
Twin Cities, Multiple Anxieties: The Social and Economic Trends Behind the “Sprawl” Controversy

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It was probably inevitable that the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul would become the metropolitan equivalent of a Siamese twin, melding together such that the Twin Cities have a single identity in most respects. The questions of the moment are

whether this convergence will be succeeded by a new burst of suburban sprawl, and what effects such a diaspora might have. Suburban sprawl is not a new controversy either in the Twin Cities or elsewhere in the United States. The fear that we are “paving

over America” or in danger of “running out of farmland” became cliché decades ago (and yet the continental United States is still less than 5 percent urbanized, and the amount of land developed each year is about .07 percent—seven one-hundredths of one percent).

Today, in addition to the old anxieties that low-density development on the urban fringe (a nonpejorative description of “sprawl”) will use up too much land, there is a new charge against sprawl—that it is responsible for the decline of central cities. As more and more middle-class people flee to the newest distant suburbs, the argument goes, the central city and older “inner-ring” suburbs become pockets of poverty, crime, poor schools, decaying infrastructure, and declining economies and tax bases.

The Twin Cities area is held out as one of the premier examples of this phenomenon. As author David Rusk, who with Minnesota representative Myron Orfield is the major proponent of this thesis, explained to a Twin Cities audience:

This decline [of central city Minneapolis–St. Paul] is rooted in the very patterns of ever increasing suburban sprawl that have dominated American lifestyles over the past 40 years. . . . It is not just the traditional central cities that are victimized by this steady process of withdrawal and abandonment by the middle class. As state Representative Myron Orfield and his legislative allies have shown so convincingly, older, inner-ring suburbs are victimized as well.

Rusk’s use of the rhetoric of victimology is telling, because one of the happier trends of the 1990s has been the decline of victimology in the area of the two great public policy successes of the decade: welfare reform and crime. Victimology is generally falling into disfavor elsewhere, as we are seeing in the debate over affirmative action. That we should see a revival of victimology, which is always a premise for large-scale social engineering projects of some kind, is a discouraging sign that the state of our urban discourse is behind the curve. It is unfortunate, too, because Rusk and Orfield are asking the right questions, and calling our attention to the right problems. Their answers, alas, show that they themselves are victims—victims of an outmoded ideology.

Rusk and Orfield are a variant of a new movement to reshape our cities and suburbs that is marching under the banner of “smart growth.” New Metropolitan Council chairman Ted Mondale will be a vigorous advocate for smart growth as well, if the fulsome praise of the Minneapolis Star Tribune is to be believed. Mondale epitomizes the vague and trade-off-free vision of smart growth as the phrase is used at the moment. In an echo of that most prominent “New Democrat” in the White House, Mondale has said that “the era of big planning is over,” and that “government can’t try to manage change; change is coming too fast.” Yet managing, if not micromanaging, our changing urban areas is exactly what smart growth is all about, and Mondale

has declared his intent to reshape and densify the Twin Cities by means of mass transit. If this vision is to succeed, transit will become the mobility tail that wags the aggressive-planning dog.

Aside from transit, the smart growth prescription for stopping the evil processes of sprawl has several key elements. First, according to Rusk at least, we need to put in place urban growth boundaries (UGBs), the land use equivalent of the Berlin Wall, to keep middle-class people from voting with their feet to leave old neighborhoods they don't like for new neighborhoods they find preferable. (Not all advocates of smart growth say that UGBs are a necessary element.) Second, regional problems require regional government, the stronger the better. There is a place for formalized regional structures for many aspects of large metropolitan areas (transportation is the most obvious), and UGBs can be useful if they are used as a genuine planning tool to bring about sequential development. But too often the cheerleaders for regional government have grandiose ambitions requiring a large charter of power for the regional agency, and UGBs become permanent boundaries that are very hard to move out when the land inside starts to run out, as the citizens of Portland, Oregon, are finding right now.

Above all, the impulse for greatly enhancing the political control of land shows a distinct inability to learn from two generations of mistakes in urban policy; or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that, having surveyed the mistakes

of the past fifty years, today's erstwhile Saviors of the City are ready to make a whole new set of mistakes.

