase of over 40 percent - not quite as fast as its suburbs, but still a pretty fast clip. Thus, Portland's policies obviously have made the city of Portland more appealing to consumers rather than driving them out. Even if Portland's suburbs are growing faster than its core, Portland has succeeded in creating a region where city and suburb alike are booming.

By comparison, many older cities which have followed "business as usual" policies are experiencing continued decline. Buffalo has followed the typical American formula: build highways to make it easier to move to suburbs, and create no regional anti-sprawl policies to discourage suburban growth- so the city of Buffalo, which had 357,000 people in 1980, and had only 292,000 in 2000- a 17 percent decrease. Some other cities have fared even worse; Detroit, St. Louis and Pittsburgh have lost over 20 percent of its 1980 population.

Buffalo, unlike Portland, is part of a stagnant region. So perhaps it would be fairer to compare Portland to other western cities with comparable rates of regional growth. But even cities benefitting from comparable regionwide growth rates are growing more slowly than Portland: Seattle's population has grown by 16 percent since 1980, and Denver's by 14 percent.

### Myth 3-B: The Planners Are Coming To Take Our Homes Away And Cram Us Into Apartments

Kotkin claims that Portland's growth boundaries and other smart growth policies have been misused by "planners [who have ] declared war on single-family homes, backyards, and insufficiently dense development." Kotkin even asserts that these policies force Portlanders to "raise their kids inside sardine cans."

In fact, over 60 percent of Portland's housing units are single-family homes. And between 1990 and 2000, the number of detached single-unit structures (i.e. single-family homes) in Portland increased from 124,000 to 143,000. (See 2000 Census, Tables DP-1 and DP-4, available through [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)) So Kotkin's rhetoric about a "war" on homes is dishonest.

After two decades of growth boundaries and of rapid urban population growth, the city of Portland has only 3972 people per square mile-less than half the population density of Los Angeles, and less than one-fifth the density of New York City. So Kotkin's "sardine can" analogy is simply bizarre.

Kotkin even claims that in Albuquerque, unspecified "planners" have "suggested banning backyards." I did a search on WESTLAW (a database containing hundreds of newspapers in America and in other countries) with the terms "albuquerque /20 backyards" and found nothing even faintly resembling Kotkin's claim. While researching an article for New Urban News, Phillip Langdon asked Kotkin where he came up with this claim, and Kotkin blamed an (unnamed) planner whose alleged proposal was quickly rejected by higher-ups within the city's planning department.

### Myth 3-C: Smart Growth Keeps Families Away From Cities

Kotkin asks: "who isn't high on this [Portland] agenda? Certainly it can't be families. Portland already has one of the lowest percentages of little tykes among American cities." In a 2005 article for the Portland Oregonian, Kotkin claims that because of Portland's alleged hyper-density (discussed above) families are moving "farther and farther out" because they "usually opt not to raise their children inside sardine cans". [http://joelkotkin.com/Urban\\_Affairs/Oregonian%20-%20Portland%20lost%20in...](http://joelkotkin.com/Urban_Affairs/Oregonian%20-%20Portland%20lost%20in...)

The 2000 Census reveals that 21.1% of Portland residents are under 18 - lower than the national average to be sure, but higher than in a wide variety of cities, including relatively hip cities like Washington, DC (20.1%), Honolulu (19.2%), Boston (19.8%) and Seattle (15.6%), and anything-but-hip places like Pittsburgh (19.9%), and Knoxville (19.7%).

More importantly, the number of children in Portland has actually increased over time. Census data show that between 1990 and 2000, the number of children under 5 increased by 6 percent (from 30,314 to 32,300), the number of children between 5 and 9 increased by 12 percent (from 27,655 to 31,184), the number of children between 10 and 14 increased by 20 percent (from 24,392 to 30,031). It may be that Portland's progress is actually attracting families. (See 2000 Census, Tables DP-1 and GCP-P15, 1990 Census, Table QT-P1A, statistics for Portland and other cities)

In any event, the number of children in a city is not a particularly useful indicator of its attractiveness to families, because in a poor, depressed city many families simply cannot afford to move elsewhere. For example, almost a third (31.1%) of Detroit's population is under 18- but does Kotkin really think that Detroit is a better place to raise children than Portland?

