

June 24, 2013

# How Comprehensive Planning Makes Suburbia More Sprawling

Michael Lewyn

## HOW COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING MAKES SUBURBIA MORE SPRAWLING

Much of the literature on smart growth treats comprehensive planning and smart growth as virtually identical, or at least as two concepts that usually go together. For example, one American Planning Association publication states: “If the community does not have a current comprehensive or master plan, it *cannot* achieve smart growth.”

But in fact, heavily planned cities are often quite sprawling. For example, Florida is one of the most planning-oriented states in the nation; the state has required its municipalities to comply with comprehensive plans since 1985. But Florida’s cities are also among the most car-centered in the nation; according to the “Mean Streets” study that is issued every few years by the Surface Transportation Policy Project, Florida’s metro areas are consistently among the most dangerous for pedestrians.

What’s going on? What I would like to suggest in my paper is that (1) comprehensive plans (which I define narrowly as a municipal document called a comprehensive plan) are not sufficient to reduce sprawl and (2) that such plans may not even be necessary to reduce sprawl.

Why isn’t planning sufficient? Because a comprehensive plan is merely a tool, just like a zoning code. So if a zoning code can promote sprawl, so can a comprehensive plan. One excellent example is the plan of Jacksonville, Florida, where I lived from 2006 to 2011.

Jacksonville’s plan includes a future land use map that allocates over 138,000 acres (or about 85 percent of its residential land) to low-density housing, as opposed to about 23,000 acres to medium-density residential and only 74 acres to high-density residential.

The maximum density in these low-density zones is 7 dwelling units per acre. But the plan adds that zoning regulations will create numerous areas with even lower density, so the average residential density allowed under Jacksonville’s plan is much lower.

These density restrictions led to automobile-dependent sprawl, because according to most sources I have read, even seven units per acre (let alone lower levels) is not enough to support significant bus service. This is the case because if there is a bus stop on block A, and only a few people live on each neighboring block, not many people are going to live within walking distance of block A- and thus, not many people are going to live within walking distance of the bus stop.

Given this reality, it shouldn’t be too surprising that most Jacksonville buses stop running around 8:30 PM, and that most buses only run once every half an hour at most.

Jacksonville’s plan also provides for single-use zoning: that is, the plan’s land use maps separate residential and commercial use to such an extent that many people will not live within walking distance of commercial zones. For example, the map includes a six-mile-wide area devoted to housing and nothing else along the city’s southern border.

Obviously, most people living in this kind of house-only monoculture will not walk several miles to the nearest stop.

The plan also includes pro-sprawl street design rules. The plan's transportation provision requires 150-foot rights of way for major arterials (the most heavily trafficked streets). Since travel lanes are usually 12-16 feet wide, this means that (even after allowing 20 or 30 feet for sidewalks and shrubbery) many streets are going to be eight or ten lanes wide. These wide streets are dangerous for pedestrians- first because a wide street takes more time to cross, but also because such wide streets promote fast traffic. For example, in San Jose Blvd., the eight-lane arterial near where I lived, most cars proceeded at about 45-50 mph. A pedestrian hit by a car going this fast has only about a 20 percent chance of survival.

Even supposedly smart growth-oriented comprehensive plans contain pro-sprawl rules. For example, Seattle's comprehensive plan, which purports to endorse more pedestrian-oriented development, treats it as a given that of course, new development will be forced to provide off-street parking for its users. But land used for parking can't be used for housing or commerce, so minimum parking requirements artificially reduce density and thus make society more car-dependent. In addition, because minimum parking requirements artificially increase the supply of parking, they reduce the price of parking, usually down to zero. Thus, minimum parking requirements subsidize driving; drivers get free parking but the cost of building the parking is imposed on businesses who build that parking (and perhaps to their customers generally)

Even if municipal planning isn't sufficient to create smarter, more pedestrian-oriented growth, it could be argued that comprehensive planning is necessary for smarter growth. But it seems to me that (at least in theory) most of the policy changes needed to reverse the status quo could be achieved just as easily through municipal zoning or through statewide ordinances. Let's just look at one example: density. Ideally (from my perspective), a comprehensive plan could limit a city's ability to zone for low density. But even if that wasn't done, the city could enact a more pro-density zoning code, perhaps eliminating its lowest-density zones. Or a state could reform its zoning enabling act to prohibit discrimination based on density, except in certain environmentally sensitive areas.

Now of course, even if comprehensive plans aren't sufficient or necessary to achieve smarter growth, they could be helpful. But that's the part of my paper I haven't started to work on yet!