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Blog post

The Federal Interest in Non-Highway

[Michael Lewyn](#) | December 14, 2010, 9pm PST

As Congress begins to draft transportation legislation next year, fiscal scarcity may induce a fight between transit and highway advocates over federal funding, rather than the cooperation of the last few years. And if highway advocates seek to tear down federal support for other forms of transportation, they will probably rely heavily on federalism considerations, arguing that highways are inherently an interstate concern while transit and non-motorized forms of transportation are a nonfederal concern. For example, Alan Pisarski writes: "If sidewalks and bike paths are federal then *everything* is federal."

There are two flaws in this argument. First of all, highways are not always primarily an interstate concern. To be sure, the interstate highway system as a whole does connect the states. But at the margins, highway improvements often have a large local component. For example, suppose that Georgia transportation officials wish to create a new interchange for I-285, in Atlanta's inner suburbs, about 100 miles from the nearest state border. The people most affected by the interchange will not be out-of-state businesses, but the people who live near the interchange (who might have faster commutes if they are lucky) and developers who will wish to build near the interchange (assuming that the faster commutes make the interchange a more desirable destination).

Second, other forms of transportation have interstate benefits as well. The easiest possible example, of course, is public transit in a multistate metropolitan area, such as Washington's subway lines (which go from the District of Columbia to Maryland and Virginia) and Philadelphia's PATCO train (which goes from downtown Philadelphia to its New Jersey suburbs).

What about a more purely local service such as, say, a bus line in Jacksonville? The bus doesn't directly benefit Georgians- but then again, the new I-285 interchange doesn't directly benefit Floridians. And both may address national problems that ultimately affect everyone. For example, both the interchange advocates and the bus advocates will argue that their policies reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution, problems that are national and even international because pollutants travel across state and even national borders. The bus advocate will argue that the buses take

cars off the road, while the interchange advocate will argue that by making traffic flow more smoothly, the interchange too reduces pollution. My point is not that either argument is right or wrong, but that both arguments address problems that are not limited by state borders.

What about a sidewalk or a bike path? Because these may cover such a narrow geographic area, these seem to be even less national than subsidies for cars and buses. But if the bus reduces pollution and congestion by taking a few cars off the road, so does the sidewalk and the bike path. And by encouraging exercise, the sidewalk and the bike path improve physical fitness and reduce obesity and the diseases it creates. Are these national problems? Probably not as much as pollution- but health problems too have national effects, affecting federal spending on Medicare and Medicaid, and affecting state and local spending as unhealthy people, like healthy ones, move across state lines.

I would not go so far as to argue that every transportation project has an equal interstate impact. But it does seem to me, however, that the line between "federal" and "local" transportation projects is not as bright a line as some commentators might think.

Blog post

Highways and Labor Markets

[Michael Lewyn](#) | November 16, 2010, 12pm PST

In a recent blog post,(1) highway expert Alan Pisarski suggests that highway-oriented sprawl development is somehow necessary for the development of modern labor markets.(2) Pisarski writes that regional job markets are jobs are more specialized today than they were in his youth, and labor markets are thus "of immense size because many [highly specialized] employers need a market of hundreds of thousands of potential workers to reach the ones they need. The Atlanta region of 26 counties is not a great economic engine because it is 26 charming adjacent hamlets, but rather because the market reach of employers, suppliers, customers and job seekers spreads over several million residents."

In other words, for a labor market to function at peak efficiency, (a) employers and employees must be able to draw on the entire region for jobs, and (b) highway-driven,

Atlanta-like sprawl⁽³⁾ facilitates this match in a way that walkable communities don't. Assumption (a) makes sense to me; Assumption (b) does not.

Instead, it seems to me that employers and employees can reach each other more easily in a less sprawling, car-oriented region. Why? Because they can travel shorter distances to do so, and can do so in a broader variety of ways.

In both Atlanta and in less car-dominated regions, most people have jobs outside their own neighborhoods. But in Atlanta, many of those people will have to drive 10 or 20 (or even more) miles to reach those jobs. In New York or Tokyo, many (admittedly not all) of those people will be able to reach those jobs via walking or public transit, and because these regions are more compact than Atlanta, more people will be able to commute fewer miles to reach those jobs, regardless of their modes of transportation.

To illustrate the point more precisely, imagine two regions, Atlanta and Compactville. Atlanta's urbanized area has 4.4 million people spread out over about 3000 square miles. ⁽⁴⁾ Compactville has a New York City-like density of around 20,000 people per square mile, which means its 4.4 million people occupy about 220 square miles. Compactville's residents, like Atlanta's, don't all work downtown or near their homes. Many of them commute from one end of Compactville to another. But in a 220-square-mile region, most residents of the north end of Compactville will be a closer to the south end (and to public transit that can take them to the south end) than in Atlanta, which, bus and train speeds being equal, means that more of them will be able to use public transit than in Atlanta, which in turn means that nondrivers are not shut out of the labor market to the same extent as in Atlanta. Thus, Compactville's lack of sprawl actually **expands** the local labor market.

Similarly, Compactville's lack of sprawl expands the retail market as well. Pisarski suggests otherwise, writing "If you want a loaf of Wonder Bread, there's a 7-11 down the street; if its ciabatta with sun-dried tomatoes there's this really great place I know a few miles off of exit 29." But in a more compact metropolis, more people will be within walking distance of that ciabatta - and the people that aren't will be within transit-riding distance. By contrast, in sprawling cities, the only way for most people to reach that ciabatta is to take the freeway, because low densities and pedestrian-hostile environments mean that very few people will be within walking distance of that ciabatta.

(1) <http://www.newgeography.com/content/001865-livability-and-all-that>

(2) This is not Pisarski's only argument; however, many of his other assertions have been criticized elsewhere. See <http://newurbanetwork.com/news-opinion/blogs/robert-steuteville/13540/livability->

[means-being-poor-and-eating-only-one-kind-let](#)

(3) I note in passing that Pisarski's description of Atlanta as a "great economic engine" is a bit out of date. Metro Atlanta's unemployment rate is 10 percent- higher than that of the nation as a whole, and higher than that of numerous less-sprawling places. See <http://www.bls.gov/web/metro/laummtrk.htm> ; see also Nelson D. Schwartz, Modernizing as a road towards recovery, International Herald Tribune, Feb. 5, 2010 (unemployment rate is 4 percent in Netherlands, 5.4 percent in Austria).

(4) http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/congestion_data/tables/atlanta.pdf

Blog post

The Tie Goes To Freedom

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 26, 2010, 8am PDT

While critiquing one of my blog posts, Prof. Randall Crane asked: "Is *any* parking regulation a net social burden or only 1.75 spaces per Jacksonville, Florida apartment?" This question in turn is an example of a broader question: how do we resolve an issue when we don't know, and perhaps have no way of knowing, the ideal empirical answer?

Parking regulation presents a classic example: looking at environmental harm alone, it seems to me clear that minimum parking requirements create some environmental harm by on balance encouraging driving, but also reduce environmental harm from "cruising" (motorists wasting time and fuel searching for parking spaces).*

But like Crane, I'm not sure if there's any way to quantify these consideration in a way that gives us the ideal number of parking spaces for a given use. So how do we break the tie where empirical data is scanty?

