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Why Sprawl Is A Conservative Issue

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SPRAWL AS A CONSERVATIVE ISSUE

Once upon a time, children of all social classes could walk to school. Once upon a time, their parents could take a trolley to work instead of sitting in traffic for hours. Once upon a time, CITY and URBAN were not dirty words in America.

But in the second half of the 20th century, American cities were transformed by (and sometimes ruined by) “suburban sprawl” - the movement of people and jobs away from older urban cores to newer, more thinly populated, more auto-dependent areas known as suburbs (whether they were within city limits or not). In the last decade, the continued acceleration of sprawl has met with public resistance. Environmentalists complain that sprawl means more driving and the destruction of rural wetlands and wildlife; residents of cities and older suburbs complain that sprawl turns their communities into wastelands.

When I first got involved in sprawl related issues in the Rust Belt, sprawl was a nonpartisan issue, so it was easy for me to both be a Republican city committeeman and chair of the Sierra Club’s sprawl cte. But here in Atlanta, conservatives tend to respond to public concerns about sprawl by acting like President Clinton did when he was confronted by rumors about his extramarital relationships: deny, deny, deny. Deny that sprawl is a problem, deny that concerns about sprawl are anything more than part of the vast left wing conspiracy to regulate us to death. Similarly, Virginia Postrel wrote in Reason, “The anti-sprawl campaign is about telling Americans how they should live and work, about sacrificing individuals’ values to the values of their politically powerful betters.” The conventional conservative wisdom, as of mid 2001, seems to be that:

1. Sprawl is the result of the free market at work;
2. Conservatives have no good reason to worry about sprawl;
3. Even if sprawl is somehow problematic and somehow related to statism, it cannot possibly be limited without making government bigger and more intrusive.

The purpose of this speech is to show that all three assumptions are wrong: that sprawl was in large part created by govt. intervention in the economy, that sprawl is in fact a conservative issue, and that sprawl has conservative solutions.

Government has encouraged migration from cities to suburbs and newer areas through housing policy, transportation policy, and education policy.

First I’d like to talk about housing policy. As early as the 1930s, the federal government was taking its first small steps towards ruining our cities. Before the New Deal, the home mortgage system was based on down payments as high as 50% and terms as short as 5 years. To encourage home ownership, the New Dealers created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which has insured mortgages against default since 1934. Specifically, the FHA guaranteed enough of the value of collateral that down payments of 10% became the norm; by contrast, before the New Deal down payments were usually 30-50% of home value. Unfortunately, the FHA systematically favored suburbs over cities, by guaranteeing home loans only in areas that it defined as “low-risk.” “Low-risk” areas in turn were defined as areas that were thinly populated, dominated by newer homes, and all-white: in a word, suburbs. For example, one FHA
underwriting manual taught that the FHA should concentrate its efforts on newer, lower density areas because “crowded neighborhoods lessen desirability” and “older properties in a neighborhood have a tendency to accelerate the transition to lower-class occupancy.” As a result of the FHA’s biases, the FHA generally insured suburban mortgages while refusing to insure urban mortgages— in other words, bribing homeowners to move to suburbs. Although the FHA changed its policies in the 1960s, by then it was too late for a lot of city neighborhoods. The boulder of middle-class flight had begun to fall.

While the federal government was bribing middle-class homebuyers to leave cities, it was bribing the poor to stay in cities. Another New Deal program, the Housing Act of 1937, funded public housing for the poor. The Housing Act provided that any city creating public housing had to create a municipal housing authority or contract to work with one, so suburbs that did not want public housing could easily avoid it. Moreover, the Housing Act made it impossible for suburbs to build public housing even if they wanted it, by requiring that municipalities eliminate one unit of substandard housing for each unit of public housing built. This meant that if a suburb didn’t have substandard housing it couldn’t build public housing. In addition to ensuring that public housing would be concentrated in cities, the federal government also ensured that public housing would be packed with poverty. Federal housing laws have consistently limited public housing to the poorest of the poor; for example, today’s housing laws require that 60% of public housing occupants earn less than 30% of their metro area’s median income. So the federal government packed poor people into the cities through public housing, thus insuring that cities had more poverty and smaller tax bases than suburbs. And by dumping public housing in the cities, the federal government also made cities less desirable to the middle class— because where you have concentrated poverty you have crime, and most people try to flee crime-ridden neighborhoods if they can afford it. For example, Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes contain only ½ of 1% of Chicago’s population but account for 10% or so of the city’s murders.

