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Advocate for a Modern Devil: Can Sprawl be Defended?

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Symposium on Urban Sprawl: Local and Comparative Perspectives on Managing Atlanta's Growth

ADVOCATE FOR A MODERN DEVIL: CAN SPRAWL BE DEFENDED?*

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INTRODUCTION

> In *The Geography of Nowhere* . . . I argued that the living arrangement Americans now think of as *normal* is bankrupting us economically, socially, ecologically, and spiritually. I identified the physical setting itself—the cartoon landscape of car-clogged highways, strip malls, tract houses, franchise fry pits, parking lots, junked cities, and ravaged countryside—as not merely the symptom of a troubled culture but in many ways the primary cause of our troubles.[1]

James Howard Kunstler, quoted above, has demonized sprawl, characterizing it as the source of nearly everything in modern society that he dislikes. But is it really so simple? Is sprawl the true source of so many evils and so lacking in redeeming characteristics? Are low-density development and the dominance of the automobile in suburban areas entirely inconsistent with caring for the environment, social equity, and community?

This Article questions whether sprawl, defined as low-density, auto-dependent development found at the edges of U.S. urban areas, is entirely bad. The answer is important because progress in transportation and telecommunication will enable and

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1. JAMES H. KUNSTLER, HOME FROM NOWHERE 17 (1996) (prologue).

motivate sprawl in the future. Although sprawl is associated with higher levels of travel in vehicles, sprawling development is not the true cause of traffic congestion, nor a main cause of air pollution. In fact, low-density expansion of the housing stock avoids some types of negative externalities that exist at higher densities and is associated with lower, not higher, levels of public expenditures, at least in the short run. Restricting sprawl tends to raise housing costs in a growing metropolitan area. Residents of sprawling areas enjoy quality of life benefits that are not as common in dense areas, as well as ready access to the majority of metropolitan employment opportunities, if they have cars. Further, there is evidence that where sprawl has flourished, rates of homeownership are higher for minorities. Finally, to the small degree that development patterns alone might account for differences in residents' social engagement in their communities, the effect of higher density seems mildly negative, while the rate of homeownership, which is higher in affordable, lower density areas is pronouncedly positive. Consequently, this Article argues that curbing sprawl is not an unambiguously worthy or important social goal.

I. SPRAWL: WHAT IS IT?

Part of the problem with discussing sprawl is agreeing on its definition. An eminent group of researchers who thoroughly surveyed the literature on sprawl for the Federal Transit Administration and the Transportation Research Board of the National Research Council in 1998 concluded that though the term has historically been ill-defined and may have as many as ten elements, "sprawl development can be characterized . . . as low-density residential and nonresidential intrusions into rural and undeveloped areas," and "[u]nder sprawl conditions, there is almost total *reliance upon the automobile* as a means of accessing the individual land uses."[2] In discussing the topic, therefore, I will rely on two attributes to define sprawl, development characterized by: (1) low relative density and (2) extensive personal travel, primarily by private motorized vehicle.

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2. ROBERT W. BURCHELL ET AL., TRANSP. RES. BD., NAT'L RES. COUNCIL, THE COSTS OF SPRAWL—REVISITED 7-8 (TCRP Report 39) (1998).

Low residential and employment densities and extensive travel by private car are important not only because they are characteristic of sprawl but also because they are causally related. Convenient, inexpensive transportation makes land at the edges of urban areas highly accessible to employment and other destinations. Because it is relatively easy to reach locations on the urban periphery, these areas are attractive to households and businesses that can afford to occupy more land at remote locations than they would in more centrally located sites. The option to have more space for the same amount of money, or to spend less for the same amount of space, is valuable to home and business owners alike. The Faustian bargain that results is one in which individuals trade affordability for time. "I look at it as I'm paying myself half a million to commute," said one California Central Valley resident who works in San Francisco.[3] Easy, fast, and inexpensive travel, and its substitutes such as telecommuting, thus create the impetus for low-density development on the edge of urban areas accessible only by private vehicle, or sprawl.

