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Blog post

What Transit Agencies Should Ask Their Customers About

[Michael Lewyn](#) | November 30, 2011, 8am PST

After reading [this story](#) about a transit agency surveying their customers, I thought to myself: do riders really want another survey asking whether they are satisfied or how clean the stations are? Although clean stations are certainly better than unclean stations, I suspect that these are not transit riders' major priorities. (And when I say "transit riders" I really of course mean "myself").

A bus is not a home. A bus (or train) is someplace you spend a few minutes in on the way to home or work (or some other destination). So the most important thing about a bus or train is whether it gets you to your ultimate destination quickly and reliably.

If I am right, the most important thing about my transit service is whether it stays quick and reliable by surviving the next round of budget cuts.⁽¹⁾ So maybe transit authorities should be surveying their customers about how to deal with austerity. For example, a transit authority could ask customers whether, assuming other government agencies will not close a gap between revenues and spending, the authority should solve that revenue gap through:

- *raising fares by amount X (X being the amount needed to close the revenue gap)

- *eliminating bus routes X, Y and Z (X, Y and Z being the bus routes most likely to be eliminated)

- *increasing headways (time between buses), and/or

- *curtailing late-night service (and of course whatever other options the transit authority might consider!)

These sorts of questions would certainly be of more interest to me than a survey asking how satisfied I am.

(1) Or, in good times, is improved as revenue grows.

Blog post

Should states have environmental review statutes for rezonings?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | November 14, 2011, 4pm PST

After reading an article on the misuse of CEQA in California,* I took a short look at New York law. In New York, city planners must prepare an environmental assessment when property is rezoned, and must prepare a more detailed environmental impact statement (EIS) if property has a significant effect on the environment.

For example, my property law textbook has the case of *Fisher v. Giuliani* (720 NYS 2d 50).** In that case, the city sought to allow additional development in certain parts of Manhattan's Theater District. According to the court, the rezoning "did modestly increase the density of particular sites via the transfer of development rights from theaters"- in other words, it allowed development to be transferred from blocks containing historic theaters to other blocks. The city prepared a 75-page environmental assessment. This assessment, however, was not enough for the local Not-In-My-Back-Yard lobby, which argued that a full-scale EIS was needed.

A New York trial court also endorsed a full-scale EIS, holding that the rezoning would create a significant impact because they would "stimulate development"- something that would be true of any upzoning, anywhere, anyplace, anytime. The New York appellate courts disagreed- but not until three years after the city approved the rezoning.

What do I get out of this case? First, that in states with environmental review statutes, any rezoning, anywhere, may be subject to years of bureaucratic review and court challenges that would not occur in other states.

Second, it seems to me that because developers in such states will need to wait for environmental assessment (and maybe for an environmental impact statement as well), environmental review statutes will therefore discourage any development requiring a rezoning, thus constricting the supply and raising the cost of both residential and commercial development.

Third, I suspect that the environmental review process may encourage development to shift towards outer suburbs. Here's why: I would guess that infill development is

probably more likely to require rezoning than "greenfield" development of semirural areas, and is certainly less likely to attract neighborhood opposition since in the latter type of area fewer people are around to complain. Thus, the environmental review process may reduce infill development more than it reduces greenfield development. Having said that, I don't wish to overstate my case: New York and California are certainly high-cost states, but I am not sure how much of this high cost is related to environmental review status. Moreover, the central cities in California and New York (well, downstate New York anyhow) are healthier than those of many other states, indicating that if environmental review statutes favor sprawl, their impact is not enormous.

*<http://www.planetizen.com/node/52413>

**<http://www.lexisone.com/lx1/caselaw/freecaselaw?action=OCLGetCaseDetail&...>

Blog post

Taming wide streets

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 24, 2011, 12pm PDT

Before moving to New York, I'd viewed street design through a fairly simple lens: narrow streets good, wide streets bad. By and large, I still hold this view. But after living here for a few months, I have learned that not all wide streets are equally bad. The wide roads of the South are generally terrible, but New York has made some of its wide streets a bit more pedestrian-friendly. To see why, go to [Google Street View](#) and examine three addresses: 5019 U.S. 23 in Chamblee, Georgia, 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood, and 107-43 Queens Boulevard in my current Queens neighborhood of Forest Hills.