Federal transportation policy also encouraged suburban migration. For nearly all of the 20th century, a major priority of govt. at all levels has been to build roads. As early as 1921, the federal government began to support highway building, by enacting a Federal Road Act that designated 200,000 miles of road as eligible for federal matching funds. At that time, govt. at all levels was pouring $1.4 billion into highways— a sum that grew over time, and exploded after the interstate highway act was passed in the 1950s. (By contrast, until the 1960s, public transit systems were typically private and unsubsidized. In fact, local governments often taxed streetcar users to pay for highways, by using general revenues for road spending). Today, the federal government spends over $30b a year on highways, and state and local governments more than twice that much.

So the govt. likes to throw money at roads. So what? Road spending has degraded cities in two ways: by physically destroying city neighborhoods and by making it easier for people to move to suburbs.

During the first decade of interstate highway construction, federal bureaucrats destroyed hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of homes, to make room for highways. (One federal court ruling uses the number 2 million). In Baltimore, nearly 20% of the city’s African Americans had their homes destroyed to make room for I-95 and I-93. Nearly every city has lost
a few neighborhoods to highways. Sometimes even the threat of a new highway destroyed a neighborhood. For example, in the 1960s Buffalo planners debated a city highway known as the West Side Arterial, that (if built) would have destroyed the Lower West Side of Buffalo. Banks, insurance companies, etc. were unwilling to invest subject to a death sentence, so homeowners took the hint and left the neighborhood.

More importantly, highways create sprawl by enabling people to live farther away from downtown jobs, thus giving commuters easier access to cities from once-distant suburbs. And where highway-driven residential development goes, commercial development follows, as retail businesses move to catch up with their customers and employers move to catch up with their more upscale employees. As one federal court wrote four years ago, “highways create demand for travel . . . by their very existence.” For example, Washington’s Beltway was designed to allow East Coast motorists to bypass the city. Instead, it became a magnet for office and retail centers that sprouted near Beltway exits, such as Tyson’s Corner.

Some deny that highways cause sprawl; it is occasionally argued that people will move to suburbs anyhow, and that the movement of people to suburbs near those highways is just a coincidence. To believe this argument, you have to believe that every single person who moves to some suburb near a major highway would still live there if his or her commute was going to be on two-lane gravel roads all the way to downtown – obviously an absurd premise. In fact, this wall of denial is beginning to crumble, as even organizations supporting roads and sprawl begin to admit that highways shift development. For example, in 1999 the National Association of Home Builders (hardly an anti-sprawl group) conducted a survey that purported to show the popularity of suburban living. The survey asked respondents what amenities would encourage them to shift neighborhoods, and the top response, cited by 55% of respondents, was HIGHWAY ACCESS. If highway access makes a suburb more popular, obviously building highways to the countryside makes the countryside more popular and more developed. In other words, even pro-sprawl groups are beginning to admit here and there that highways create sprawl. Case closed.

Now it has been argued that highways don’t create sprawl because after all, Europe is much more transit oriented than we are and they still have some sprawl. Ronald Utt of Heritage, in making this argument, writes: “in Europe and Japan. . . comprehensive and heavily subsidized public transit systems helped facilitate the exodus of central-city residents to outlying communities.” But you can’t have it both ways: if a commuter train facilitates movement to suburbs, so does a highway.

Another counterargument is that suburbanization was well underway by the time the interstates were built. To which I respond: so were highways. The feds had been financing highways for decades, as had state and local governments. Moreover, the suburban migration of the second half of the century was radically different in degree than the suburban migration of the first. Of the 18 American cities that had over 500,000 people in 1950, every one of them gained population in the first half of the century—EVERY SINGLE ONE. By contrast, in the following three decades most of those cities lost people, sometimes to a calamitous degree, 13 in the 50s, 15 in the 60s, 16 in the 70s. St. Louis has lost over 60% of its 1950 population, Buffalo and
Cleveland almost half.