The great hubris of urban renewal forty years ago was that the renewers were simply heedless of understanding how neighborhoods actually work on the micro level. The know-it-all planners of the time summarily rejected the intelligent critiques of urban renewal by Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*) and Martin Anderson (*The Federal Bulldozer*). The result was one of the greatest public policy disasters of all time. By the time the renewers came up for air, a million people had been displaced from their neighborhoods in American cities, most of them never to return.

St. Paul was an eager participant in this hubris, demolishing 350 downtown stores between 1963 and 1975, while the newly built skyways connecting the office towers took street-level pedestrians away from the remaining stores. The number of stores in downtown St. Paul declined from over 400 in 1963 to 160 in 1975. During this same time, 8 million square feet of retail space opened up in the suburbs. By the 1970s, the civic leaders of St. Paul, led by Mayor George Latimer, understood that what downtown most needed was retail! Having spent money to tear down retail establishments, St. Paul, like other major cities, was now spending millions to get it back.

In nearly every city today, the cornerstone of downtown revival is typically the oldest section of town—the West End in Dallas, Old Town Pasade-

na, California, the gaslight district of San Diego, old town Lincoln, Nebraska—if it was lucky enough to have escaped the enlightened bulldozers of urban renewal thirty years before.

One of the ironies of the present enthusiasm for “smart growth” is that today Jane Jacobs is regarded as a hero and model, even though most advocates of smart growth have totally missed her central point, which is that cities evolve spontaneously, and in their most vital respects are beyond the reach of well-meaning planners. Before we start down the road of suburban renewal in the twenty-first century, we ought to pause long enough to make sure we really understand what is occurring in today’s central cities and suburbs, so we can sort out cliché from reality, half-truth from distortion, and mixed motives from sincere reformist zeal. Otherwise our grand schemes for cities and suburbs today will run head-on into reality, and observers forty years from now will be writing about how dumb the smart growth movement was.

The Nature of the Modern Megalopolis

Another irony of the present moment is that liberals and conservatives are starting to change places with regard to their outlook on urban affairs. It used to be conservatives who despaired of any hope for the inner city, while liberals optimistically designed Model Cities programs and other interventions that they thought might succeed in ending poverty within the span of a decade. While conservatives don’t

have unrealistic expectations about perfect and complete solutions to all the problems of urban neighborhoods, they tend to be much less gloomy than liberals about the prospects for the urban core of America.

To be sure, Minneapolis and St. Paul, like many older Midwestern and Eastern cities, have lost 30 percent of their population since 1960, while their surrounding suburbs have grown by more than 100 percent. (This trend is not unique to the United States. Most European cities have been losing population, too—some, like Venice and Vienna, for 300 years—but even progressive Stockholm has seen its population decline by 30 percent since 1960, while Swedish suburbs have grown rapidly even though government policy tried to discourage suburban growth.) Many liberals extrapolate this recent trend and fear that if nothing is done to keep middle-class people from leaving, central cities will be hollowed out completely. Conversely, some conservatives and technoenthusiasts (like George Gilder, who is both) argue that in the postindustrial information age, central cities are obsolete and beyond saving.

Both views are unduly pessimistic, if not mistaken. The city has always been, and will always be, the center of human progress and social life. Technology and affluence may be making city life somewhat less necessary, but cities will yet thrive because of man’s basic sociality. Aristotle’s great judgment is still correct: a person who does not participate in the sociality of city life “must be either a beast or a god.”

Despite all of the hype about the Internet and “virtual” communities, cities in a knowledge-based economy are arguably more important, because creative communities of people are still going to want to exchange their ideas in person, which is better than e-mail. That is one reason why Silicon Valley is still the leading high-technology center, even though its sky-high housing prices are an impediment to new people moving there. But it is not just the high-tech enclaves where this phenomenon can be found. In Los Angeles, which was given up for dead after the Rodney King riots, the low-tech toy design and manufacturing business has been a major engine behind the city’s surprising resurgence.