First look at the Chamblee address. You will see a road that is seven or so lanes wide. There is no median, so the pedestrian has to cross seven lanes at once, obviously a death-defying act. Not surprisingly, pedestrian fatalities and injuries are [fairly common](#) on this road (known to everyone but Street View as "Buford Highway"). Other suburban Atlanta streets have medians that are so thin as to be barely usable: for example, if you go to Cobb Parkway and Galleria Parkway in Smyrna, you will see six

lanes of traffic, then a median that appears to be about a foot or two wide, then four more lanes of traffic. Would you feel safe standing on that median?

Now go to the Queens Boulevard address. This street appears to be about twelve lanes. But having lived here for a few months, I can say with some certainty that it is less scary to cross. Why? Because every three or four lanes there is a median. So a pedestrian can walk across three lanes of one-way traffic to median A, then to median B, then finally to the other side of the street. Moreover, a couple of the outer lanes are taken up by on-street parking, which means that the pedestrian often has to cross only one or two lanes of speeding traffic at a time rather than three. Because each chunk of the trip is not so long, the street is not as intimidating as the Atlanta-area addresses discussed above.

Finally, go to the Eastern Parkway address. The street itself is twelve lanes wide: three lanes, then six lanes in the middle, and three lanes. But the northern and southern sets of lanes again have on-street parking, thus reducing the amount of car traffic that the pedestrian must contend with. And when the pedestrian crosses the first three lanes, he or she reaches not a tiny concrete median but a "pedestrian mall" (really a median wider than most sidewalks) which is lined with greenery and street trees. After the six-lane main stretch of Eastern Parkway, the pedestrian reaches another pedestrian mall. Thus, our pedestrian not only does not have to cross all twelve lanes at once, but gets to walk in a fairly appealing environment if he or she just wants to be on Eastern Parkway rather than being on both ends of that street. (On the other hand, Eastern Parkway's six-lane middle stretch might be scarier than any one part of Queens Boulevard).

In sum, both Eastern Parkway and Queens Boulevard are far more pedestrian-friendly than Buford Highway, despite being significantly wider. Why? Because both streets use on-street parking to reduce the number of lanes a pedestrian must cross, and use medians and greenery to ensure that pedestrians don't have to cross as many lanes at a time as on Buford Highway. In addition, Eastern Parkway uses its "pedestrian mall" to decorate the street and make it feel more welcoming than the concrete jungle of Queens Boulevard.

Blog post

Learning from TTI

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 4, 2011, 1pm PDT

In a [recent post](#), Todd Litman criticized the Texas Transportation Institute's [Urban Mobility Report](#). In this post, I'd like to do something a little different: assume that TTI's congestion estimates are more or less reliable, and try to learn something from them. So here are a few observations:

1. Congestion isn't (consistently) rising anymore. Out of the nation's 15 largest urban areas, five (Seattle, San Francisco, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Detroit) benefitted from **decreased** traffic congestion (measured by hours lost per driver) between 1999 and 2009. On the other hand, congestion continued to rise in some places- for example, by 38% in Houston (from 42 to 58).

2. Highway-building didn't seem to help. Two of the five congestion-reducers built enough highway lane-miles to increase lane-mileage per person (San Francisco and Detroit). But three others did not. In Atlanta, the number of lane-miles increased by 7 percent from 1999 to 2009 (from 2350 to 2520). But population increased from 3.7 million to 4.2 million (a 13 percent increase). So road-mileage per person actually decreased, yet congestion decreased from 49 miles per driver per year to 44. In Seattle (where congestion hours went from 52 per motorist in 1999 to 44 in 2009), a 20 percent regional population increase was not matched by road growth: freeway mileage increased from 1600 to 1855 miles, only a 9 percent increase. In Los Angeles, freeway mileage and population were almost evenly matched. Regional population increased from 12.3 million to 13 million (about a 6 percent increase) while freeway miles increased from 5400 to 5610 (a 4 percent increase). Yet congestion nosedived from 76 hours per person/year to 63.