This understanding of sprawl is rooted in urban economics, which has sought to describe the interrelationship of urban form and transportation for over thirty years. From this perspective, and from that of many urban planners who share it, sprawl is not the work of bad or stupid people. Rather, it is the natural result of years of pursuing improvements in travel and communication, making previously remote locations increasingly accessible. And progress in transportation and telecommunication will continue to enable and motivate individual and firm behavior in this direction.

II. DOES SPRAWL HAVE ANY GOOD FEATURES?

A. Sprawl and Externalities

Negative externalities are the effects of one person's behavior that spill over to harm another person, without consequences for the one who caused the problem. Two negative externalities

3. Patricia Leigh Brown, *In "The Other California" a Land Rush Continues*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 27, 2000, at A14. Circumstances change, and people change their minds, so not all sprawl-dwellers remain happy with their commuting arrangements forever. *See id.*

that cause widespread concern and are often attributed to sprawl include air pollution and traffic congestion.

There is little argument that residents of sprawling areas travel more. Professor Kahn has found that vehicle mileage increased by one-half of one percent for every one percent decline in residential density in a Census block.[4] However, the density of the whole metropolitan area had effects six times larger than the effects of neighborhood density, *i.e.*, placing a dense neighborhood in a low-density metropolitan area affects its residents' travel very little. This conclusion was suggested, though not confirmed, by previous research.[5]

There is substantial disagreement over sprawl's connection to air pollution.[6] In fact, a large number of factors influence whether air quality will violate federal standards. Most substantial air quality improvements to date have been the result of policy that spurred technological advances. For example, changes to fuel and vehicles have reduced vehicle emissions in spite of tremendous increases in vehicle miles of travel.[7] Other approaches include daily and hourly forecasts of pollutant concentrations applied in tandem with moral suasion,

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4. *See* Matthew E. Kahn, *The Environmental Impact of Suburbanization*, 19 J. POL'Y ANAL. & MGMT. 569, 569-86 (2000). This decline was measured after controlling for household size, income, and region. *See id.*

5. *See* Robert Cervero & Roger Gorham, *Commuting in Transit Versus Automobile Neighborhoods*, 61 J. AM. PLAN. ASS'N 210, 221-24 (1995); Susan Handy, Understanding the Link Between Urban Form and Travel Behavior, Address at the 74th Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board (1995).

6. *See* BURCHELL ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 7-8.

7. *See* BUREAU OF TRANSP. STAT., U.S. DEP'T OF TRANSP., TRANSPORTATION STATISTICS ANNUAL REPORT 1998: TRANSPORTATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT 132-35 (1998).

> Most of the progress to date in curbing criteria air pollution from transportation can be attributed to: 1) tailpipe or other emissions standards for newly manufactured highway vehicles . . . ; and 2) requirements that harmful substances be reduced or removed from fuels, or that substances be added to fuels to make them pollute less. (Thus, lead essentially has been eliminated from fuel, and the sulfur content of fuel has been reduced greatly).
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> . . . [H]ad nothing been done, tailpipe and other vehicular emissions of criteria pollutants would have more than doubled between 1970 and 1994 because of the growth in travel. Instead, EPA estimates that highway vehicles emit only half the VOC and 30 percent of the CO as in 1970; motor vehicle emissions of NO_x are higher but by only 2 percent . . . . As a result, concentrations of these air pollutants in the atmosphere generally are lower today despite continuing growth in vehicle travel.

Id. at 132, 135.

pricing strategies, old car buy-back programs, and other means to focus on emissions by the worst polluters at the most critical time periods. Efforts to control sprawl, by contrast, are not similarly targeted, and the effects would not be felt for years. By that time, vehicles powered partly or entirely by electricity or other new technologies might have changed the issues dramatically.