Yet the example of the toy industry in Los Angeles provides an important first clue as to how metropolitan areas have changed and will continue to change in the future. The Los Angeles toy industry is highly dispersed throughout the L.A. basin, rather than being concentrated in a few neighborhoods as industries used to be. Yet it is a highly dynamic and interconnected sector of the city’s economy.

The evolution of the modern American city neatly parallels the evolution of the modern American steel industry, where small, widely scattered custom steel plants have replaced the old large mills near downtown. This trend does mean that the old “central business district” conception of downtown is obsolete, though this does not mean that old downtowns are destined to inevitable decay. Most central cities are trying to fight decay through a pol-

icy of nostalgia that might well be called the Edifice Complex—subsidize a sports stadium, convention center, or downtown retail mall. Although these edifices often succeed in generating foot traffic downtown, they do not make much economic sense and have little positive “spillover effect” to needy neighborhoods beyond the immediate area where they are built.

Meanwhile, seldom is a serious effort made to cut the regulations that stifle small business development in the central city. Urban politicians would rather cut red ribbons than red tape. Cutting red ribbons of taxpayer-financed edifices gets you on TV and gives you something to point to when reelection time comes up, while the benefits of cutting red tape are diffuse and often slow in coming, and therefore never get you on TV or in the papers. Doing business in the suburbs in most cases is not only cheaper, but less aggravating as well.

For urban revitalization to work, it will have to comport with the realities of modern metropolitan growth. To recall Aristotle again, the goal of the city is self-sufficiency. In a prior age, maximizing self-sufficiency through city life required that people live in relatively high density patterns mostly because transportation costs were relatively high. But transportation and communication costs have been falling for a century, and continue to fall today. These falling costs have a powerful decentralizing and de-densifying effect.

Electric trolleys and later trains fostered the rise of single-family suburban homes and the first suburban sprawl a

century ago in places such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, which is ironic given that today's anti-sprawl crusaders are champions of rail transit as a means of stopping urban sprawl. The most obvious change was of course the automobile. Throughout the early decades of the automobile, the main roads followed the same pattern as the rail and trolley lines—toward the central city. Hence the central city initially survived the advent of the car.

As business and jobs have decentralized in recent decades, however, suburb-to-suburb commuting has replaced suburb-to-downtown commuting. No amount of caterwauling about the evils of the car or billions of mass-transit subsidies is going to change the new decentralized living and working patterns of the modern metropolis. The car will almost always be faster than mass transit, even in heavily congested areas. Recent federal transportation statistics show that the average travel time on mass transit is double the average travel time in a car. And as transportation and communication costs have fallen, the value of time has risen in importance for most people. Vice President Gore has attempted to dramatize what he sees as the dysfunction of suburbia by saying that “parents are having to read bedtime stories to their kids over their cellular phones,” but if any such parents are really out there, they are most likely on a commuter train or light-rail line.

Yet this description of the modern dynamic metropolis is exactly the state of affairs that the critics of sprawl

deplore. They think this kind of urban life is somehow unnatural or alienating (the contribution of sprawl to the causes of the Columbine High School shootings has been a prominent theme of the Chattering Class—wait until they find out that the NRA moved from downtown Washington to suburban Virginia several years ago, and the chain of causation will be complete). Sprawl could not have occurred, the critics think, without massive subsidies from the government, especially the highway programs and mortgage interest deductibility. These are legitimate arguments, though they are surely overstated and distract from more fundamental trends.

Go visit Toronto, a city that has invested much less in highways and much more in mass transit, a city in a nation that does not have the mortgage interest deduction, and you will see a metro area that is “sprawling” just like American cities. The de-densification of cities is now a worldwide phenomenon, and the much maligned subsidies for sprawl are exaggerated and a mere sideshow to the much deeper trends. Even in “compact,” transit-rich European cities, the suburbs are growing and look more and more like American suburbs every day; overall urban densities are dropping; and car ownership and driving are increasing as people get richer. This is true even of everyone's favorite European city: Paris.