Generally, local governments seem to use traffic flow as the tie-breaking principle: when in doubt about the empirical consequences of a policy, choose the answer that helps the greatest number of vehicles move the greatest number of miles as speedily as possible. Having lived in places where government consistently follows this principle, I am not particularly satisfied with the results, because I believe the "traffic flow first" principle involves other important values. In particular:

***The tie goes to freedom.** Where the factual results of policy alternatives are unclear, I tend to favor the solution that involves the least government regulation, because I

believe that negative freedom- that is, freedom from government intrusion- is a useful value.

***The tie goes to (positive) freedom.** Where the facts are unclear, I favor maximizing positive freedom, by which I mean increasing the level of transportation choice. Where walking and bicycling are so uncomfortable as to be impractical for sane people, consumer choices are limited. In less car-dependent environments, consumer choices are increased.

***The tie goes to equality.** Where the facts are unclear, I favor the solution that aids those too young, disabled or needy to drive, as opposed to the solution that aids the rich and the middle class at the expense of the poor.

In many situations, these values are in conflict. For example, urban growth boundaries may increase positive freedom (by making city living a more practical choice) yet reduce negative freedom by increasing government regulation of land use. And their impact on equality is unclear: on the one hand, growth controls might increase real estate prices (bad) but where a region's poor live in cities and older suburbs, growth boundaries might, by saving such municipalities from being hollowed out, increase the tax base available for serving the poor (good) and increase the number of jobs within commuting distance of the urban poor (also good).

But parking presents none of these tough calls. By favoring drivers at the expense of (mostly poorer) nondrivers, minimum parking requirements are anti-equality and anti-positive freedom. By inconveniencing landowners, minimum parking requirements reduce negative freedom. Hence, where empirical knowledge is scarce, my inclination is to eliminate such regulations.

*See my blog post at <http://www.planetizen.com/node/44907> for a more extensive discussion.

Blog post

The "Contrarian" Myth

[Michael Lewyn](#) | October 13, 2010, 11am PDT

Every so often, I read something describing defenders of sprawl as "contrarians", implying that they are underdogs fighting against the elitist, anti-sprawl Establishment. For example, when I did a google.com search for sites including Robert Bruegmann (author of one of the better defenses of the status quo) and the word "contrarian" I found over 1400 "hits." Similarly, a search for websites using the terms "smart growth" and "elitist" yielded over 6000 hits.

But realistically, most of the U.S. built environment is sprawl by any conceivable definition. So how can it be "contrarian" to defend the status quo?

Moreover, numerous wealthy corporate elites are quite invested in this status quo, and give generously to politicians to ensure that nothing changes - most notably the road-building industry and large chunks of the real estate development industry. Other well-heeled industries (such as the tire, auto and oil industries) also benefit from the status quo to some extent.* Although the majority of planning academics may support less sprawling development, they control few dollars and fewer votes. If "elitism" means favoring wealthy corporations, supporters of sprawl are true elitists. And if "elitism" means disenfranchising the poor and the disabled, supporters of sprawl are the true elitists, since automobile-dependent development keeps jobs away from people too poor or too disabled to drive.

To draw an analogy: imagine a country called "Turkonesia" where most people (and most political donors) were Muslims. Unlike the most headline-grabbing Islamic nations, the nation is peaceful and more or less democratic. But in Turkonesia, most of daily life is structured to benefit Muslims; Muslims have more schools, those schools are located in more desirable areas, and many major employers are not close to any non-Muslim neighborhoods. Some employers are so far away from non-Muslim areas as to be almost inaccessible. Jewish and Christian neighborhoods tend to be either dangerous or very expensive. Although politicians are responsive to Judeo-Christian interests, Muslim interests come first, and when government subsidies are scarce, those most of interest to Jews and Christians tend to be squeezed out first. Even if most of the nation's intellectuals were Jews or Christians, it would make no sense to describe Muslims as rebels or contrarians. Clearly, Turkonesia functions better for Muslims than for everyone else.

If one substitutes "drivers" and/or "pro-sprawl lobbies" for Muslims and "nondrivers" and/or "sprawl critics" for "Jews/Christians", Turkonesia is pretty similar to the United States. Just as Islam is the easier choice for Turkonesians wishing to get ahead, sprawl and driving are the default choices for most Americans. Just as Judeo-Christian neighborhoods in Turkonesia tend to be either socially troubled or expensive, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods in many American cities tend to be troubled or expensive.

Surely, someone wishing to bolster Muslim domination of Turkonesia would not be a "contrarian". And someone defending the interests of Turkonesia' religious minorities would hardly be "elitist." Similarly, the real contrarians and anti-elitists are those who dare to fight the sprawl status quo.

*To be sure, environments are quite critical of sprawl - but to them, sprawl is just one of many environmental issues.

Blog post

The Unbounded Home

[Michael Lewyn](#) | September 14, 2010, 7am PDT

When you buy a house, you might think that you are in control of that house and its value. But in reality, your house's value depends on a wide variety of factors beyond your control, such as the perceived desirability of your neighbors, local highway and transit policies, and trends in national and regional housing markets. Your home may be your castle in a physical sense- but its value is heavily affected by what goes on outside the residential setting.

In her new book *The Unbounded Home*, University of Chicago law professor Lee Fennell addresses the implications of this reality and of homeowners' attempts to reassert control over property values through restrictive covenants and zoning.

Covenants are usually designed to protect property values by excluding certain

obnoxious activities. Through covenants, homeowners contract to give away some of their property rights in exchange for a veto power over nearby homeowners' use of their property rights. Zoning, by contrast, involves municipal ordinances rather than enforceable private contracts.

But under either system, a city or group of homeowners must either absolutely prohibit or absolutely allow certain activities. Fennell points out that this approach often leads to inefficiencies- that is, rules that create X amount of harm to one homeowner (or group of homeowners) while creating less-than-X amount of benefit to others. Fennell suggests a statue of a gnome as an example. Suppose Beasley lives in a community that has banned yard art such as garden gnomes. Gnome privileges will win Beasley \$600 in intangible psychic benefits, an amount in excess of the \$500 cost the gnomes will impose on the community as a whole. Fennell suggests that a more efficient system would allow Beasley to install the gnome and compensate the community for its "loss", thus resulting in a societal surplus of \$100. However, both zoning law and covenant law are not flexible enough to allow these type of transactions.

Fennell suggests a variety of market-oriented solutions to the gnome problem, and critiques each proposed solution. One simple option would be to create fee schedules for rule violations; homeowners could pay for the right to install gnomes. But a set fee schedule might be too inflexible, or lead to definitional problems. Fennell proposes a more complex but possibly more equitable solution: using self-assessed valuations to set fees. Under this system, the homeowner would set the value of his right to install gnomes, and the city or association would have to either purchase his right or let him pay for the right.