What happened in regions that failed to beat congestion? In four of our nation's fifteen largest regions (Chicago, Dallas, Philadelphia, and Houston) hours lost to congestion increased by over 20% between 1999 and 2009. In three of those, freeway mileage increased faster than population.

3. Density was of limited importance. This is a difficult issue because there are so many ways of measuring density: central city density, urbanized area density, and even attempts to combine the two. But it seems to me the most rational way of dividing large U.S. metro areas is between "transit metropolises" (places where at least in the central

city more than 20% of commuters ride transit) and "car cities" (in varying degrees, everywhere else). There are six large "transit metropolises" in the United States: Washington, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and San Francisco. Did they have more congestion than other megaregions like Dallas and Houston? Sometimes. On the one hand, Washington and Chicago were nos. 1 and 2 in congestion. On the other hand, the other four metropolises were somewhere in the middle, ranging from No. 5 among the 15 largest urban areas (New York) to No. 11 (Philadelphia). Thus, the relationship between urban form and congestion does not appear to be enormous.

Blog post

The false hope of comprehensive planning

[Michael Lewyn](#) | September 15, 2011, 9am PDT

It is conventional wisdom in some circles that "comprehensive planning" and sprawl are polar opposites- that planning is the enemy of sprawl.

But in fact, a comprehensive plan is almost as likely as a zoning code to be pro-sprawl. Many of the land use policies that make suburbs automobile-dependent (such as wide roads, long blocks, low density, single-use zoning, etc.) can just as easily be found in a comprehensive plan.

For example, Jacksonville, Florida's plan⁽¹⁾ devotes most of the city's residential acreage is devoted to low-density residential use. The future land use map allocates 138,949 acres to that use, as opposed to 23,187 to medium-density residential and only 74 to high-density. (Land Use Element, Table L-20). The maximum density in the low-density area is 7 units per acre, barely enough to support minimal bus service. The plan adds that because zoning regulations will allow numerous districts with each residential category, "the average residential density in each category will be much lower than the maximum allowable density" (p. 67, Future Land Use Element). In other words, the plan contemplates that most of Jacksonville will have far fewer than 7 units per acre. Needless to say, these low-density zones will be single-use, and are often so large that residents will not be within walking distance of anything but other houses. For example, my former neighborhood in Jacksonville (Mandarin, at the city's southern edge just east of the St. Johns River) is about six miles wide at its southern fringe- but the only

commercial use is on two or three north-south streets, which means that most people will have to walk (or more likely, drive) a mile or two to reach any form of shopping at all. (Id., p. 153). The plan essentially ratifies the status quo, and in fact freezes it in place by allowing commercial expansion near residential areas only if such expansion "maintains the existing residential character." (Id., p. 35).

The plan also is ambiguous on cul-de-sacs, a common target of new urbanist commentators. The plan states in several places that cul-de-sacs are disfavored in new developments, but on the other hand states that the city "shall protect residential neighborhoods from cut-through non-residential traffic by providing appropriate traffic control mechanisms" (p.. 32) including cul-de-sacs.

The transportation element of the comprehensive plan also includes a few sprawl-generating provisions. In particular, it creates right-of-way minimums, such as a 150-foot minimum for major arterials and a 120-foot minimum for minor arterials (Transportation Element, p. 41). Major arterials are the most important commercial streets, while minor arterials are also typically commercial. (For examples, go to maps.google.com and look at "10000 San Jose Boulevard" to see a major arterial and "Baymeadows Road" to see a minor). Assuming 12 feet on each side for sidewalks and shrubbery, that means a major arterial might have about 125 feet of pavement and minor arterials 95 or so. Since the plan also provides that most lanes are to be 12 feet wide (16 for outside lanes, to add a turn lane) this means that major arterials will could have as many as nine or ten lanes, and even minor arterials will have five to seven. Either way, such wide streets are hardly walkable.