Government policy has created sprawl in a third major area: education policy. Most of you know, of course, that families often flee cities because of bad urban schools. But what makes city schools “worse” than suburban schools? The intersection of two factors: first of all, the policies I’ve mentioned above makes cities into dumping grounds for the poor, and second, that government makes one’s school depend on one’s address.

I start with a highly relevant fact. Typically, students from underprivileged backgrounds achieve less than students from rich backgrounds, and numerous studies have shown that a student’s social background has a more significant effect on his school achievement than anything that happens at school. For example, Christopher Jencks of Harvard wrote in Inequality that “qualitative differences between high schools seem to explain about 2% of the variation in the students’ educational achievement”. Generally, the slower students tend to be from poorer households. It logically follows that no matter how efficiently they are run, schools filled with poverty-stricken children quickly get a reputation as “bad schools” and parents try to avoid them whenever possible.

Now if government didn’t have anything to do with schooling (or if government assigned children to school based on achievement tests rather than residents), the class gap between rich and poor students wouldn’t have anything to do with suburban sprawl. Rich kids and/or bright kids would go to their rich schools or their gifted children’s schools, and poor people would go to poor schools a few blocks away -- not my idea of Utopia, but one that at least didn’t add residential segregation to the educational segregation that would exist anyhow. But the real world is even worse. Because in the real world we deal with the major cause of school-related sprawl: under American state laws, bureaucrats assign students to schools based on their city of residence. If you live in the District, you go to school in the District with other children from the District. Because the District has more low income children, this means that District schools have more underperformers. And because District students achieve less, District parents want to get the heck out of the District and go to schools in the suburbs, where students are more well off and their children won’t have to be held back by listening to the teacher teach to the bottom of the class. So state laws tying schooling to residence have rigged the dice against diverse cities with lots of poor people.

And then the federal govt. made the problem worse, through its botched attempt at so-called desegregation. If school assignment depended on neighborhood, diverse neighborhoods would still have so-called bad schools, because students from underprivileged backgrounds would be driving down the test scores. But even so, homogeneously well off city neighborhoods would still have good schools with good test scores. But in the 1970s, the federal courts decided that city schools had to be racially integrated – which, because blacks are so much poorer than whites (and were more so then than today) meant that they had to be economically integrated as well. By contrast, the federal courts didn’t bother to apply similar rules to suburbs; they reasoned that because suburbs had never had any blacks to discriminate against, they obviously didn’t need to stop discriminating. Parents in middle-class neighborhoods looked at the situation and said: well, we can send our kids to city schools dominated to kids from the worst neighborhoods in
town, or we can blow $10,000/yr on private school, or we can move to the suburbs (where thanks to the federal courts, the schools were still lily white). Not surprisingly, most moved to the suburbs. For example, in Boston, site of a notoriously bitter political fight over desegregation, the city’s juvenile white population declined by over 50% in the 1970s, while the city’s single adult white population declined by only 3%.

In addition to encouraging the migration of the middle class from city to suburb, government policy has also affected the design of those suburbs, making them far more auto-oriented than they might be in a truly free market. In the absence of government regulation, many American suburbs might look like Arlington or Bethesda: communities that tolerated the automobile without being enslaved by it. But instead, the majority of American suburbs look like most of Howard and Fairfax Counties: communities where non-automotive transportation is an ordeal. How’d this happen?? One word: zoning.

The federal govt. encouraged state and local govts. to create zoning codes through the Standard Zoning Enabling Act, a model statute enacted in the 1920s. Sec. 2 of SZEA states: “‘‘Regulations shall be uniform for each class or kind of buildings throughout each district.’’” Thus, SZEA defines zones as parcels where all lots have the same minimum lot sizes, thus effectively mandating single use zoning which keeps stores out of residential zones and vice versa, keeps rental property out of zones reserved for single family homes. And SZEA encourages those minimum lot sizes to be large: Sec. 3 of this Act provides that zoning legislation should be designed “‘to avoid the undue concentration of population.’’” Most states quickly adopted zoning enabling acts based on SZEA, and local govts. adopted local ordinances based on these principles.