At the end of the book, Fennell makes a broader attack on homeownership as currently conceived. She asks: if a buyer of ice cream doesn't have to buy a stake in the company, why should the buyer of a home have to purchase the risk of national and international housing trends? The current system forces homeowners to put nearly all of their capital in one investment, thus creating economic catastrophe when house values plummet.

As a remedy, Fennell proposes "Homeownership 2.0"- unbundling the physical value of a home itself from the broader economic risks of the housing market. Ideally, investors would create financial products that would allow a homeowner to alienate some of those risks. For example, an investor would sell a kind of insurance against declining property values, promising to make up some of the difference between existing values and a future price in exchange for an insurance premium. Or the investor would bet on housing price premiums, buying the right to receive part of a house's appreciation; the

homeowner would benefit by using the money to invest in more diversified holdings. But as Fennell admits, there are "many [design issues] that would have to be confronted in translating the H2.0 concept into a workable policy." So someone else will have to do the detail work of figuring out how to make Homeownership 2.0 profitable.

Blog post

Snow, Cars and Growth

[Michael Lewyn](#) | September 3, 2010, 8am PDT

A couple of years ago, I was listening to a friend explain why she left Rochester for Jacksonville. "I was tired of digging my car out of the snow." It occurred to me that the nexus between driving and winter weather may at least partially explain the decline of America's northern Rust Belt.

Here's why: car care and storage makes snow a bigger bother than might otherwise be the case: if you don't have a heated garage, you have to dig your car out of the snow every day, and if you park on the street you may have to constantly move your car to accommodate municipal snow removal.

By contrast, if you live in either a snow-free southern city or a transit-friendly northern city, you don't have this problem: in the first case because there is no snow to worry about, in the second case because there is no car to worry about (or at least you don't have to use it as often if you own one). So to the extent snow governs your relocation decisions, places that are both (1) car-dependent and (2) snowy are at a disadvantage compared to places that share only one of these characteristics.

And indeed, such places have been especially noncompetitive in recent decades. As a general matter, southern cities have grown faster than northern cities. But within the north, not all regions are equal. Some "Rust Belt" northern regions, such as Cleveland and Buffalo, have suffered massive outmigration; their central city populations have nosedived, while their regional populations have stagnated. By contrast, other northern cities have survived the late 20th century more comfortably. Their central cities have

either grown or lost population at a slower rate than in the Rust Belt. And by and large, the least car-dominated American cities are within this group.

Among the twenty-five largest American cities, five have significant snow levels (over about 20 inches per year) and significant (over 25 percent of central-city residents) transit ridership: Washington, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York. * Three of these cities (Washington, Boston and Chicago) gained population between 1990 and 2007. Two lost population - but at a pretty mild rate: Philadelphia lost 8 percent of its population, and Washington lost about 3 percent. All five cities were part of growing metropolitan areas.**

By contrast, the most rapidly declining cities tend to be more automobile-dependent. Four metropolitan areas with over one million people lost population between 1990 and 2007: all of them had lower transit ridership than the cities discussed above, and three of them (Pittsburgh, Buffalo and Cleveland) had very high snowfall levels. All three lost well over 10 percent of their central-city population since 1990. (The fourth, New Orleans, lost population in part due to a natural disaster). Some other car-oriented snowy cities, such as Detroit and St. Louis, have suffered from massive central-city decline and slow metropolitan growth.

On the other hand, some cities combined fairly high levels of snow with population growth. For example, Minneapolis and Denver have more snowfall than most of our most heavily transit-oriented cities, yet both their central cities and surrounding suburbs have gained population in recent decades. And Indianapolis and Columbus have very low transit ridership (under 5 percent of city residents) and yet have gained population (although their snowfall is at the low end of the "Snow Belt", with only 20-30 inches per year, comparable to Washington and New York but lower than Boston or Chicago).*** So I don't think one can plausibly argue that the combination of so-so public transit and high snowfall *automatically* leads to decline.

But as a matter of common sense, it does seem logical to me that a car-oriented Snow Belt city will, all else being equal, be a marginally less attractive place to live than (a) a less car-oriented city with better alternatives to driving, and (b) a car-oriented city where residents do not have to struggle with snow. Given this conclusion, it makes more sense**** for a snowy city to invest in public transit (and to steer development to places already served by transit) than for a not-so-snowy one to do so.

*Transit ridership statistics from the 2000 Census are at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/03statab/trans.pdf> (Table 1092). The preceding table lists ridership

by metropolitan area; because suburbs are more car-dependent than cities, regional ridership tends to be much lower than central-city ridership. However, all of these cities have regional ridership higher than the average.

** <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/09statab/pop.pdf> (Tables 19, 26) (city and metro area population statistics).

*** <http://lwf.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/climate/online/ccd/snowfall.html> (snowfall statistics by city).

****Or, if you favor expanded public transit in all cities, "*even* more sense."

Blog post

How To Raise Fares

[Michael Lewyn](#) | August 13, 2010, 11am PDT

A couple of weeks ago, I was on a bus in Chicago and noticed something that I had not noticed before- that how you paid to get on the bus affected how long you took to get on the bus. People who flashed monthly passes boarded in a few seconds. People who put in dollar bills got on a lot more slowly, as they fumbled for the right number of bills. People who had to pay change took longer still.

So to speed buses' on-time performance (pun intended) transit agencies should encourage the former and discourage the latter.

How can this be done? One way is to manipulate the fare structure to disfavor change-fumbling and encourage faster modes of payment- and the national transit funding crisis provides a perfect opportunity to do this.

Suppose a transit agency has lost 20% of its revenue due to the recession. The typical transit agency response is either to cut service (the worst possible option, as I have pointed out elsewhere).^{*} The second worst option is to raise fares just enough to cover the deficit- a policy that reduces ridership of course, and does no affirmative good.

But if the agency wants to make buses run faster, it can combine fare increases with positive steps to encourage use of passes and/or dollar bills. In particular, the transit agency should raise fares to the next dollar increment, and use any surplus to either increase service or reduce the price of weekly and monthly passes. Thus, riders would

have to pay more, but at least they'd be getting some positive benefit from their fare increase.

For example, suppose the Anycity Transit Agency (ATA) currently charges \$1.25 per ride, and needs to raise fares to make up for lost government support. The unimaginative but common decision would be to raise fares to \$1.75 (and/or cut service). In no way does this decision leave riders better off; they have to pay more and fumble for even more quarters than usual.

Instead, ATA should raise fares to \$2. Even after accounting for revenue lost due to lower ridership, ATA is left with a surplus. ATA should use this surplus to lower the price of monthly passes (as well as increasing service). This combination of fare increases and lower fares speeds up bus performance in two ways. First, riders will be encouraged to use passes (the fastest mode of payment). Second, riders will not need to fumble for quarters, so even one-time riders will have a faster (if more expensive) commute. In addition, cheaper passes may create ridership increases at least partially offsetting what ATA has lost due to its base fare increase.