#### Myth 3-D: Smart Growth Keeps Babies From Being Born

Kotkin even hints that smart growth, if successful, will reduce birth rates. In his Newsweek article, he claims that the low birth rates of South Korea and Japan are caused by their "ultra dense" development because "Once everyone is forced into a small city place, there's literally no room for kids." Kotkin contradicts himself: on the one hand he claims (as noted above) that Japan is sprawling just like America. On the other hand, he claims that Japan's low birth rate is caused by its failure to sprawl just like America. Joel Kotkin, meet Joel Kotkin.

In any event, Kotkin's attempt to tie low Asian birth rates to density is erroneous because European countries with much lower density have equally low birth rates. South Korea has 10.1 births per 1000 people. Germany and Italy, which are half as densely populated as South Korea, have 8.5 and 9.1 births per 1000 people respectively. Spain, which has only 209 people per square mile (less than one-sixth as many as South Korea) has the same birth rate as South Korea. (See 2006 Statistical Abstract of the United States, pages 863-65, 868).

If sprawl increased birth rates, America's birth rates would have soared in recent decades, as urbanites moved to suburbs. Instead, birth rates were almost cut in half, from 24 per 1000 in 1950 to 14 per 1000 today. (Id. at 64). Evidently, Americans' bigger houses have not spawned more children, just more gadgets.

On the other side of the coin, less space doesn't mean less children. The Hasidic Jews of Williamsburg (a neighborhood in Brooklyn) live in a neighborhood with over 30,000 people per square mile, over twenty times the density of South Korea-yet the average Hasidic family has eight children. (See <http://www.demographia.com/db-nyc-wardrank.htm> for Williamsburg density statistics; <http://newyorkmetro.com/news/cityside/16864/index.html> for birthrate statistics). So Kotkin's assertion that in cities, "there's literally no room left for kids" is flat-out false.

#### Myth 3-E: Smart Growth Means An Unbalanced Economy

In his Oregonian article, Kotkin claims that Portland is an "ephemeral city" - one of a group of cities that "don't create a lot of jobs for working or middle-class people [that] mostly exist to celebrate themselves." According to Kotkin, such cities don't "compete with lesser places- you know, those ugly cities with functional warehouses and factories, Wal-Marts and strip malls- for jobs, companies and investors" but instead have an economy based "on a high level of self-esteem among its residents."

Kotkin makes no effort to supply any factual basis for these claims- perhaps because there is none. If Portland was unable to supply jobs for middle-class people, one would find that Portland had a disproportionate number of very poor or very rich wage-earners- say, households earning over \$100,000 or under \$10,000.

But in fact, as of 1999 only 10.3% of Portland households were in the top category, and only 8.6% in the bottom category, leaving 81.1% in the intermediate "working and middle classes."

More importantly, Portland was actually less polarized than the nation as a whole. Nationally, 9.5% of American households earned under \$10,000 (fewer than in Portland), and 12.3% earned over \$100,000 (more than in Portland), leaving 78.2% in the middle. So Kotkin's claim that Portlanders are less middle-class than other Americans is just rubbish.

Obviously, self-esteem doesn't produce jobs. Perhaps Kotkin is trying to say that only manufacturing jobs are "real", while services jobs are "not."

But even if this strange assumption is correct, Kotkin's attack on Portland is dead wrong. Portland has manufacturing and strip malls just like other cities. In fact, 12.5% of Portlanders work in manufacturing, only slightly lower than the national average of 14.1% and more than in sprawling Sun Belt cities such as Houston (10%) or Atlanta (7.7%). (See 2000 Census, DP-3, statistics for Portland and various other cities).

#### Myth 3-F: Smart Growth Leads To Either Too Few Immigrants

Kotkin claims that Portland's economy is somehow diseased because it lacks a sufficient number of, in his words, "Hardworking Latin laborers or opportunistic Asian traders." He complains that these groups are "the canaries in the economic coal mine [and] seem to be opting instead for less-lovely but more commercially vital places such as Los Angeles, Phoenix or Houston."

Once again, Kotkin plays fast and loose with the facts. Portland's population is 6.3% Asian- a higher percentage than not only the nation as a whole (3.6%) but also Houston (5.3%) or Phoenix (2.0%).

#### CONCLUSION

Kotkin's most venomous work is simply chock-full of errors. It is simply not true that New Urbanists are only interested in downtown. It is not true that cities around the world are losing population. And Kotkin's attack on Portland's smart growth policies is one long spin in a "No Facts" zone.