These local ordinances typically divide suburbs and cities into zones dominated by one category of land use: commercial zones must be exclusively commercial, homeowner zones must be exclusively for homeowners, and so forth. If these zones were small and close to each other, it might still be possible for people to go from one zone to another w/o driving. But thanks to zoning, this is not the case. Zoning ordinances typically mandate minimum lot sizes of as much an acre per home (the standard in most Atlanta suburbs). And where densities are as low as noe or two homes per acre, very few homes will be within walking distance of stores, and public transit will be economically infeasible. The practical consequence of SZEA and its progeny are that absent a zoning variance, walkable traditional neighborhoods are outlawed in many American suburbs, because every activity demands a separate zone of its own: people can’t live within walking distance of shopping and offices can’t be within walking distance of either.

In the words of James Howard Kunstler, “‘‘We have separated housing from every other human activity. The result is the familiar pattern we see today in edge-city suburbs: commercial offices in one parking pod, commercial retail in
another, light industrial in another, and housing on cul-de-sacs, completely
isolated from everything. Housing subdivisions consequently have no corner
stores and nothing much else within walking distance, except more housing.”’’

As a practical matter, zoning codes don’t even allow all the things they seem to
allow. To quote Prof. Douglas Laycock of the Univ. of Texas law school, zoning
““is administered through highly discretionary and individualized processes that
leave ample room for deliberate but hidden discrimination.”’’ So even if some
enterprising landowner tries to build something pedestrian-friendly, some
neighbor of the proposed development will complain to the zoning board or the
city council, because many of them are afraid any change will make things worse.
And the zoning board will typically decide that even though property rights may
be OK for developers out in the country, but in the suburbs people’’s property
rights are subject to the veto power of the people who already live there — or
more accurately, of the loudest neighbor, thus creating a kind of heckler’’s veto
over new development. One could profitably spend days talking about the
absurdities of existing zoning law, but a couple of recent excesses come to
mind. Recently Andres Duany proposed building a large mixed-use multifamily
structure in Tysons Corner, one of Washington’’s largest suburban business
districts so that people who worked in Tysons Corner could live there without
driving to work. If anyplace could handle high density housing, one would think
it would be a major business district. But the neighbors vetoed it because it
could cause traffic congestion: so in the world of zoning, if you’’re making it
possible for people to get around without driving, you’’re creating congestion.
Now this kind of argument might make sense in a quiet suburb like Garret Park,
but Tysons Corner? Gimme A Break!

In Ramapo, N.Y., a Orthodox Jewish rabbi sought to create a mini-synagogue in
his home, so that a few dozen worshippers could walk to synagogue (as those of
who followed the adventures of Sen. Lieberman closely know, observant Orthodox
Jews walk to synagogue, because they believe that the Bible forbids them to
light a fire on the Sabbath, and they also believe that use of internal
combustion engines constitute such fire, whether in autos or in public transit).
Clearly, there was no issue of traffic congestion in the conventional sense —
nevertheless, the neighborhood prohibited the synagogue by incorporating as a
village and then rewriting its zoning code to state that home offices and
similar activities are not allowed if they ““detract from the residential
character of the neighborhood.’’”’ The city council then held that worship
services did exactly that. Although the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second
Circuit threw out the council’’s decision on First Amendment grounds, pious
pedestrians in the 9th Circuit (which includes Calif.) have not been so lucky —
so your right to walk to church or synagogue still depends on where you live.

Zoning law is not the only obstacles that local governments use to force
suburbanites into their cars. Local governments frequently force businesses,
apartment buildings, and developers to provide parking. Nearly all building
codes, for example, require apt. bldgs to provide at least one parking space per
apt. and sometimes more. This unfunded mandate creates significant costs for
developers, thus forcing up the prices of apts and offices. But more
importantly for my purposes, free parking mandates force pedestrians to walk
through a sea of off-street parking to get to aps and stores, thus making
nonautomotive transportation inconvenient if not downright unsafe. Moreover, by
forcing businesses to provide more parking than a free market would dictate,
Govt. creates a glut of parking, thus lowering the price of parking and
essentially subsidizing driving.