*See <http://www.planetizen.com/node/36466>

Blog post

More evidence that walkability is marketable

[Michael Lewyn](#) | July 29, 2010, 5pm PDT

A few days ago, I was in a Chicago neighborhood called Lincoln Square, on Lincoln Avenue just south of Lawrence Avenue. Lincoln Avenue looks like many posh urban neighborhoods- narrow, walkable streets inhabited by gelato-eating, prosperous-looking people. Even on a weeknight, the shops and streets of Lincoln Square betrayed no evidence of a recession.*

Lincoln intersects with Lawrence Avenue just a block from the core of Lincoln Square. Lawrence Avenue resembles a suburb more than it resembles Lincoln Square; it is six lanes wide (though unlike in most suburbs, two of them are used for parking), and some shops are behind parking lots. But Lawrence's retail is far less prosperous than that of Lincoln; a good number of Lawrence's storefronts seemed to be vacant, and others were occupied by dollar stores and other non-carriage trade businesses.**

Both Lincoln Avenue and Lawrence Avenue have the same housing stock and thus the same neighbors, the same city government (and thus the same tax rates and school districts) and the same distance from downtown (about seven miles). Thus, these two intersecting streets constitute the perfect controlled experiment on the popularity of walkable urbanism. If people basically liked shopping on car-oriented speedways, Lawrence would have fewer vacant storefronts than Lincoln. Yet the opposite is true. It follows that where everything else is equal, shoppers prefer walkable urbanism to car-oriented suburbanism.

At this point, readers may be asking themselves: why, then, do some suburbs continue to prosper? Because not everything else is equal: an unwalkable suburb may be further away from troubled neighborhoods (usually leading to more prestigious schools and less crime), in a less poverty-packed jurisdiction (thus leading to lower taxes), or have a newer housing stock. Thus, not every suburb will look as scruffy as Lincoln Square.

But the tale of these two adjacent streets nevertheless tells us something: that city life with walkability is appealing to American consumers, while city life with less walkability is anything but.

*For a few pictures of Lincoln Square, see

<http://atlantaphotos.fotopic.net/p66205703.html>

<http://atlantaphotos.fotopic.net/p66205709.html>

<http://atlantaphotos.fotopic.net/p66205702.html>

**Although I took no pictures of Lawrence, you can see the street by going to the 2200-2600 blocks of West Lawrence Avenue on Google Street View.

Blog post

Externalities, Meet Externalities

[Michael Lewyn](#) | July 1, 2010, 11am PDT

(NOTE TO READERS: An expanded, footnote-filled version of this article is online at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1632935)

Externalities are costs (or benefits) imposed on third parties by another individual's voluntary action. Government regulations exist at least partially to protect us from externalities created by others.

But government regulation may create its own externalities, leading to costs that may even outweigh the benefits (or "positive externalities") created by regulation.

One example of externality-creating regulation is government-imposed minimum parking requirements. For example, Jacksonville, Florida requires apartment complexes to provide 1.75 parking spaces per one-bedroom apartment - despite the fact that 16% of Jacksonville's renter households don't even own **one** car. The purpose of such regulation is to prevent externalities- for example, to prevent drivers from creating congestion and pollution while they cruise the streets searching for parking spaces.

But in fact, this sort of regulation creates a variety of negative externalities. First, minimum parking requirements, by artificially increasing the supply of parking, reduce the cost of parking and thus force landowners not only to build parking lots, but to give parking to motorists for free (or, in downtown areas, at lower rates than would be the case in the absence of regulation). But landowners still have to pay to build parking lots and garages; so landowners will pass the costs of parking lot construction on to their tenants and customers in the form of higher rents and prices. So as a practical matter, society as a whole is forced to subsidize driving; parking regulation makes driving cheaper by making parking free, and makes nondrivers pay more for goods and services to support this subsidy.

Second, minimum parking requirements reduce the total amount of housing and commerce, because land that is used for parking cannot be used for housing or commerce. And by reducing the housing supply, minimum parking requirements reduce density- and residents of lower-density areas tend to be highly dependent on automobiles for most daily tasks, because they are less likely to live within walking

distance of public transit and other amenities. So in this respect as well, minimum parking requirements increase driving and its negative side effects.

Third, minimum parking requirements indirectly discourage walking, by encouraging landowners to surround their buildings with parking. Where shops and offices are surrounded by a sea of parking, they are unpleasant places for pedestrians, because pedestrians must waste time walking through parking lots and risk their lives dodging automobiles. When walking is unpleasant, people drive more and walk less.

Thus, minimum parking requirements make driving more attractive and walking less so. It logically follows that municipal parking regulation may actually increase, rather than decreasing, congestion and pollution. And by increasing the number of parking lots, minimum parking requirements may increase pollution from storm water runoff. Rainstorms cause storm water to fall on parking lots, collect metal, oil and other pollutants lying on the ground, and then to run off into nearby waters, thus making those waters dirtier and more dangerous.

Of course, it could be argued that the costs of minimum parking requirements are slight, because in the absence of such requirements most landowners would build almost as much parking as they do now in order to get financing. But this argument cuts both ways: if landowners would build parking lots in the absence of regulation, then the abolition of regulation is unlikely to create negative externalities significant enough to justify regulation.

Blog post

What a bus rider wants

[Michael Lewyn](#) | June 22, 2010, 8pm PDT

As I began to type this, I was on a Greyhound bus somewhere in southern Ontario, on the first leg of my return from Toronto (where I have spent the past year getting an extra degree) to the United States. As I type, it occurs to me to ask myself: what are the interests of the long-distance bus rider? Are they the same as users of other forms of public transit, or closer to those of drivers and truckers? My short answer to these questions is: a little of both.

First of all, a bus rider needs good roads: smooth roads that enable him/her to read or type without being jolted by stomach-churning bumps. In this respect, a bus rider is like a motorist: motorists also value good roads rather than pothole-filled obstacle courses.

And certainly a bus rider places some value on lack of congestion, though probably less than a motorist. In a bus, I don't expect a total free flow of traffic, but I do mind congestion sufficiently severe to create enormous delays. Although all bus riders value on-time performance, I think this is probably somewhat more true for long-distance bus riders than for riders of municipal buses, since the former group is more likely to be stuck on interstate highways where there is no escape from congestion. (By contrast, if a bus on a downtown street is moving too slowly for your taste, you might be able to get off the bus and start walking to your destination).*

But in other respects, long-distance bus riders and municipal bus riders are like pedestrians and users of rail transit. For example, even intercity bus riders value public transit, so that once they get in their destination city they can reach a wide variety of destinations within the city.

And ideally, the bus station should be in a walkable area well served by public transit. When I ride a long-distance bus, I want my bus station to be in a busy neighborhood where I can walk to something interesting if I have some spare time. For example, Toronto's bus station is quite centrally located, which means I can walk to an enormous variety of destinations.

But in other cities, this is not the case. For example, I was recently on a bus that stopped at the South Bend, Indiana, airport, which appeared to be near absolutely nothing. (After checking [walkscore.com](https://www.walkscore.com), I found that its Walkscore was 11). When I visited Chattanooga some years ago, I noticed that its bus station (also near the airport) is a few blocks away from not only the nearest city bus, but even the nearest sidewalk.

