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September 30, 2008

## Sprawl, Y'All

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/lewyn/54/>

In my experience, the sort of people who worry most about Jacksonville's suburban sprawl tend to be environmentalists. Environmentalists tend to believe that the growth of automobile-dependent suburbs means:

- \*more pollution and global warming, because residents of those suburbs tend to drive more miles, thus increasing emissions of various toxins;
- \*more water pollution, as oil leaks from cars onto new parking lots and roads, and is then driven by rainwater into the St. Johns;
- \*more flooding, because wetlands get paved over to create new subdivisions, thus reducing the ground's capacity to hold rainwater; and
- \*more danger to endangered species, as wildlife habitat is turned into subdivisions and strip malls.

These concerns tend not to have much traction in Northeast Florida. One reason for this fact may be that most people in Duval and surrounding counties are political conservatives, who tend to distrust environmentalist groups for a wide variety of reasons. Environmentalists tend to favor increased government regulation of business in order to reduce pollution; conservatives tend to favor reduced regulation. And as a result of their pro-regulatory bias, environmentalists tend to favor liberal political candidates.

Nevertheless, conservatives and environmentalists should make common cause to limit suburban sprawl. Here's why: economic conservatives believe in consumer choice and lower taxes. Yet sprawl actually reduces consumer choice, and may ultimately lead to higher taxes.

Expanded consumer choice should mean that people can choose where they live and how they travel. But in metro Jacksonville (to an even greater extent than in most American cities), many people need a car to get to work and otherwise enjoy the region's advantages. Thus, sprawl means less consumer choice, insofar as it forces people to own and use cars.

Indeed, the automobile dependence of Northeast Florida is similar to a tax. Taxes are expenditures compelled by government, and buying a car is effectively compulsory for many Floridians. If you drive 10,000 miles a year and have a car which gets 30 miles per gallon, you spend over \$1000 per year on gasoline alone- and if you own a less fuel-efficient car and drive more, you pay even more. And that doesn't even count the cost of the car itself, the cost of insurance, or the cost of repairs. Thus, compulsory car ownership creates a yearly tax of thousands of dollars for most Jacksonville residents.

Admittedly, the government won't send you to jail for failure to buy a car. Nevertheless, car costs are like a tax in this respect: government at all levels has contributed to automobile dependence through pork-barrel spending and overregulation.

Over the years, our state and local governments have repeatedly built new roads and widened old ones, turning country lanes into interstates and eight-lane arterials. These highways make it easier for people to have speedy commutes from once-distant suburbs, thus shifting development and jobs to those suburbs. In addition to creating suburbs through highway spending, government policy has made those suburbs automobile-dependent through zoning and street design regulations. Local zoning codes typically require commercial buildings to be set back behind 25 feet or more of parking, thus forcing pedestrians to walk through a sea of parking to reach apartments and stores- not a policy that makes walking or biking convenient. And to get to those parking lots, pedestrians often have to cross six- and eight-lane streets- not exactly an environment conducive to walking.

In sum, government highway, zoning and street design policy has both shifted development to suburbs and made those suburbs automobile-dependent. Thus, our region's dependence on automobiles was created by government regulation as surely as if it had been imposed through taxation.

But sprawl means tax increases in a more direct way. To the extent highway-driven development has occurred outside Duval County, sprawl redistributes development and thus wealth from Duval to its suburbs in Clay and St. Johns Counties. In 1983, Duval County's per capita income was 92% of St. Johns County's per capita income. By contrast, in 2005, Duval's per capita income was only 78% of the St. Johns per capita income. As cities like Jacksonville lose their middle-class residents and retain the poor, they become poorer – which means they have a weaker tax base, which means that they have to hike taxes in order to keep existing levels of public services.

And as a city's tax base declines, its electorate changes. For example, Philadelphia had Republican mayors for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the first wave of middle-class flight to suburbia hit Philadelphia, its Republican vote declined: in 1960, Richard Nixon got only 31% of the city's vote. And as the city continued to decline, the GOP vote in Philadelphia nosedived still further, to George W. Bush's 19% in 2004. A city that, like Philadelphia, is dominated by poor people and Democrats is a lot less likely to elect a tax-cutter as mayor, and a lot more likely to elect a tax-and-spend politician—causing still more taxation. So if sprawl continues unabated, Jacksonville will start to lose middle-class population to a much greater degree, causing its politics to shift sharply to the Left.

In fact, it might even be the case 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. To quote the web page of the National Association of Home Builders, 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 starts to grow, developers will come swooping down, pleading for that suburb to tax and spend to "accommodate" new development.

So much for economic conservatism. What about cultural conservatism? Should cultural conservatives devote even a millisecond to worrying about sprawl?

Yes, at least if cultural conservatism means concern for neighborhood stability. Sprawl means today's suburbs become tomorrow's slums, as the middle class moves farther out. For example, Jacksonville's University Boulevard was probably a typical suburb in the 1950s, but parts of that street are now beginning to look decidedly slumlike. Thus, sprawl is a revolution that devours its own children: it creates inner-ring suburbs, only to destroy them a few decades later by creating outer suburbs to skim off their better-off residents.

Sprawl also affects another conservative value, one shared by economic and social conservatives: the preference for work over crime and welfare dependency. Thanks to suburban sprawl, many low-skill jobs are located in areas that are inaccessible by public buses, or nearly so. To find a job and get off welfare, 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 engaged in illicit activity than trying to get a job for wages that are partially canceled out by car-related expenses.

You may ask at this point: so sprawl is bad, and sprawl is caused by government. But is there anything conservatives can do about sprawl that doesn't involve more regulation of property rights? Are there free-market solutions to sprawl? This issue is extensive enough to justify an article or two in itself (and in fact I've written a long scholarly piece on the issue, at <http://works.bepress.com/lewyn/41/> ). But just to summarize briefly: what government has done, it can stop doing. Just as government has created sprawl through highway-building and anti-pedestrian zoning, it can stop creating sprawl by limiting road spending to maintenance of existing roads, and it can change zoning laws by allowing the creation of walkable streets bordering more walkable shopping districts. Sprawl is stoppable- but it may take a coalition including conservatives to stop it.