And Jacksonville's comprehensive plan is by no means the most pro-sprawl in existence; because Jacksonville has some walkable areas and a planning director who seeks to make the city more walkable, it does contain numerous countervailing features. For example, the plan suggests that parking can be in back of buildings instead of in front. Suburban plans, by contrast, tend to be more aggressively sprawl-oriented. For example, Alpharetta, Georgia is an outer suburb of Atlanta. Its plan's(2) future land use map lists a variety of permitted densities; the highest density, for apartments, is only 10 units per acre (Ch. 7 at 7-14). Thus, the most compact areas allowed by Alpharetta's plan are only slightly more compact than Jacksonville's low-density areas. The plan also provides for numerous zones that are clearly incapable of supporting public transit, such as a "residential estate" area of 3-acre lots and a "very low density" area of half-acre lots. (Id.) The plan provides that only 4% of the city's land is to be high-density residential, as opposed to 54% for low-density residential (Id. at 7-10).

Moreover, what passes for compact development in Alpharetta is not intermingled with the city's offices; instead, high-density residential is a buffer zone between the city's large stock of offices (near the Georgia 400 highway) and the city's even larger stock of single-family homes. (See Future Land Use Map). As a result, most of Alpharetta's renters will not be able to walk to work even if they work in Alpharetta.

In sum, comprehensive plans will typically reincorporate the status quo. So if the status quo favors sprawling, low-density development, so will the comprehensive plan.

(1) <http://www.coj.net/Departments/Planning-and-Development/Community-Planning-Division/Comprehensive-Plan/2030-Comprehensive-Plan.aspx>

(2) <http://alpharetta.ga.us/index.php?m=publications&id=30>

Blog post

Cheap transport and cheap housing: is there a tradeoff?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | July 30, 2011, 10pm PDT

A few months ago, I updated a city rating system (available at <http://lewyn.tripod.com/livable09>) that evaluated cities' "livability" by rating crime rates, transit-friendliness, and cost of housing.

Plenty of cities did very well on the first two criteria. For example, New York is now safer than most big cities, and of course is by far the best city in the U.S. for public transit. But its housing costs are dreadfully high. The same was true of Boston and San Francisco (which, if only crime and transit were considered, would rank second and third for livability).

By contrast, the most car-oriented cities tended to have very cheap housing. If only crime and transit were considered, my three least livable cities were Jackson, Baton Rouge and Detroit- but low housing costs partially canceled out these disadvantages.

This apparent trade-off creates ammunition for those who argue that subsidizing auto-oriented sprawl reduces housing costs by opening up land for housing, and thus cancels out negative externalities caused by sprawl. On the other hand, it could also be argued that this benefit is itself canceled out by higher transportation costs.

When I decided to place cost of living into my "livability mix" I wondered if there was a happy medium - cities which were less car-oriented than sprawling Sun Belt cities, but still were less expensive than New York or Boston. In fact, I did have some winners: when all three factors were considered, Rust Belt cities such as Pittsburgh and Syracuse clobbered both Sun Belt cities and expensive coastal cities, because they combined low housing costs with mediocre-to-good walking and transit.

But these livability winners (with the exception of Madison, a university town) had something not-so-positive in common: they are declining cities in stagnant regions, a fact which I suspect brings housing prices downward.

In other words, its possible for a city to have decent transit and reasonably priced housing, but in American cities today, only in declining regions with declining urban cores. For example, Pittsburgh has lost more than half of its 1950 population, and its metropolitan area is also declining (though less rapidly).

To the extent that the smart growth movement can succeed in revitalizing cities, its biggest challenge might be: how can Americans do so without suffering from Boston- or New York-size housing costs? It seems to me that this is not an impossible problem to solve- in theory. All we need do is just build a lot more housing to keep up with demand. But given the political constraints on infill development, this may be easier said than done.

Blog post

Cleanliness from a car

[Michael Lewyn](#) | June 30, 2011, 5pm PDT

A few months ago, I was talking to a faculty colleague who lives in a part of Jacksonville even more sprawl-bound where I live, an area about a mile or so from the nearest bus stop and with a single-digit Walkscore. He said Jacksonville was "safe and clean." I was a little surprised: "clean" is one word I would never* use to describe Jacksonville. When I walk down the sidewalks of San Jose Boulevard, I notice litter aplenty - and from what I know of Beach Boulevard (the grim commercial strip near my colleague's house) I doubt that it is much better.