Other bus stations are in truly scary neighborhoods; St. Louis's bus station appeared to be in one of the city's large stock of deserted areas. In my experience, this is a "smart growth vs. sprawl" issue: the most transit and pedestrian-oriented cities tend to have bus stations closer to downtown, while declining or sprawling cities tend to have bus stations in less impressive places. **

*Depending on how able-bodied you are, the degree of hurry you are in, and numerous other variables.

****However, there are plenty of exceptions to this generalization. For example, Jacksonville's bus station is pretty close to the heart of downtown.**

Blog post

Being Productive On The Bus

[Michael Lewyn](#) | June 5, 2010, 9pm PDT

In a recent blog post (at <http://www.planetizen.com/node/44518>) Steven Polzin argues that drivers are more productive because they get places faster. His post, in turn, generated an avalanche of critiques noting the negative externalities of auto travel (e.g. pollution, death and injury from traffic accidents, health costs of obesity, etc.).

But what I'd like to address is something else: the positive productivity benefits of transit use. Let's suppose that it takes me 30 minutes to reach destination X on the bus, and 15 minutes by car. Obviously, the car is more productive. Right?

Not necessarily. On the bus, I can read and write. In my job, reading and writing are fairly major parts of my work, so being able to read is really, really important.*

In addition, I can **safely** make cell phone calls and text messages on the bus; such activity, although common for drivers, is nevertheless unwise. If you are tempted to use a car as a phone booth or restaurant, please google "distracted driving"; you will learn that such behavior is controversial to say the least.

And if I have to walk to a transit stop, this is actually productive time as well, insofar as it brings exercise into my day.

Admittedly, not all transit trips are equally productive: on an overcrowded transit vehicle, I may have to stand, thus making it more difficult for me to engage in any of the rewarding activities discussed above. In my experience, there has been a tradeoff between the overall quality of the transit system and the ability to get a seat of my own. In cities with mediocre transit systems, I spend more time waiting for buses and getting to my destination (bad) but have no difficulty getting a seat (good); an inadequate transit system, by scaring off customers, may actually make transit service more physically comfortable in this respect. In downtown Toronto or midtown

Manhattan, travel time is more likely to be competitive with driving (good) but I might have to stand up (bad).

*Granted, you can listen to "books on tape" in a car, but audiobooks are not an adequate substitute for real books for two reasons. First, only the most popular books are on tape; for example, a brief look at amazon.com reviewed no audiobook versions of anything by Andres Duany, Sam Staley or Jane Jacobs- to name three of the more popular writers on planning issues. Second, the necessity of paying attention to other drivers limits my ability to get very much out of the book.

Blog post

A Blunt Tool

[Michael Lewyn](#) | May 5, 2010, 9pm PDT

How can one measure the housing affordability of a city or region? One common option is to focus on a region's median home price (or the median home price divided by median income). I've used this method myself, and regional medians will often be the best tool available.

But sometimes, this method leads to absurd results. For example, the median home price for metropolitan Atlanta is \$150,000, which makes Atlanta seem like a remarkably affordable housing market.(1)

But anyone who has actually lived in Atlanta knows that for most of the past few years, it has been impossible to purchase a single-family home there for \$150,000, unless you are willing to live (a) at or near some fairly unpleasant urban neighborhoods, or (b) somewhere in drive-to-qualify country. (Of course, this has been less true for the past year or so!) In middle-class intown neighborhoods, prices tend to start at much higher levels. For example, in zip code 30306 (Virginia Highlands/Morningside), the median home value is just over \$584,000.(2)

The imperfections on relying on regional averages are often more obvious when one compares regions. Metro Atlanta's \$150,000 regional median is less than 10 percent higher than Jacksonville's \$140,000 median.

But in the neighborhoods I am most familiar with, the differences between Jacksonville and Atlanta are much more significant. For example, let's compare two very similar neighborhoods: Atlanta's Toco Hills and the northern part of Jacksonville's Mandarin. Both are middle-middle class, heavily (by southern standards) Jewish inner suburban areas, automobile-oriented but with some bus service.

But the cost difference between these neighborhoods is, I think, significant. The Center for Neighborhood Technology's website suggests that in the core of Toco Hills, the average homeowner's monthly housing expenses are in the \$1300-1400 range for the cheapest block groups, and in the \$1800-1900 range for the most expensive block groups. By contrast, my old Jacksonville neighborhood is divided into two block groups: and in the cheaper of the two, the average housing expense is under \$1000.(3) A look at zillow.com revealed pretty similar results: single-family homes in Toco Hills start at around \$200,000, while single-family homes in Mandarin start around \$135,000. (Of course, most homes in both areas are significantly more costly).

What about more upscale neighborhoods? I decided to compare two well-off areas about an hour's walk from downtown: Atlanta's Ansley Park and Jacksonville's San Marco. In San Marco's most expensive block group, the average monthly housing cost was \$2113. By contrast, in Ansley Park's most expensive block groups, monthly housing costs were over \$3000.(4)

So how would one measure affordability in an ideal world? In an ideal world, one would look at neighborhoods that are really comparable, as opposed to some regional average that compares an incredibly wide range of neighborhoods and cities.

Of course, in the real world this can be difficult as to be impractical: unless we are looking at cities we are very, very familiar with, we really can't figure out what part of city A is really similar to what part of city B.

So we may often have to rely on median prices as a measure of affordability. But we should realize that in doing so, we are using an incredibly blunt, imperfect instrument rather than an all-purpose argument-stopper.

(1) http://www.nahb.com/reference_list.aspx?sectionID=135

(2) <http://www.city-data.com/zip/30306.html>

(3) I got these statistics from the Center for Neighborhood Technology's housing and transportation affordability websites. (<http://htaindex.cnt.org/>). The Atlanta statistics are for block groups off LaVista Road between Briarcliff and North Druid Hills; the Jacksonville statistics are for block groups off San Jose

Boulevard just north of I-295. In Jacksonville's more expensive block group west of San Jose, housing costs are comparable to the less expensive part of Toco Hills- a result more or less duplicated on zillow.com. A caveat: Toco Hills becomes less expensive as you go further from synagogues. In Mandarin, the same is true as one goes east, but not in the neighborhood's western edge because of the popularity of riverfront homes.

(4) Ansley Park is just north of 15th St. and east of Peachtree Street. San Marco's fanciest blocks are on the eastern edge of the St. Johns River, just south of Landon and west of Hendricks.

Blog post

Waiting for a miracle

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 26, 2010, 2pm PDT

I was reading Wendell Cox's recent attack on the Center for Neighborhood Technology's affordability calculations, and was struck by one thing he wrote: *"transportation costs will be reduced in the future by the far more fuel efficient vehicles being required by Washington."**

In other words, don't worry about Americans being impoverished by the cost of a car for every man, woman, and 16-year old in the House: the technological miracle of fuel efficiency will save us.