## Staley article in Washington Post



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 01/31/2007 - 1:23am

Sam Staley coauthored an [article](#) in the Washington Post. I think he is one of the more thoughtful smart growth critics- partially because he agrees with me sometimes, and partially because his tone is a bit more measured than some others I might name. Moreover, he seems to be playing with more or less the same deck of facts that I play with. On the other hand, he interprets those facts differently than I do; he tends to see the glass as half-empty while I see it as half-full, and vice versa. Below are some of his thoughts and my responses.

#### Myths About Suburbia and Our Car-Happy Culture

By Ted Balaker and Sam Staley  
Sunday, January 28, 2007; B03

They don't rate up there with cancer and al-Qaeda -- at least not yet -- but suburban sprawl and automobiles are rapidly acquiring a reputation as scourges of modern American society. Sprawl, goes the typical indictment, devours open space, exacerbates global warming and causes pollution, social alienation and even obesity. And cars are the evil co-conspirator -- the driving force, so to speak, behind sprawl.

Yet the anti-suburbs culture has also fostered many myths about sprawl and driving, a few of which deserve to be reconsidered:

LEWYN COMMENT: I think the term "anti-suburbs culture" is a bit unfair. Although sprawl critics certainly don't like the way suburbs have developed, we are arguably less anti-suburb than the defenders of the status quo. How so? Sprawl is a revolution that eats its own children; newer suburbs drain wealth and vitality



from older suburbs (at least in slow-growth regions where there is not enough affluence to go around). By supporting infill and redevelopment, sprawl critics seek to protect older suburbs.

(Staley continues)

1. Americans are addicted to driving.

Actually, Americans aren't addicted to their cars any more than office workers are addicted to their computers. Both items are merely tools that allow people to accomplish tasks faster and more conveniently.

The New York metropolitan area is home to the nation's most extensive transit system, yet even there it takes transit riders about twice as long as drivers to get to work.

In 1930, the interstate highway system and the rise of suburbia were still decades away, and yet car ownership was already widespread, with three in four households having an automobile.

LEWYN COMMENT: I couldn't find this statistic, but knowing Staley, I trust that he would not say something that was literally false. Having said that, this statistic conceals as much as it proves. According to the [1933 Statistical Abstract](#), there were 26 million vehicles registered to people in 1930. (Table 372). There were 72 million Americans over 21 (Table 27). Assuming that no one under 21 owned a car and that no individual owned more than one, this still means that over 60% of adults did NOT own a car. It may well be that most heads of households owned a car. But even assuming this is so, a society where Daddy owns a car and the wife and kids don't is a very different society (and much less car-dependent) than one in which everyone over 16 owns a car! In such a society, most people will be (and were) able to get around more places without driving.

(Staley continues)

Look at any U.S. city and the car is the dominant mode of travel.

Some claim that Europeans have developed an enlightened alternative. Americans return from London and Paris and tell their friends that everyone gets around by transit. But tourists tend to confine themselves to the central cities. Europeans may enjoy top-notch transit and endure gasoline that costs \$5 per gallon, but in fact they don't drive much less than we do. In the United States, automobiles account for about 88 percent of travel. In Europe, the figure is about 78 percent. And Europeans are gaining on us.

LEWYN COMMENT: What about Europe? Yes, rural and suburban Europe is car-dependent just as rural and suburban America is. But 69% of Stockholm residents walk, bicycle or take transit to work, as do 62% of Munich residents. (Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy, *Sustainability and Cities: Overcoming Automobile Dependence*, p. 83 [1999])

Bottom line: in places where transit is most plentiful (e.g. Manhattan, European cities) most people don't drive to work. In places where transit is not so plentiful (e.g. NYC suburbs, rural and suburban Europe) most people do drive to work. In other words, automobile dependency is not inevitable in modern society.

(Staley continues)

The key factor that affects driving habits isn't population density, public transit availability, gasoline taxes or even different attitudes. It's wealth. Europe and the United States are relatively wealthy, but American incomes are 15 to 40 percent higher than those in Western Europe. And as nations such as China and India become wealthier, the portion of their populations that drive cars will grow.

LEWYN COMMENT: Then how do you explain the Upper East Side of Manhattan, one of the wealthiest parts of America but also one of the most transit-friendly? In one [Upper East Side zip code \(10162\)](#), the average household income is over \$100K, yet about 60% of households (550 of 943) own no car.