So why do my coworker and I view the city so differently? My suspicion is that how we get around makes a difference. Even though I drive to work about half the time, I still walk enough that I have a sense of what my neighborhood looks like on foot. And when you walk at 2 mph on foot, you notice little soda cans and cigarettes dumped here and there. My contrast, my colleague drives to work every day, and probably has little reason if any to walk to Beach Boulevard. And when you drive through a super-wide commercial street at 40 mph, you aren't going to be able to notice litter (let alone urban hassles which have spread to suburbia, such as the occasional panhandler).

On balance I would rather live where I live than where my colleague does. But my colleague does get to view his city through rose-colored glasses.**

*What about "safe"? I would say that Jacksonville is about average, maybe a little worse, for comparably sized American cities- not tremendously dangerous, but more so than I would expect for a laid-back Southern city.

**At least if he doesn't watch television, much of which is designed to terrify people into believing that their city, state and nation are one gigantic crime wave!

Blog post

On defining "Sprawl"

[Michael Lewyn](#) | May 18, 2011, 7am PDT

Last week, I was busy trying to turn my paper on sprawl in Canada (available at <http://works.bepress.com/lewyn/65/>) into a speech. In my paper, I define sprawl in two ways: where we grow (measured by growth or decline of central cities, controlling for municipal annexations) and how we grow (measured by modal shares for cars and transit). As I was proofing, I asked myself: why these particular measurements? What presuppositions underlie defining sprawl based on, say, modal share as opposed to the growth of a urban area's land mass?

It seems to me that how you define sprawl must be based on what you view as interesting or problematic about sprawl. My concerns about sprawl are based primarily on concerns about freedom and consumer choice. To me, a region where city living is not a reasonable option is a place lacking in adequate choice, so I define a sprawling region as one where the city has weakened over time. A region where not driving is not

a reasonable option for most people is similarly lacking in consumer choice, so I focused on automobile dependence and used modal share as my leading criterion.

But someone focused primarily on environmental issues would want to measure sprawl very differently. For example, if your primary interest is in sprawl-related destruction of wildlife habitat or agriculture, you would consider a sprawling region as one with lots of land that is no longer usable by wildlife or agriculture (perhaps measured by the growth of the suburban land mass from X square miles to Y square miles). If your primary interest is air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions you might wish to define a sprawling region as one with a high level of transportation-related emissions per capita (a much trickier enterprise, since these sorts of statistics are not so easy to find). If your primary concern is social and fiscal inequality between city and suburb, you might define a sprawling region as one where a city is much poorer than its surrounding suburbs, and accordingly focus on measures of per capita and household income for a city and its surrounding suburbs.

Blog post

The City/Suburb Income Gap- Bigger or Smaller?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 22, 2011, 1pm PDT

The Brookings Institution's "State of Metropolitan America" database (at <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/StateOfMetroAmerica/Map.aspx#/?subject=7&ind=70&dist=0&data=Number&year=2009&geo=metro&zoom=0&x=0&y=0>) contains a wealth of information both on central cities and their metropolitan areas. One issue I was curious about was the economic gap (or lack thereof) between cities and their suburbs. In the late 20th century, many central cities (especially in the Northeast and Midwest) fell behind their suburbs economically, becoming the warehouses for the region's poor. Did this continue to be the case in the 2000s?

To answer this question, I looked for information on city household income as a percentage of regional household income. (I note that because cities tend to have smaller households than their suburbs, this measurement tends to make cities look

poorer than would a focus on per capita income).^{*} In particular, I was interested in northern cities that had lost population for large chunks of the 20th century, as opposed to constantly-growing cities such as Columbus, Indianapolis, and many Sun Belt cities.

Generally, older central cities fell into two categories. One category was cities, mostly larger cities, that had rebounded from their 20th century difficulties. In these cities, the city/suburb income gap narrowed during the 2000s. For example, in the District of Columbia, urban household income increased from 75% of regional household income in 2000 to 82% in 2009. This pattern was common in the largest northern regions, such as Boston (74% in 2000, 83% in 2009), New York (from 76% to 78%) and even some population-losing cities such as Chicago (77% to 81%) and Pittsburgh (77% to 80%).