Now, this argument has a grain of truth: new EPA regulations will require the average vehicle to get 35 miles per gallon by 2016**, so cars will become somewhat more fuel efficient if next year's Republican Congress or the federal courts don't get in the way. But even so, the benefits of fuel efficiency may be canceled out by gasoline price rises - and even if they don't, gasoline costs comprise only about 30 percent of vehicle-related expenses. In 2007 the average household spent \$2384 on gasoline and motor oil, \$3244 on car purchases, and \$2592 on other vehicle-related expenses.***

I have seen the same argument raised to deflate concerns about automobile-related air pollution or greenhouse gas emissions: even if pollution is a problem today, tomorrow's Wonder Cars of the Future will drive the problem away. For example, one blog writes: *"The widespread availability of electric cars will make one argument made by transit proponents harder to advance: that riding trains and buses is better for the environment."******

But it is not just the defenders of the sprawl status quo who rely on hoped-for technological change to support their views.

Critics of sprawl often argue that sprawl is doomed because of Peak Oil. According to this argument, supplies of oil will become unreliable, and the Peak Oil Fairy will slay the dragons of unsustainable development. One recently published book summarizes the theory: "Why Your World Is About To Get A Whole Lot Smaller."

To be fair, one or both of these arguments could be true. It is possible that 100 mile-per-gallon cars will revolutionize American transportation. It is also possible that scarce or expensive gasoline could revolutionize American transportation.

But maybe not -and it seems to me that a technological change that hasn't happened yet isn't a particularly strong argument for any public policy.

*<http://www.newgeography.com/content/001526-the-muddled-cnt-housing-and-t...> .

**<http://www.fastcompany.com/1604219/obama-sets-new-fuel-efficiency-standards>

*** <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0668.pdf>

****<http://www.thetransportpolitic.com/2010/03/31/whos-afraid-of-the-electri...>

Blog post

Yes, Zoning Still Encourages Sprawl

[Michael Lewyn](#) | April 11, 2010, 5pm PDT

A few weeks ago, Randall O'Toole (a leading anti-anti-sprawl commentator) and Matthew Yglesias (a Washington-based pundit who primarily writes about politics, but occasionally veers off into planning issues) had an interesting discussion about the extent to which sprawl is a result of land use regulation.(1)

O'Toole argued that zoning does not play a major role in creating sprawl because historically, zoning "was used almost exclusively in areas that were already developed. Those original zones merely reaffirmed the development that was already there. Single-family neighborhoods were zoned for single-family homes; apartments for multi-family;

industrial for industry; and so forth." By contrast, zoning in undeveloped areas is more flexible; O'Toole writes that if a developer asks a city or county to rezone for more dense development, the government usually complies.

In other words: if you want to build in the middle of nowhere, you can build what you like- even if you want to build something other than conventional sprawl.

But O'Toole's point is perfectly consistent with the possibility that if you want to build anywhere near any existing neighborhood, you risk running into a brick wall of zoning regulation designed to limit density and cater to "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) hostility to new development.

This difference between developed and undeveloped areas restricts compact development more than it restricts sprawl. Here's why: if you want to build a walkable neighborhood, you're probably going to want to build in a desirable intown or inner-suburban neighborhood, close to public transit. After all, people who value walking to the nearest store are probably more likely to value proximity to transit than people who are just as happy to drive everywhere. So the dominant zoning system means that a landowner can build compact development- but not always where such development is most desirable, i.e. in areas near public transit (which tend to be older, established, heavily-zoned neighborhoods).

The restrictiveness of zoning laws in developed areas affects the location of development as well as its form: it increases the likelihood that developers will prefer to build in the least developed areas in order to avoid NIMBY objections and zoning restrictions that cater to NIMBYism.

O'Toole cites the Maricopa County, Arizona zoning code as an example of developer-friendly zoning. The Maricopa code contains a provision for Planned Area of Development (PAD) districts,(2) which can be more compact than other neighborhoods. But a developer still has to apply to get a parcel rezoned to PAD (3). Where do you think a PAD application is more likely to be approved- in an inner suburb cheek by jowl with existing neighborhoods, or at the edge of the county dozens of miles away? Common sense suggests the latter.

My suspicion is not just a hunch. In 2001, the Urban Land Institute surveyed developers, asking them whether they would build more compactly if government regulation was less restrictive. About 80% of developers responded that they would build more compactly in inner suburbs if government regulation was more permissive, as opposed

to less than 40% in rural areas.(4) In other words, developers themselves believe that government regulation limits development in cities and inner suburbs.

In sum, even jurisdictions that are quite permissive towards "greenfield" development may be less permissive towards infill. This bias encourages developers to build in semirural suburbs, and is especially likely to reduce compact development.

- (1) O'Toole's points are made at <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2010/03/18/a-libertarian-view-of-urban-sprawl/> and <http://ti.org/antiplanner/?p=2887> ; For Yglesias' post go to <http://yglesias.thinkprogress.org/archives/2010/03/centrally-planned-suburbia.php>
- (2) http://www.maricopa.gov/Planning/Resources/Ordinances/pdf/reform_ordinance/mczo1.pdf , Ch. 10.
- (3) Id., art. 1001.4
- (4) Jonathan Levine, Zoned Out 131(2006). Cities and outer suburbs ranked between those extremes.
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Blog post

Banking Regulation, Not Real Estate Reregulation, Saved Texas

Texas' strict banking regulation may be partially responsible for its economic health.

April 5, 2010, 6am PDT | [Michael Lewyn](#)

Many planning commentators have suggested that Texas' relatively lax land-use planning system has protected the state from the foreclosure epidemic.

But another cause may be Texas' strict banking regulation: Texas restricts home equity loans to a greater extent than most states. In Texas, "the total amount of debt on a home cannot exceed 80 percent of its appraised value, and any proceeds cannot be used to pay off other debts."

Thanks to [Michael Lewyn](#)

Full Story:

[The Lone Star Secret](#)

Published on Tuesday, March 30, 2010 in The Big Money

Blog post

How Much Does Congestion Matter?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 28, 2010, 1pm PDT

When Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood's suggested that bicyclists' needs should be accommodated in federally-funded road projects, the road lobby responded with something approaching hysteria. Bill Graves of the American Trucking Association wrote that a more pro-bicyclist policy "would cause an economic catastrophe" by "hinder[ing] the movement of our nation's goods." (1) The road lobby's logic seems to be (a) supporting bicycling reduces funding for roads, which (b) will lead to an increase to road congestion, thus (c) causing an economic catastrophe.

In this blog post, I'd like to focus on element (c) of that chain of logic- the link between road congestion and economic growth. Both auto and transit lobbies occasionally suggest (as did Graves) that without more transportation funding, economic life as we know it will end.

If this were true, the most congested regions would be the most economically stagnant ones, and the least congested regions would be booming. But this is hardly the case. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, the two large regions with the lowest per-capita travel delay are Buffalo and Cleveland (2)- hardly economic powerhouses.

To be a little more scientific, I took a look at the nation's fourteen largest regions, and tried to compare their congestion and job growth levels.