Traffic engineers also make streets unfriendly to pedestrians by making them
extremely wide. For example, most of Main St in Buffalo, NY is six lanes
wide—even though Buffalo is one of America’s least congested cities, and Main St
borders some census tracts where a majority of people don’t even own cars!
What’s going on? The traffic engineers decided that the welfare of the poor
pedestrians of main street is less important than helping suburbanites get out
of the city a few minutes more quickly — and now the state DOT is thinking about
widening the street even more in some areas! Why does street width matter?
Because as anyone who’s tried to walk in a suburb with six or eight lane roads
knows, the wider the street, the more dangerous it is to walk down that street.
Herbert Spencer, the 19th century libertarian philosopher, once wrote a book,
Man vs. the State. Today someone should write a book, The Pedestrian vs. The
State.

So sprawl is in large part the government’s fault. So what? Lots of things are
caused by government, but conservatives only worry about a few of them. In the
next section of my talk, I’d like to talk about WHY conservatives should worry
about sprawl. What conservative values does sprawl create a problem for?

I believe that sprawl should be problematic for both economic and social conservatives.
Economic conservatives believe in more consumer choice and lower taxes. Yet
sprawl creates less consumer choice and (at least in some areas) higher taxes.

Consumer choice means that people can buy whatever they want, without government
telling them what to buy. But sprawl means less consumer choice, by forcing people to own
cars. It is a common cliche (and one with ample support) that in most American suburbs and Sun
Belt cities, you need a car to be a functioning part of society. Now I realize that this isn’t true in
the District or Arlington or Bethesda — but its true in Atlanta where I live,
and I suspect its probably true for most Washingtonians who have kids in school,
because there are very few places that are transit accessible and have public
schools that people don’t run away from. And as I have pointed out, Americans
need their cars because of government policies — because of zoning laws that
make suburbs car dependent through separation of uses and artificially low
densities, and also through transportation, housing and education policies that
have made older urban cores dumping grounds for the poor and intolerable places to live for middle class families. Govt. used highway policies to encourage people and their employers to move to suburbs, used housing and education policies to turn cities into dumping grounds for the poor (thus causing those cities to have higher crime and less prestigious schools than their suburbs, which in turn forces out the middle class). And then local govt., through zoning, parking and transportation policies, ensured that those suburbs would be totally auto dependent.

In other words, car dependency isn’t a result of the free market, car dependency is an unfunded mandate imposed on Big Brother — to put it another way, car dependency is a tax. According to the Statistical Abstract, the average American spends about $6000 a year on their cars (counting car purchases, gasoline, maintenance, insurance, and a variety of smaller costs). Since car dependency is imposed by govt. policy, it logically follows that the costs of cars are a tax — and if we reduced car dependency, most Americans would get a tax cut that dwarfs anything proposed by President Bush or even Dick Armey.

But sprawl means tax increases in a more direct way. As cities lose their middle-class residents and retain the poor, they became poorer. In the metro areas encompassing the 23 American cities that have the lowest ability to annex their suburbs (areas that, to quote David Rusk, are “zero elasticity” cities, city per capita income is only 2/3 of suburban median income. Even though poorer cities have less revenue to play with, their needs continue to multiply: poorer cities will have to spend more money to obtain adequate public services than their richer suburbs, because poor people need more money for poverty-related health care and public assistance than rich suburbanites, and they tend to commit more crimes (thus causing additional public spending on jails and cops). So other things being equal, sprawl means that cities will have to raise taxes to keep their public services at the same level, because their tax base is smaller and their expenses are higher.

But everything else ISN’T equal. Here’s why: as a city becomes poorer, its electoral base changes too. For example, between 1976 and 1996 the GOP vote in the city of Buffalo nosedived from 37% for Jerry Ford to 17% for Bob Dole, even though Dole’s national percentage of the two party vote was only 4 pts lower. Similarly, Philadelphia had Republican mayors for the first half of the century, and now votes just like Buffalo. In Philadelphia, as in Buffalo, the Republican presidential vote dropped from about 1/3 of votes in 1976 to under 20% in the last couple of elections. The bottom line is that a city with a 20% poverty rate is a lot less likely to elect Dick Armey as mayor, and a lot more likely to elect a tax and spend politician like Marion Barry — because all its Republicans have left town. So sprawl means not only that cities have to raise taxes to maintain their public services, it also means that cities are more likely to elect politicians who don’t MIND raising taxes. Some conservatives say, “well, sprawl is the
cities’” fault because they keep electing people like Marion Barry.”” But what these folks don’t get is that they are confusing cause and effect: sprawl causes Marion Barry as much as vice versa. To put it another way, if you took the 572,000 people who live in the District now and swapped them with 572,000 randomly selected residents of Fairfax County, the next few elections would be very different indeed.