A second category is a group that former Albuquerque Mayor David Rusk labelled as cities that have passed at "The Point of No Return" - cities that had, as of 2000,^{**} never closed the economic gap with their suburbs. Rusk labelled ten core cities of major (population of over 1 million) metropolitan areas in this way: Cleveland, Detroit, Birmingham, Buffalo, Baltimore, Hartford, St. Louis, Rochester and Providence. How did these cities do?

The picture here is more mixed. Some dying cities continued to die: Cleveland's median household income nosedived from 61% of the regional average in 2000 to 54% in 2009, Detroit's from 63% to 58%, Hartford's from 46% to 42%. Some other cities sustained smaller losses: Birmingham from 70% to 68%, Baltimore from 60.2% to 59.5%, Philadelphia from 64% to 61%, and Rochester from 61.6% to 60.5%. But two cities that were supposedly past the point of no return sustained income rebounds: St. Louis from 62% of the regional average to 67%, Providence from 63% to 68%. (Buffalo also gained ground by an insignificant margin, from 63.6% to 64%).

A middle group of cities that suffered losses during the late 20th century but were not quite at the "Point of No Return" generally continued to become poorer than their suburbs, though rarely at a rapid rate. Milwaukee's median household income declined from 71% of the regional average in 2000 to 67% in 2009; similar results occurred in Cincinnati (66% to 64%), and Minneapolis (70% to 69%).

So what do we get out of this data? I would say that as a general matter, well-off cities tended to become more well-off: the rebounding cities all had median household incomes at or above 3/4 of the regional household income. These cities were sufficiently appealing to attract more affluent people. By contrast, cities that had "passed the point of no return" mostly continued to lose wealth.

The correlation between population growth and income growth was not 100 percent: some growing cities (like Philadelphia) became poorer relative to their suburbs, and some population losers (like Pittsburgh) did not. Nevertheless, there seems to be at least a modest correlation between population and income: of the eight "Point of No Return" cities that continued to lose income, only two (Philadelphia and Hartford) gained people during the 2000s.

*William Lucy's new book, *Foreclosing the Dream*, contains a wealth of data using per capita income.

**See David Rusk, *Cities Without Suburbs: A Census 2000 Update*, at 78-82 (2003 ed.)

Blog post

What the foreclosure data teaches us

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 21, 2011, 3pm PDT

I recently finished reading *Foreclosing the Dream*, by William Lucy. The most interesting parts of this book are the first chapter and the last appendix, both of which tell us where foreclosures are (or at least were in 2008, before the foreclosure crisis morphed into an international economic downturn). These figures seem to me to debunk at least a couple of the more popular explanations of the foreclosure crisis, such as:

Myth 1: "It's all the fault of too much lending to the urban poor."

Fact: In the states most affected by foreclosures (such as California and Florida) "drive to qualify" middle-class outer suburbs had far more foreclosures than urban counties. In Northern California, only 0.2% of San Francisco's housing units were in foreclosure or preforeclosure status, as opposed to 3.3% in Contra Costa County and 3.7% in Solano County. In fact, San Francisco had the lowest foreclosure level of any San Francisco-area county. Alameda County (which includes Oakland) had a less impressive 1.8% foreclosure rate- but even that rate was below not only the suburban counties mentioned above, but the statewide average of 2.5%. Similarly, in Southern California, Los Angeles County's 1.4% foreclosure rate was far below that of drive-to-qualify Riverside County (4.4%) and San Berardino (4.0%).

And in South Florida, only 1.1% of housing units in Dade County (the most urban-like of Southeast Florida's three not-very-urban counties) were in foreclosure/preforeclosure status, as opposed to 3.9% in neighboring Broward County.

(Sort of) Myth 2: "Its all of the fault of high housing prices."

This is not a complete myth, which is why I call it a "sort of" myth: most 2008 foreclosures occurred in just four states (California, Florida, Nevada, Arizona). All of these states had median housing value/median family income ratios above the national average- almost 8-1 in California, 5-1 in Nevada, 4-1 in the other two states.

But other expensive states, mostly in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest, had comparable housing/income ratios and much lower foreclosure rates. For example, in New Jersey, 2007 housing prices were 4.6 times family income. Yet only 0.4% of housing units were in foreclosure/preforeclosure status, below the 0.8% national average.