In order of congestion levels, they are: 1) Los Angeles (70 hours lost to congestion per traveler), (2) Washington (62), (3) Atlanta (57), (4) Houston (56), (5) San Francisco (55), (6) Dallas (53), (7) Detroit (52), (8) Miami (47), (9) New York (44), (10) Phoenix (44), (11) Seattle (43), (12) Boston (43), (13) Chicago (41), and (14) Philadelphia (38).

If congestion was an extremely important factor in job growth, we would find that Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia are booming, and that high-congestion regions like Los Angeles, Washington and Houston were declining.

But in fact, there appears to be almost no correlation between congestion and recent job growth. The 2000-09 job growth levels (3), in order, for these regions were: (1) Houston + 11.3%, (2) Washington + 10.6%, (3) Phoenix + 8.4%, (4) Dallas + 5.3%, (5)

Miami + 4.9%, (6) Seattle + 2.5%, (7) New York + 0.6%, (8) Atlanta -0.8%, (9) Philadelphia -1%, (10) Los Angeles -3%, (11) Boston -4.3%, (12) Chicago -5.5%, (13) San Francisco -10%, (14) Detroit -20.7%.

As you might notice, the three least congested regions all suffered negative job growth between 2000 and 2009. By contrast, the two fastest-growing large metro areas, Houston and Washington, are also among the most congested. On the other hand, Los Angeles and Atlanta experienced high congestion and negative job growth, while Phoenix and Seattle had relatively low congestion and moderately positive job growth.

It could be argued that there is a lag between congestion and growth, as businesses move out of a city in response to congestion. If this was true, prior congestion data would show a much stronger relationship to job loss than the most recent data. But in 1997, the congestion rankings were pretty similar to those of 2007. (4) Then as now, Los Angeles was the most congested of the major urban areas, followed by Atlanta and Washington (as well as Seattle, which tied with Washington for third place). Then as now, Philadelphia was the least congested of the major cities; the least congested regions after Philadelphia were Boston and New York. \

In sum, the correlation between congestion and job growth is pretty weak. It logically follows that even if the federal government reduces transportation spending, and even if such reductions do increase congestion, the overall economic effect of this result may be pretty small.

Let me emphasize what I am not arguing: I am not arguing that congestion has **no** economic costs. It makes sense to me that other factors being equal, businesses would rather locate in a place with less traffic rather than a place with more. But I am arguing that congestion is one of many, many factors affecting our economy, and that its alleviation should be balanced against other factors.

To put the matter another way: the Texas Transportation Institute estimates that congestion cost the national economy \$87 billion per year.(5) Sounds pretty bad, doesn't it? But US GNP is about \$14 trillion per year, so the cost of traffic congestion is less than 1 percent of GNP.

Ironically, traffic congestion is a bit like the accommodation of bicycles. It seems to me that Americans' quality of life would be higher if they sat in traffic less. It also seems to me that Americans' quality of life would be higher if they could bicycle more safely and conveniently. But I doubt that the long-term success of the U.S. economy depends on getting either issue right.

- (1) <http://transportation.nationaljournal.com/2010/03/should-bikes-and-cars-be-treat.php>
 - (2) http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/congestion_data/tables/national/table_1.pdf
 - (3) <http://www.newgeography.com/content/001156-employment-growth-2000-2009-metropolitan-areas-over-2-million-population>
 - (4) http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/congestion_data/tables/national/all_nat_cong_tables.pdf (Table 4)
 - (5) Id., Table 2.
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Blog post

Sprawl In Canada and the U.S.: A Comparison

[Michael Lewyn](#) | March 8, 2010, 11am PST

I am spending this spring at the University of Toronto working on an advanced law degree (called an L.L.M.), and am writing a thesis comparing sprawl in Canada and the United States. Here are a few preliminary findings:

*Canada's cities are generally growing, unlike older American cities. Among the ten cities that were America's most populous in 1950, eight have lost population- often by huge margins. The most extreme example is St. Louis, which lost 59 percent of its population between 1950 and 2000. By contrast, every single one of Canada's 1950 "Top Ten" cities have gained population.

To some extent, Canadian cities' population growth is a result of annexation, since every major city but Vancouver has annexed significant amounts of territory in recent decades.

I tried to control for annexation by figuring out which census tracts were part of the city in 1971. (I chose 1971 because 1971 census tracts are comparable to those of today, while tracts from earlier Canadian censuses are not). Thus, I was able to ascertain whether the areas within city limits in 1971 have gained population or not.

In six of the ten largest cities, these older areas have gained population. And in the other four cities, population losses have not been comparable to those of America's weakest central cities. For example, Canada's most rapidly declining big city, Montreal,

has lost 18 percent of its 1971 population (disregarding areas added to the city since 1971). By contrast, St. Louis has lost 44 percent of its 1971 population.

In sum, Canadian cities have either grown or modestly declined. So if sprawl is defined as "migration from cities to suburbs", Canada has experienced some sprawl but less than the United States.

*Another way to measure sprawl is automobile dependence. Here too, Canada differs from the United States. In the United States, 6 percent of work commutes involve public transit; in Canada, 14 percent of commutes involve transit. Although no Canadian city is as transit-oriented as New York, even Canada's more sprawling, car-dependent big cities are far less auto-oriented than their American counterparts. For example, in Edmonton, 79 percent of commutes are by car, as opposed to almost 90 percent in Phoenix. On the other hand, Canada is still more auto-oriented than much of Europe: in some European cities, less than half of commutes are by car - and in a few (such as Zurich and Copenhagen) less than one-fourth. Thus, Canadian cities occupy a middle ground between the more car-oriented United States and the less car-oriented cities of Western Europe.

There are many possible explanations for this state of affairs- some having little to do with land use policy. For example Canada's lower crime rates and higher gas prices make cities more desirable, while the nation's enormous size ensures that there is more room for suburban expansion than in Europe.

I note, however, that in Canada, as in the United States, some government policies favor sprawl. Canadian government at all levels spends more than four times as much on highways as on transit, thus opening up suburbs for development.

And Canadian cities and suburbs, like their American counterparts, artificially limit density through anti-density, single-use zoning and minimum parking requirements. Low density limits the number of people who can walk to jobs, shops or transit stops, thus making development more car-oriented.

*On the other hand, Canadian pro-sprawl policies are often less extreme than those of American cities. For example, "big house zones" in the Toronto suburbs of Burlington and Mississauga are zoned for half-acre or one-acre lots, while in Atlanta even the center city government zones certain neighborhoods for two-acre lots.

Moreover, some American suburbs are much more aggressive than Toronto suburbs in discouraging medium- and high-density development even in their relatively compact

areas. For example, Alpharetta, Georgia (a suburb of Atlanta) limits density in single-family zones to just over four houses an acre, and limits density in multifamily zones to ten houses per acre - lower than single-family housing zones in some Toronto suburbs! Moreover, Toronto suburbs often have high-rise zones near commuter trains, while American suburbs often forbid any apartments above three or four stories.

In sum, Canadian government promotes sprawl less aggressively than the United States- and gets less of it as a result.