In fact, there’s even a plausible argument that sprawl means higher taxes in the suburbs it supposedly benefits, by causing suburbs to need more roads and schools for all their new residents (although there is some scholarly dispute on this point, and I really don’t have the time or the expertise to go into the dispute in detail). Let me quote the web page of the NAHB, hardly an anti sprawl group: “‘appropriate bodies of government should adopt capital improvement plans . . . designed to fund necessary infrastructure required to support new development.’” English translation: sprawl means Bigger Government, because once a suburb gets the so-called benefit of middle-class flight from cities or older suburbs, the developers will come swooping down on wings of eagles, pleading for local govts. to tax and tax, spend and spend, develop and develop.

In sum, sprawl means less consumer choice (because consumers HAVE to live in the suburbs and drive a car) and more govt.

What of sprawl and cultural conservatism? Well, I concede that sprawl doesn’t have much to do with abortion, and it may not even affect gun control (though I wonder whether the steady incursion of suburbanites into once rural areas, by reducing the number of hunters, has reduced support for the 2nd Amendment). But it does affect social stability in a general way. Sprawl means today’s suburbs become tomorrow’s slums, as the middle class moves further and further out and abandons whatever is left over to the poor. The decay is most obvious in Rust Belt cities like Cleveland and Milwaukee. In the latter city, the number of census tracts with poverty rates over 40% increased from 9 to 42 between 1980 and 1990. In Cleveland, the number increased from 20 to 69.

But you might say, well, they’re only cities, and cities have a unique set of problems because of the size and bureaucracy and yadda yadda yadda. But even suburbs are vulnerable to the depredations of sprawl, as urban decay spreads beyond the central city limits. Detroit’s Highland Park, L.A.’s Compton and Miami’s Opa Locka all have higher murder and robbery rates than nearby central cities, and even suburbs in better shape are still in trouble. For example, most of Cleveland’s inner ring suburbs have suffered dramatic declines not just in population, but in wealth relative to other suburbs. In Cleveland’s poorest suburb, E. Cleveland, household income declined from 77% of the metro area mean in 1970 to 57% in 1990. But even more affluent suburbs are in trouble: affluent suburbs like Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights have lost population in recent decades, and in fact many second and third ring suburbs are becoming poorer.
For example, Mayfield Heights is a third ring suburb: that is, it doesn’t border
the city, or even border the suburbs next to the city like C Hts or E Cleve: yet
it went from 103% of the median income in 1970 to 85% in 1990. In sum,
sprawl, like the French Revolution, is a revolution that devours its own
children: sprawl creates inner ring suburbs, only to destroy them a few decades
later by creating outer suburbs to skim off their elites, and as long as cities
and suburbs continue to lose their most affluent citizens to newer suburbs, no
community is truly safe from the ravages of neighborhood decay, and no stable
community can long endure.

Sprawl also affects another conservative value, one shared by economic and
social conservatives: the preference for work over welfare dependency. Thanks
to suburban sprawl, many low-skill jobs are located in areas that are
inaccessible by public buses or nearly so. For example, even in the relatively
transit-friendly Boston area, just 58% of entry level jobs are within a mile of
transit service. So to get off welfare and get a job, a welfare recipient may need
a car which of course she probably cannot afford. So suburban sprawl means that
welfare recipients are often better off on welfare or in illicit activity than
trying to get a job that they can’t hold due to inadequate transportation, or
for wages that are canceled out by the costs of car payments.

You may ask at this point: so sprawl is bad, and sprawl is caused by govt. But
isn’t it a fait accompli? That is, is there anything conservatives can do about
it that doesn’t involve more subsidies for costly mass transit projects or more regulation of
property rights? Are there free-market solutions to sprawl? In fact there are,
in 3 areas: transportation, land use, and education.