If uses changes in housing/income ratios over the 2000s (to distinguish between places that became expensive more rapidly and those that were always expensive), one finds similar results. The "Big Four" states had increases ranging between 57% (Arizona) and 97% (California)- among the highest in the nation, but not significantly different from low-foreclosure states such as New Jersey (76%), Rhode Island (68%) or Maryland (75%).

So what does make these four states different from all others? Anyone want to explain?

Blog post

Census 2010: the early returns

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 3, 2011, 3pm PST

Census data is already in for a couple of dozen states, and already blogs are starting to speculate about their lessons for American cities. Some commentators look at the continued decline of Rust Belt cities like Chicago and St. Louis, and suggest that suburban sprawl continues (and will forever continue) unabated. But reality is not quite so simple.

When commentators argue about whether cities can compete with their suburbs, they don't really mean "all cities"; instead, I suspect they mean "cities that have been losing population to their suburbs." So in examining the early returns from the Census, I focused on two groups of cities: **declining** cities (those that have lost population since their post-WW II peak) and **formerly declining** cities (those that have lost population in at least one post-1950 decade, but have recovered and are now more populous than in 1950).

By my count, the Census has issued population data for only nine declining cities with over 200,000 people: Chicago, Baltimore, Washington DC, St. Louis, Newark, Jersey City, Birmingham, New Orleans, and Norfolk. Four of these cities actually gained population in the 2000s: Washington, the two New Jersey cities, and Norfolk- and in three of the cases (all but Jersey City) the city gained population for the first decade since 1970. So if anything, there has been a modest "back to the city" movement in some cities. On the other hand, one city that had gained population in the 1990s (Chicago) slipped backwards.

A second category of formerly declining cities slipped in the mid-20th century, but started to gain population in the last decade or two of that century. This category includes Indianapolis, Fort Worth, Kansas City, Seattle, Denver, Portland, Omaha, Winston-Salem, and Baton Rouge. Not one of these "comeback cities" lost population; it appears that once a city regains its appeal, it keeps growing again. (Caveat: I am sure some of these cities grew by annexing their suburbs).

Of course, all of this could be balanced out by population losses among growing cities. Among cities that consistently gained population in the last half of the 20th century, census data is available for Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Austin, Charlotte, El Paso, Las Vegas, Oklahoma City, Raleigh, Colorado Springs, Tulsa, Arlington (Texas), Wichita, Aurora, Corpus Christi, Plano, Greensboro, Lincoln, Durham, Laredo, Lubbock, and Garland. Only one of these cities (Tulsa) lost people in the 2000s, and by the narrowest of margins (about 2000 people).

So far it appears that the 2000s has been a better decade for cities than the last decades of the 20th century- albeit not the complete reverse of suburbanization that some pundits appear to yearn for. Not every declining city gained population, but on balance there were more winners than losers, and more winners (if "winning" is defined as "gaining population")* than in prior decades.

Another issue that I find interesting is the relationship between mid-decade Census estimates and the 2010 Census. As yearly Census estimates came in over the past

decade, commentators battled over their meaning. Does it matter if a Census estimate in year X shows more big cities growing? Or does it matter more if the trend appears to be reversed in year Y?

Intercensal estimates were not consistently wrong in any one direction. The 2009 estimates showed Chicago and St. Louis growing- results quite contrary to the 2010 Census. But in some cities (such as Washington and Newark), the 2009 Census estimate came within a couple of thousand people of the 2010 result. And the 2009 estimate failed to catch Norfolk's growth, and underestimated Charlotte's growth by 20,000 people. So on balance, the best one can say about intercensal estimates is that they have a margin of error of as much as 11 percent (the amount by which the Census overestimated the 2009 populations of St. Louis and Omaha).

*One could also define "winning" as increased income. This issue I shall address in some future post, I hope.

Blog post

John McCain for President (?)

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 13, 2011, 6pm PST

My sense is that most new urbanists and smart growth advocates were happy to see Barack Obama elected President two years ago. While John McCain opposed Amtrak and had not been overly supportive of local public transit, Obama created an Administration full of advocates for transit and urbanism, and high-speed rail is one of his Administration's signature programs. So the Obama Administration will slow sprawl, and will make our cities more transit-oriented, prosperous and walkable. Right?