Most transportation economists agree that without implementing efficient, though politically unpalatable, charges for using congested streets and highways, no long-term solution to congestion is possible. Contrary to popular belief, congestion is not caused by sprawl. Congestion was common in downtown Atlanta before sprawl. Rather, traffic congestion occurs because we lack any other mechanism to (1) signal drivers when streets and roads are at capacity and (2) reward drivers for avoiding, rescheduling, or rerouting their trips. Thus, congestion is simply the manner we have chosen to manage demand for travel on streets and highways. While developing at low densities does increase personal travel, both low densities and high levels of travel are themselves caused by the increased ease, high speeds, and low cost of travel that we have sought for so long through transportation policy. The most effective way to reduce socially inefficient personal travel, and thus its negative externalities, without overriding the personal and social benefits of individual choice, is to increase the cost of travel itself. As a side benefit for sprawl opponents, this approach would increase urban densities.

In keeping with rural American tradition, sprawling parts of metropolitan areas sometimes rely on spatial separation more than formal land use or other controls to reduce other undesirable effects of private decisions on society. Some types of negative externalities can be reduced by low densities if the development is otherwise well planned.[8] Separation buffers undesirable land uses while at the same time reducing aesthetic disagreements, glare and undesirable shadows, loss of privacy, noise, and non-point source water pollution. For example, without additional expense, low density development can leave much of the land surface permeable and, if the original

8. Wooded areas or significant topographic relief like Atlanta's can achieve some of the same things.

vegetation is retained so that rain soaks in rather than running off, can reduce both flooding and pollution in nearby waterways.

Eliminating sprawl will not eliminate the need to accommodate a growing population. If people cannot live at low densities on the periphery, they will have to live at higher densities in either the suburbs or intown neighborhoods. In most cases this will not please the current neighbors. First, there is disruption due to construction. Resulting service interruptions and noise will lower the quality of life, at least temporarily, for commercial and residential neighbors. In a dense area, those close enough to be affected are by definition more numerous. These short-term impacts are only the beginning. Trees and green space are already likely to be scarce, making additional losses especially painful. Even with careful planning, higher densities are likely to result in greater friction as increased numbers of people, pets, and cars use the same area. While higher densities reflect increased property values, they can also signal unwelcome changes in neighborhood character. This is usually a drawback to residents who chose the neighborhood for its character.

B. Sprawl and Affordable Housing Choices

Metropolitan areas that allow sprawl have permitted a sort of "frontier-mentality" approach to affordable housing. To obtain affordable housing under these conditions requires individual effort (more commuting and other personal travel) and a vehicle. Because Americans generally prefer to pay the price through travel rather than with other sacrifices, low density housing has broad appeal. "Eighty percent of Americans . . . identified the traditional single-family home with a yard as the ideal place to live. To afford it, they would rather live farther out than take a second job, tie up savings, put children in day care, or incur heavier debt."[9]

Sprawl also lowers the tax burden associated with expanding the metropolitan housing stock, thus contributing to housing affordability, at least in the short run. When densities are very low, some services that must be publicly provided at higher densities can be left to the landowner. In fact, public

9. BURCHELL ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 24-25.

expenditures for current accounts, capital outlays, and public safety are greater at higher densities.[10] Public savings due to low densities may include the following: the use of septic tanks instead of sanitary sewers; the presence of private instead of public open space; the absence of public sidewalks or storm sewers; and the use of some private roads instead of complete dependence on public streets. All of the privately provided options are thus cheaper to the public initially. However, all are susceptible to failure if overburdened, which is highly likely to occur as areas continue to grow over the course of decades. The Atlanta region's reliance on aging septic systems is one example. Containing development to contiguous areas obviously allows more compact public infrastructure networks for roads, sewer, and water. However, since skipped-over areas will be developed eventually, it can be equally efficient to construct infrastructure scaled for future needs a few years early.[11] Though spreading development over a larger area is not a good solution to every problem, it does hold costs down initially if residents accept a different mix of public and private infrastructure and service provision.