Blog post

Living in Mrs. Jacobs' Neighborhood

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 10, 2010, 11am PST

A decade or so ago, after reading some of Jane Jacobs' work, I became aware of the distinction between mixed-use and single-use neighborhoods. In those days, I imagined that in a well-functioning urban neighborhood, every non-polluting use would be mixed together, and the lion of housing would lay down with the lamb of commerce.

But for the past few months, I have lived just six blocks from Jacobs' Toronto house, in the Annex neighborhood. And in the Annex, I have learned that the distinction between sprawl and walkable urbanism is a little more subtle than the bumper-sticker phrase "mixed-use" suggests.

In the Annex, as in conventional sprawl development (CSD), most businesses are on a few major streets, especially Bloor Street West between Spadina and Bathurst. Although Bloor has a few residences above shops, Bloor is primarily a commercial street.

So how is Bloor different from San Jose Boulevard (the sprawling commercial street of my former neighborhood in Jacksonville)? Bloor's distinction rests less on diversity of uses than on street design.

San Jose has a wide variety of commercial activities near some residential blocks, but is as wide as eight lanes in some spots- too wide to be comfortable for pedestrians. Bloor is only four lanes wide, and is thus relatively easy for pedestrians to cross. And on Bloor, nearly every commercial building immediately adjoins the sidewalk, rather than being set back from the sidewalk by yards of parking.

As a result, pedestrians can easily access shops, rather than dodging cars on the way to their destination. And because the nearby residential blocks are part of a grid system, neighborhood residents don't have to hop from cul-de-sac to cul-de-sac to reach Bloor's businesses. In sum, Bloor is pedestrian-friendly less because of mixed use than because of pedestrian-friendly street design and compact development.

The Annex's residential streets, like those in my old neighborhood in Jacksonville, are at least somewhat single-use: streets with large apartment complexes (St. George and Spadina near Bloor) have very few single-family structures, and other residential streets are dominated by houses and duplexes. So in a sense, the Annex's streets are as single-use as a typical suburban subdivision- both types of streets are dominated by one type of structure.

But there are two significant differences between an Annex street and a CSD street. First, some of the Annex houses have been cut up into small apartments; thus, on an Annex street, single-family houses and duplexes often coexist with very small apartment houses (though not with high-rises). More importantly, the Annex's residential streets are more compact than their equivalents in sprawl subdivisions: houses are closer together, and are often duplexes. Thus, more people live on an Annex street than live on a typical residential street in Jacksonville, which means that the Annex has the density to support good public transit.

In sum, what makes the Annex walkable is not so much that every street mixes uses; rather, it is that the commercial streets are easily accessible from the residential ones, thus creating a mixed-use neighborhood.

NOTE: To see some examples of what I am talking about, go to Google Street View at maps.google.com. To see Bloor, go to anyplace between 350 and 600 Bloor Street West in Toronto. To see a typical residential street, go to Albany Avenue, just north of Bloor (Jane Jacobs lived on this stretch of Albany). To see an apartment-oriented street, go to St. George St. or Spadina Road just north of Bloor. To see my old sprawl street in Jacksonville, go to 10000 San Jose Boulevard in Jacksonville.

Blog post

Taming the Office Park

[Michael Lewyn](#) | February 3, 2010, 8am PST

Most attempts to regulate suburban development have focused on containing the growth of suburban housing. But such regulation, by restricting the supply of buildable land, risks increasing housing prices. And from a more libertarian perspective, an individual's interest in choosing to "drive to qualify" may seem quite appealing. Attempts to regulate commercial suburban development do not involve the same sentimental considerations as limits on residential development, but do risk increasing prices for commercial land, thus increasing prices for everything else.

But these considerations do not justify the form of suburban office parks. I can think of no reason why an office building (other than, perhaps, one where the Ebola virus is routinely handled) should be behind a 500-foot driveway with no sidewalks. The arguments for allowing offices to locate in suburbia do not justify the office park form, because 500-foot driveways do not reduce rents in any obvious respect.

Moreover, the suburban office park in its current form creates harmful externalities, by forcing people to drive to reach them even if they live nearby (thus increasing pollution and traffic congestion).

It logically follows that office buildings should be fair game for public regulation, in all but the most libertarian jurisdictions. Quite simply, any building in an area zoned for offices should be required to be within five or ten feet of a functional sidewalk, so that a pedestrian or transit user can reach the office without endangering life or limb.

In addition, any collection of office buildings should be on grid streets rather than cul-de-sacs. The traditional justification for cul-de-sacs is to protect families from cut-through traffic. But this justification does not apply to an office building, since office buildings by definition create traffic to a much greater extent than do single-family homes.

Blog post

Are Passenger-Miles a Valid Measure of Anything?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | January 15, 2010, 9am PST

Every so often, one sees an article arguing that one mode of transportation is cheaper, more efficient, or less dangerous than another because it uses less energy/kills more people/costs more per passenger-mile. (1)

It seems to me, however, that per passenger-mile comparisons are flawed in one key respect: they assume that trips on any mode of transportation will involve the same mileage, so that if the average driver lives 20 miles from work, the average bus rider will also live 20 miles from work.

This assumption does not square with empirical reality. In the real world, people who live far from work tend to drive more often than people who live closer to work; the combination of long distances and the existence of multiple stops makes public transit far less convenient for someone who lives 10 miles from work than for someone who lives 2 miles from work. This is true even where transit service extends far into suburbia. For example, in Toronto, which has a long-distance commuter train system, 58 percent of commuters living less than 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) from work use non-automotive transport, as opposed to 35 percent living 1-4 kilometers (0.6 miles to 2.5 miles) away, and only 22 percent living more than 15 kilometers (9 miles) away.

In cities lacking long-distance commuter train systems, the differences between short-distance and long-distance commuters are even greater. In Edmonton, for example, 25 percent of people living 1-4 kilometers from work commute by foot, transit or bike, as opposed to only 2 percent of people living 15 kilometers or more from work.(2)

So in the real world of city planning, our choices are not between a city of 20-mile bus commutes and a city of 20-mile car commute. Rather, our choice is: do we want to make cities more compact, thus increasing the number of short commutes (some of which will typically involve transit, for the reasons stated above) or do we want to create a relatively spread-out city with lots of long commutes (most of which will usually be by car)?

In the compact city, fewer passenger-miles will be traveled, which means that all the negative externalities of travel (e.g. pollution, collisions, public costs) will be lower. And because people will be somewhat more likely to use transit and carpool, both cars and transit vehicles will be more fuel-efficient, because cars and buses are more fuel-efficient when they have more passengers. By contrast, in the car-oriented, spread-out city, both car and transit commutes will typically be longer, and both cars and buses will have fewer passengers.

- (1) For anti-transit examples, see http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=9325
http://saveportland.com/Car_Vs_Tri-Met/energy-cost-death-02d.htm ; for a pro-transit example, see
<http://hugeasscity.com/2009/03/22/your-co2-emissions-per-mile-may-vary/>
(2) <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/english/census06/analysis/pow/pdf/97-561-XIE2006001.pdf> at 34-35.

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