Not so fast. Since President Obama took office, public transit service has been slashed almost everywhere; the Obama Administration apparently was unable to foresee how deep the recession would be, and its stimulus efforts were too small to forestall local governments' jihad against public transit. And because the Obama Administration was too busy remaking the health insurance industry to get a highway/transit bill passed in 2010, it essentially punted the issue to the more conservative Congress taking office this year.

To make matters worse, President Obama's failure to jump-start the economy led to a right-wing backlash, causing the election of a Congress eager to cut spending on just about everything but Social Security and Medicare. Given the House's newfound embrace of austerity, the federal government might not even continue transit funding at current levels, let alone increase funding.

Admittedly, President Obama can still fight the Republican House with a Democratic Senate and veto power. But his new budget will include cuts in even noncontroversial government programs such as home heating assistance for the poor- an indication that the President plans to run for reelection as Republican Lite, rather than continuing his pre-2010 pattern of supporting expanded government services.

To be fair, President Obama has started some new programs designed to further walkable urban development. But these programs are likely to be significantly reduced by the Republican House or are too small to be particularly significant. For example, in 2010 the government made \$168 million in "sustainable communities grants" to state and local planning agencies, and was authorized to make \$600 million in grants under the TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) program. But this number is puny compared to the \$10 billion per year that the federal government spends on the Federal Transit Administration - which means that even a small cutback in FTA funding will dwarf whatever good is done by TIGER and the sustainable communities grants. In short, it is quite possible that public transit will get less support over the next few years than under the Bush Administration.

Would government have been more generous under McCain? Possibly so. On the one hand, urban development and public transit would receive little positive White House attention. But since the public tends to react against the party holding the White House when unemployment is high, the Democrats would have gained seats in the 2010 midterms, possibly having as much as a 2-1 edge in one or both Houses of Congress. Such a left-leaning Congress would have been unlikely to support budgetary austerity- good news for transportation advocates. And on budgetary matters, Congress tends to get its way, since Presidents typically have limited appetite for budgetary shutdowns and trench warfare with Congress.

I cannot say whether John McCain would have been a better President overall than Barack Obama - but I strongly suspect that quite inadvertently, he would have been a better President for mayors and transit riders.

Blog post

Why Drivers Might Hate Bicyclists

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 5, 2011, 11pm PST

I spent the last two weeks of December in Atlanta, living (mostly) with my parents. My life in Atlanta is much more car-dependent than my life in Jacksonville; in the latter city, I live a block from a bus stop, while in Atlanta, I live at least a mile from the nearest bus stop (and more importantly, near no sidewalks to take me to said bus stop). So naturally, I drove everywhere in Atlanta.

And while driving, I noticed a couple of unusual things. First, I noticed that unlike in my Jacksonville neighborhood, bicyclists actually tried to ride on the street rather than on sidewalks.* Second, I noticed that I was beginning to get annoyed with bicyclists- to a much greater extent than I have ever been annoyed with pedestrians while driving.

A recent Planetizen article (<http://www.planetizen.com/node/47339>) suggests that motorist hostility to bicyclists is no more rational than motorist hostility to other nondrivers. But I believe that the bicyclist/motorist relationship is different, for two reasons.

First, bicyclists affect motorist behavior more often. Pedestrians rarely share space with motorists; they walk on sidewalks, cross the street, and then return to their customary state of invisibility. By contrast, if someone is cycling in front of a motorist, the motorist must drive more slowly and be more careful as long as the cyclist is in front. And if traffic is sufficiently congested that the driver cannot easily pass the bicyclist, this status quo might last awhile. So the driver not only must go more slowly, but has a more difficult (and thus more annoying) experience where a cyclist is present.

Second, nearly all drivers are occasionally pedestrians- if only because drivers must walk in and out of parking lots. By contrast, many drivers rarely or never use a bicycle. As a result, they have less empathy for cyclists, because they will never be in the same position as a cyclist.

Thus, it is only natural that as long as cyclists use the same streets as drivers, the driver/cyclist relationship will be a tense relationship- to a much greater extent than the relationship between drivers and other nondrivers.

*Which of course, is as it should be according to most local laws. I have no opinion as to proper cycling practice on this issue.

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