Most of the arguments for infill development as a cost-saving measure assume that capacity is available, but it is uncommon for developed areas to have unused capacity in *all* public services and facilities. Yet, if infill development is allowed to overload infrastructure with impunity, it will lower the quality of life. New and proposed high-rise residential buildings in Buckhead, for example, are expected to add to traffic congestion there and will require added interceptor sewer capacity. Liane Levetan, who recently concluded her service as DeKalb County's Chief Executive, commented, "My concern is that with more people working and driving in DeKalb and the infill developments, we're being faced now with tremendous infrastructure needs."[12] Adding capacity in dense areas is also more difficult and costly than in previously undeveloped areas

10. *See* Helen F. Ladd, *Population Growth, Density and the Costs of Providing Public Services*, 29 URB. STUD. 273, 283, 287-88, 291 (1992).

11. *See* BURCHELL ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 7-8.

12. Jacques L. Couret, Jr., *Infill Development Stretching DeKalb's Infrastructure*, ATLANTA BUS. CHRON., Sept. 15-21, 2000, at 11A.

because of physical constraints and the potential for conflicts with existing uses.

Deliberately or not, many anti-sprawl measures increase the cost of housing because they constrain the supply of housing in a metropolitan area. The consequences are particularly great where employment growth is attracting new residents.[13] It is no coincidence that after decades of relatively unrestrained growth, we now have widespread development restrictions in the Atlanta suburbs and a thirty percent increase in metropolitan Atlanta housing prices during the past two years.[14]

C. The Welcome Mat to a Better Quality of Life

Sprawling suburbs have historically provided a higher quality of life to households moving out from denser areas. Although there is much to be said for retaining healthy neighborhoods in cities, nostalgia should not blind us to the positive aspects of modern suburbs—especially to those who have not previously been part of the American middle class. Reporting on a poll of New York area residents, the New York Regional Plan Association noted:

> As compared to the region's suburbanites, urban residents are twice as likely to think that the lack of open space, the quality of their schools, or the level of crime are big problems in their communities. On the other hand, there is little distinction between urban and suburban residents' views on employment opportunities, traffic congestion, racial tension, or lack of community.[15]

Suburban households of the same income live in more space than their central city counterparts.[16] Suburban schools have fewer dropouts.[17] Public expenditures are lower where densities are lower.[18] Suburbs have lower crime rates and higher median

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13. Ironically, excluding medium and high density residential development has a similar effect, so opponents to sprawl have no monopoly on this negative result.

14. *See* Rajiv Vyas, *Cost of Living Rising Rapidly in Atlanta*, ATLANTA BUS. CHRON., Sept. 8-14, 2000, at 1A.

15. ROBERT D. YARO & TONY HISS, A REGION AT RISK: THE THIRD REGIONAL PLAN FOR THE NEW YORK-NEW JERSEY-CONNECTICUT METROPOLITAN AREA 69 (1996).

16. *See* Kahn, *supra* note 4, at 574-76.

17. U.S. DEP'T OF HOUS. & URB. DEV., THE STATE OF THE CITIES 2000, at xii (2000).

18. *See* Ladd, *supra* note 10, at 291.

household incomes than central cities.[19] Suburbs have higher homeownership rates than central cities.[20] Nationwide, in both 1980 and 1990, blacks were twice as likely to live in central cities as were whites.[21] Recent research has demonstrated that, controlling for household income and metropolitan patterns of racial segregation, sprawl was significantly and positively related to closing the gap between black and white rates of suburban homeownership between 1980 and 1990.[22] In other words, sprawling metropolitan areas provided greater opportunities for suburban homeownership for black households. Professor Kahn proposes that this is a direct result of more affordable housing in sprawling metropolitan areas. Furthermore, one study found that homeownership was more important to predicting life satisfaction among low-income people than age, gender, income, education, marital status, occupation, or neighborhood satisfaction.[23]