First, transportation. As I’ve explained, govt. creates sprawl by building
roads — in fact, govt. at all levels spends about $100b a year on roads. So to
stop the sprawl, stop the roads, cut the gas tax, and give the money back to the taxpayers.
Period. Specifically, no more widened roads, no more new roads in undeveloped
areas. Now I realize that Big Brother justifies new and widened roads by
uttering the magic words, “traffic congestion.” Taxpayers will fight govt.
spending on welfare or jails or foreign aid, but if you say the magic words,
“traffic congestion”, suddenly a lot of ordinarily sensible people start to
believe that government is their Lord and Savior. Not so!

I concede, of course, that if new and widened roads did not affect development
patterns, a new road might actually reduce congestion. But of course, as I have
explained above, roads do affect development patterns, by shifting development
to the area where the new road is located. So when the road is built, more
people move to the area near the road, causing more traffic, causing instant
congestion. For example, in 1991 Montgomery County widened I-270 to 12
lanes—12 lanes, mind you! But still there are complaints about congestion.
Why? Because suburbs near I-270 like Germantown and Gaithersburg grew because
of the road widening, causing more traffic. And 270 is no aberration.

Of course, it could be argued that even if a new road doesn’t reduce congestion in the area served by the new road, it might reduce congestion elsewhere in the region. But the evidence on this issue is at best ambiguous; regionwide congestion has increased both in regions that have thrown money at roads and those that have not. For example, Charlotte and Fresno have grown at roughly similar rates over the past two decades (about 60-80%). Charlotte’s freeway mileage more than doubled, from 135 to 450. Fresno’s freeway mileage increased by less than population growth from 140 to 170. So if highways had a significant impact on regional congestion, you might think that Charlotte would be less congested in 2000 than in 1980. Not so! In 1982, congestion cost Charlotte drivers 6 hours per year per person. In 1999, congestion cost them 32 person-hours. Obviously, congestion increased dramatically in Charlotte. Even though Fresno didn’t bother to throw money at roads, congestion increased at a slightly lower rate than in Charlotte, from 4 hours per person to 18.

Housing policy is even more susceptible to free market solutions than transportation policy. I realize that the problem of public housing for the poor may be insoluble — but the problem of sprawl creating zoning isn’t. Here, the problem is zoning. As I’ve explained, Zoning creates sprawl, so cut it out. One obvious free market solution: take our zoning laws, destroy them and salt the Earth so that nothing grows again. I concede, however, that abolishing zoning entirely may not be politically possible. Alternatively if you can’t abolish zoning, eliminate zoning requirements that adversely impact pedestrians and nondrivers, through a state law barring any requirements discriminating on bases like off-street parking, lot size or density, or requirements restricting residential use in commercial zones. I once saw a bumper sticker that said “If you don’t like abortions, don’t have one.” Similarly, if you don’t like small houses or houses that are close together, don’t buy one — but you shouldn’t be able to prevent other people in your neighborhood or suburb from buying one.

Education is a slightly more difficult problem. Our education laws cause sprawl by requiring people to go to public schools in the city or neighborhood where they live. Since lots of people who are willing to live in a diverse city aren’t willing to send their children to a diverse public school, this encourages middle-class flight. So the solution is obvious: break the link between schooling and residence, so parents can send their children to school anywhere they feel like it. This means that if parents are dissatisfied with urban public schools, they can stay in the city and still get a school they are satisfied with without shelling out $10,000/yr for private school tuition. How do you achieve this goal? Some variation of a voucher system or tuition tax credit would appear to be ideal: however, exactly what policy to create is best left for another speech. Conservatives tend to favor either tuition tax credits or voucher systems that include private schools; moderates and liberals (at least the ones who are smart enough to see the problems with the status quo) tend to support some sort of open enrollment plan that allows city children into
suburban schools but doesn’t support private schools. I think all of these options would be an improvement on the status quo—both from a urban affairs perspective (because even a public schools only voucher system would reduce middle class flight from cities) and from a conservative, free-market perspective (by increasing parental choice).

In sum, I hope that I’ve persuaded you that sprawl was in large part created by govt. policy, affects conservative policies, and is in part susceptible to free-market solutions.