Conversely, suburbia is sometimes the choice of people who can't afford urban life, as people "drive to qualify."

It probably is the case that other things being equal, more wealth means more car ownership. But it is also the case, I think, that some people with money are willing to spend that extra increment of wealth in a place where they don't HAVE to drive.

(Staley continues)

## 2. Public transit can reduce traffic congestion.

Transit has been on the slide for well more than half a century. Even though spending on public transportation has ballooned to more than seven times its 1960s levels, the percentage of people who use it to get to work fell 63 percent from 1960 to 2000 and now stands at just under 5 percent nationwide. Transit is also decreasing in Europe, down to 16 percent in 2000.

LEWYN COMMENT: No longer as correct as it was a few years ago. Staley has a point: it IS true that transit use declined during the 70s and 80s and early 90s- but in both Europe and America, transit is bouncing back.

Between 1995 and 2003, European streetcar and subway ridership rose by 12.5%. See EUROPEAN COMMISSION, [ENERGY AND TRANSPORT IN FIGURES 2005](#), TABLE 3.3.2.

And to the extent driving is increasing in Europe, it may be less due to increased affluence than because government makes the same mistake that American government makes: it builds more roads to more suburbs, creating more auto-dependent sprawl. Id., Table 3.5.1 (length of roadways in Europe tripled since 1970).

And in America, the picture is similar. Between 1995 and 2003, transit ridership rose by 20%. See U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2006 Statistical Abstract at 722 (after decreasing in early 1990s, transit ridership rose from 7.7 billion passengers in 1995 to over 9.4 billion in 2003)

Indeed, [driving is actually starting to decline in America](#) (though this may be a temporary result of high gas prices).

(Staley continues)

Like auto use, suburbanization is driven by wealth. Workers once left the fields to find better lives in the cities. Today more and more have decided that they can do so in the suburbs. Indeed, commuters are now increasingly likely to travel from one suburb to another or embark upon "reverse" commutes (from the city to the suburbs). Also, most American commuters (52 percent) do not go directly to and from work but stop along the way to pick up kids, drop off dry cleaning, buy a latte or complete some other errand.

We have to be realistic about what transit can accomplish. Suppose we could not only reverse transit's long slide but also triple the size of the nation's transit system and fill it with riders. Transportation guru Anthony Downs of the Brookings Institution notes that this enormous feat would be "extremely costly" and, even if it could be done, would not "notably reduce" rush-hour congestion, primarily because transit would continue to account for only a small percentage of commuting trips.

LEWYN COMMENT: Enormously costly compared to what? The \$150 billion or so that governments spends on highways?

Also, I think the last sentence of the above quote illustrates a key difference between myself and Staley: how much do marginal differences matter? For example, suppose we tripled transit ridership in every American city. Staley would presumably focus on the fact that transit's share of commuters rose from 5% to 15%, and declare that a defeat for transit. But in many of the most congested regions, a threefold increase would be pretty significant. For example, in Atlanta's central city about 11% of riders use transit. If transit tripled, that percentage would be up to 33%- comparable to San Francisco or Chicago or Washington. To me (a native Atlantan) somehow making Atlanta as transit-friendly as Washington or Chicago would make a huge difference in the regional quality of life, even if suburbia was unaffected.

To me, even smaller differences matter. I've lived without a car in Jacksonville, Atlanta, Buffalo, Cleveland, Washington and Philadelphia (and with a car in the first two, as well as in St. Louis). Staley writes that cars are "dominant" in every city in America. But there is a huge difference between the ironclad dominance of Jacksonville, where life without a car is really very difficult indeed, and the more gentle dominance of Washington, where even in inner-ring suburbs one can survive fairly comfortably without a car. Indeed, my sense has been that there is a significant difference even between Buffalo and Jacksonville, let alone Washington and Jacksonville.



(Staley continues)

But public transit still has an important role. Millions of Americans rely on it as a primary means of transportation.

LEWYN COMMENT: This is what I like about Staley; he actually is willing to acknowledge some value for public transit.

(Staley comment)

Transit agencies should focus on serving those who need transit the most: the poor and the handicapped. They should also seek out the niches where they can be most useful, such as express bus service for commuters and high-volume local routes.