In 1997 fifty-seven percent of all jobs in 114 metropolitan areas were in the suburbs.[24] Sprawl shortens commuting distances for many individuals and may even reduce the average commuting distance in a metropolitan area if both employment and population are highly decentralized. People who can afford cars get to work faster than previously, even when distances are greater.[25]

A recent analysis of Boston found

> that if job seekers traveled by car and were willing to commute for up to 30 minutes, they would have a relatively high level of accessibility of job openings as long as they did not reside at the periphery of the metropolitan area .... On the other hand, the results indicate that if job seekers were willing to commute for up to 30 minutes but were dependent

19. *See* U.S. DEP'T OF HOUS. & URB. DEV., *supra* note 17, at xi-xii.
20. *See id.* at vii.
21. *See* Matthew E. Kahn, *Does Sprawl Reduce the Black/White Suburban Consumption Gap?*, 12 HOUSING POL'Y DEBATE 77, 77-86 (2001).
22. *See id.*
23. *See* William M. Rohe & Michael A. Stegman, *The Effects of Homeownership on the Self-Esteem, Perceived Control and Life Satisfaction of Low-Income People*, 60 J. AM. PLAN. ASS'N 173, 180 (1994).
24. *See* U.S. DEP'T OF HOUS. & URB. DEV., *supra* note 17, at B-2.
25. *See* Peter Gordon & Harry W. Richardson, *The Influence of Metropolitan Spatial Structure on Commuting Time*, 26 J. OF URBAN ECON. 138, 138-51 (1991).

> on public transit, they would have a very low level of accessibility of job openings almost anywhere they lived.[26]

This can be seen as a condemnation of sprawl or a celebration of the job opportunities that are open to those who drive private vehicles in modern cities. Because the research was conducted in Boston, a city with an excellent transit system, I adopt the latter view. Better and faster transportation creates more choices for the job seeker. It also provides more choices for the employer, thereby stimulating job growth. The availability of private vehicles for inexpensive and convenient transportation, along with modern telecommunications, increasingly leads employers to expect personal mobility and flexibility from their employees. As a result, employers make travel part of many jobs and cause the commute time and destination to vary for others.[27] These changes would not readily be reversed, even if further sprawl were prevented.

Except for job accessibility, locations at the edges of metropolitan areas typically have even more of these desirable attributes than do older, closer-in suburbs. These attributes are enjoyed, of course, by current suburban residents and increase the value of the homes and land in these communities. Requirements that have the effect of limiting growth at the periphery, even if that is not their stated purpose, essentially pull in the welcome mat to this higher quality of life.

D. Social Engagement

There is a tremendous romance to the idea of dense, urban neighborhoods where people are involved in their communities. But at least one study found that living in apartment buildings is correlated with a much lower probability of voting in local elections.[28] The study also indicated that those living in a single-

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26. Qing Shen, *A Spatial Analysis of Job Openings and Access In a U.S. Metropolitan Area*, 67 J. AM. PLAN. ASS'N 53, 61-62 (2001).

27. *See* Amy Helling & Patricia L. Mokhtarian, *Worker Telecommunication and Mobility in Transition: Consequences for Planning*, 15 J. PLAN. LITERATURE 511, 511-25 (2001).

28. *See* EDWARD L. GLAESER & BRUCE SACERDOTE, THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF HOUSING 4-5 (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 8034, 2000) (holding constant gender, marital status, race, age, education, income, number of children, and homeownership status).

family detached home were significantly more likely to have worked to solve local problems.[29] These results suggest that high residential densities have a weakly negative effect on local citizenship. This study further suggests that threats to outdoor charm and privacy spur greater community involvement in single-family neighborhoods.[30] The authors suggest that this could be because threats to privacy and charm are a great motivator of community involvement in single-family neighborhoods, and occupants of single-family homes must deal with residential problems directly, unlike apartment dwellers who often must rely on building managers.[31] However, it seems wise to take these conclusions with a grain of salt. The authors of the study were not able to control for all of the variables that influence choice of residential location. Sociologist Herbert Gans found the detachment of inner-city residents from neighborhood life was largely explained by differences in economic condition, cultural characteristics, life-cycle stage, and level of transience.[32] Gans' research on people who moved from city apartments to a lower middle class New Jersey suburb, made up of neighborhoods of single-family homes, did not uncover dramatic behavioral changes other than those that the residents aspired to before moving.[33] He concluded that "[c]oncepts such as 'city' and 'suburb' allow us to distinguish settlement types from each other physically and demographically, but the ecological processes and conditions which they synthesize have no direct or invariate consequences for ways of life."[34]

There is broad agreement that there are social benefits to owner-occupancy, which, as I have already noted, is more prevalent in sprawling suburbs where homes are relatively more affordable.

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29. *See id.*
30. *See id.*
31. *See id.* at 5.
32. *See* HERBERT J. GANS, PEOPLE, PLANS, AND POLICIES: ESSAYS ON POVERTY, RACISM, AND OTHER NATIONAL URBAN PROBLEMS (1991).
33. *See id.* at 58-64.
34. *Id.* at 65.

> Homeownership creates incentives to improve one's neighborhood because homeowners have a significant asset, the value of which is tied to the quality of the community. Homeownership also creates barriers to mobility. Lower levels of mobility also create incentives to invest in social capital. When someone expects to live longer in a community, the incentives to invest in that community become stronger.[35]

Sprawl has also been criticized for fostering homogeneity. Although it may be politically incorrect to acknowledge, this too fits both economic and sociological findings, as Gans observed that homogeneity, not diversity, increases social engagement.

> Homogeneity of residents turns out to be more important than proximity as a determinant of sociability. If the population is heterogeneous, there is little social contact between neighbors, either on apartment-house floors or in single-family blocks; if people are homogenous, there is likely to be considerable social contact in both house types. One need only contrast the apartment house located in a transient, heterogeneous neighborhood and exactly the same structure in a neighborhood occupied by a single ethnic group. The former is a lonely, anonymous building; the latter, a bustling microsociety. I have observed similar patterns in suburban areas: on blocks where people are homogenous, they socialize; where they are heterogeneous, they do little more than exchange polite greetings.[36]

Of course such social engagement in sprawling suburbs is not entirely benign because it is likely to mobilize and preserve exclusive, affluent communities, unburdened by wide differences in preferences for public goods or costly services for poorer residents. However, curbing sprawl is generally not a direct route to greater inclusiveness.

CONCLUSION

Respect for citizen input is a core value in the modern planning profession. There was a time when planners acted as if they knew what people wanted better than people did

35. GLAESER & SACERDOTE, *supra* note 28, at 4.
36. GANS, *supra* note 32, at 60.

themselves, but those times are past. Or are they, if sprawl is so despised after offering so much to so many?

One of the more intractable issues planners face is that not everyone has the same idea of heaven. Is heaven a 3000 square foot house on a half-acre lot with a one-hour commute, or an efficiency apartment with a fifteen-minute walk to work? Both have their adherents. Is it reading the newspaper on a MARTA train or having your own car when you leave work late at night? Is it going to Zoo Atlanta or watching birds in your own backyard? The solution to this problem is not for some ideologue to choose what *he* would prefer. With sprawl, as with so many issues planners face, there is no devil—just people trying to find the best situation for themselves and their families.

What *can* be improved is the linkage between decisions and responsibility for the long-term consequences of those decisions. It is too easy for us to escape such consequences now. In my view, the important challenge to planning is not to curb low-density sprawl, but to devise more systematic ways to link personal and community decisions to their consequences. This will encourage a better understanding of the future and better planning decisions, while leaving room for individual choice.