Many officials say we should reconfigure the landscape -- pack people in more tightly -- to make it fit better with a transit-oriented lifestyle. But that would mean increasing density in existing developments by bulldozing the low-density neighborhoods that countless families call home. Single-family houses, malls and shops would have to make way for a stacked-up style of living that most don't want.

LEWYN COMMENT: If we abolished zoning, street design and parking rules that limit density, we might be surprised how many want something different from the status quo. See <http://pedshed.net/?p=25#more-25> (suggesting significant possible demand for more walkable neighborhoods). But to be fair, I don't know how exactly far the free market could take us in this area.

(Staley continues)

And even then the best-case scenario would be replicating New York, where only one in four commuters uses mass transit.

LEWYN: As President Clinton might say "it all depends on the meaning of the words "New" and "York."" Yes, if you include sprawl 20 miles from NYC, then the figure is 1 in 4. But if you look at the urban parts of NYC, the data is very different indeed.

In the city of NY (including the far-flung outer boroughs) only 1/3 (1.049 million commuters out of 3.192 million) of all workers 16 and over drove to work in 2000.

And in New York County (aka Manhattan, aka "The City") only 11% (82,754 out of 753,114) of residents drove to work. 11% (or even 1/3) doesn't sound real "dominant" to me.

(Staley continues)

3. We can cut air pollution only if we stop driving.

Polls often show that Americans think that air quality is deteriorating. Yet air is getting much cleaner. We miss it because, while we see more people and more cars, we easily overlook the success of air-quality legislation and new technologies. In April 2004, the Environmental Protection Agency reported that 474 counties in 31 states violated the Clean Air Act. But that doesn't mean that the air is dirtier. The widely publicized failing air-quality grades were a result of the EPA's adoption of tougher standards.

Air quality has been improving for a long time. More stringent regulations and better technology have allowed us to achieve what was previously unthinkable: driving more and getting cleaner. Since 1970, driving -- total vehicle miles traveled -- has increased 155 percent, and yet the EPA reports a dramatic decrease in every major pollutant it measures. Although driving is increasing by 1 to 3 percent each year, average vehicle emissions are dropping about 10 percent annually. Pollution will wane even more as motorists continue to replace older, dirtier cars with newer, cleaner models.

LEWYN: Staley has a point; certainly, emissions of many pollutants have decreased, most notably carbon dioxide. On the other hand, emissions of carbon dioxide (arguably a contributor to global warming) have not. According to Table 10 of [this EPA report](#), carbon dioxide from motor fuel increased from 952 million metric tons in 1990 to 1169 in 2004. Assuming that "motor fuel" has something to do with cars, it may well be the case that carbon dioxide emissions have increased along with vehicle miles traveled.

As former President Clinton might say. "It all depends on what the meaning of the word 'emissions' is."

(Staley continues)

#### 4. We're paving over America.

How much of the United States is developed? Twenty-five percent? Fifty? Seventy-five? How about 5.4 percent? That's the Census Bureau's figure. And even much of that is not exactly crowded: The bureau says that an area is "developed" when it has 30 or more people per square mile.

But most people do live in developed areas, so it's easy to get the impression that humans have trampled nature. One need only take a cross-country flight and look down, however, to realize that our nation is mostly open space. And there are signs that Mother Nature is gaining ground. After furious tree chopping during America's early years, forests have made a comeback. The U.S. Forest Service notes that the "total area of forests has been fairly stable since about 1920." Agricultural innovations have a lot to do with this. Farmers can raise more on less land.

LEWYN COMMENT: Mostly true, but with some qualifications. In much of America, there are ample supplies of undeveloped land. On the other hand, some areas (such as New Jersey) have less undeveloped land than others; so the "running out of land" argument may make more sense there than in the rest of America.

(Staley continues)

Yes, American houses are getting bigger. From 1970 to 2000, the average size ballooned from 1,500 square feet to 2,260. But this hardly means we're gobbling up ever more land. U.S. homeowners are using land more efficiently. Between 1970 and 2000, the average lot size shrank from 14,000 square feet to 10,000.

LEWYN COMMENT: On the one hand, Staley asserts a few paragraphs ago that more density means "bulldozing the low-density neighborhoods that countless families call home".

On the other, "U.S. homeowners are using land more efficiently." Sounds like the authors want to have it both ways- on the one hand density is increasing and that's good, yet on the other hand density might increase and that's bad.

(rest of Staley article deleted, since I don't know enough to comment intelligently about global warming)