The deepest trend of all is the one that is hardest to quantify and attribute to any specific policy or economic factor. It is the ever-expanding sphere of private life. While it may sound

grandiose, it is not inaccurate to say that the history of Western civilization, at least since the arrival of liberal individualism, has been the history of the expanding sphere of private life. In the city of antiquity the public square was the focus of almost all city life because there were so few amenities or sources of entertainment to be found in private homes (such as they were). Early modern philosophers in the eighteenth century noted that one of the implications of the rise of property rights and liberal individualism was that people would increasingly tend toward the cultivation of their “private gardens” at the cost of a diminished sense of citizenship.

In our own time, technology and affluence have allowed for a great advance in the material conditions of private life. The increasingly affluent baby boom generation wants to live in a relaxed-fit house to go with their relaxed-fit blue jeans, which is why the average size of new homes is one-third larger than it was in 1970, while average household size continues to shrink. For a mundane but telling example of the expanding sphere of private life, consider that it is no longer necessary to go downtown to the opera house to hear an aria; a good CD player will deliver almost the same quality in the comfort of your own living room.

This is exactly what liberal communitarians dislike about suburbia today, but it is shortsighted to attribute it solely to the spatial pattern of low-density residential development. Our low-density suburbs are an effect of the long-

term trend of expanding private life, not a cause of it. The expanding sphere of private life is the flip side of the supposed decline of Americans’ civic engagement. This concern is not unserious, but civic engagement is another aspect of modern life that is hard to quantify and analyze in a rigorous way, despite the ingenious work of social scientists like Harvard’s Robert Putnam who have taken measures such as the decline in bowling leagues as a proxy for a decline in civic engagement (the famous “Bowling Alone” thesis). But if bowling leagues and other older forms of communal activity have declined, certain others, such as the “soccer mom” phenomenon, have proliferated.

The decline in civic engagement, however it is understood, would likely be little different if we still lived in the high-density city of old. In fact, voter turnout today is higher in the suburbs than in the central city, and, as Myron Orfield himself hints in his book *Metro-politics*, just propose to build moderate-income multifamily housing near a single-family residential neighborhood, and you will get lots of civic engagement! The point is this: low-density suburban form should not be made the scapegoat for free-floating anxiety about Americans’ civic apathy.

So Why Are People So Unhappy about Sprawl?

At this point the critic will rightly ask: If low-density suburbs are an expression of consumer demand and the trend toward greater private life, why are people increasingly agitated about

sprawl? Why is this an issue not just in the fast-growing states on the two coasts (where it has been an issue for forty years), but now is a live issue in the heartland, in places like Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, and the Twin Cities?

The simple answer is this: It's the traffic congestion, stupid. Traffic congestion is certainly an acute cause for public annoyance, and according to federal traffic data, the Twin Cities went from being the forty-fourth most congested U.S. city in 1982 to the sixteenth most congested city by 1996. (Twin Cities congestion will be discussed in more detail later.) Though traffic congestion is no doubt what most people would say first if they were asked about what's wrong with sprawl, traffic is really a symptom of a deeper change in social attitude toward growth that has been developing for several years now.

In order to convey the thought that America has arrived at a new and unprecedented social moment, I sometimes ask people to conduct the following thought experiment about the urban sprawl controversy: Imagine that you brought back some of the architects of New Deal social policy from FDR's "brain trust," showed them a photo of a new suburban neighborhood, and explained that new neighborhoods like this were going up all over the country. In addition, you would tell our New Dealers that the homeownership rate in America was approaching 70 percent—a rate few other nations in the world even come close to matching—and that minorities were the fastest-growing demographic

group of new homeowners.

At this point our reincarnated New Dealers would puff with pride and say, "By golly, we did it. Our goal of expanding prosperity and extending it to the working class has met with success." But then if you said, "Oh, no, you don't understand; this is nowadays called 'sprawl,' and is a huge source of controversy and discontent; lots and lots of people, especially liberals, want to stop the spread of suburban housing"—I am sure our New Deal friends would be utterly baffled.

How would you explain this state of affairs to a New Dealer, or even an early Great Society liberal, for whom growth of all kinds was the main imperative of policy, and the most stubborn challenge of their generation? The answer, I think, can be found in an obscure 1976 book called *The Social Limits to Growth* by Fred Hirsch. Hirsch was an economist and journalist who wrote in the aftermath of the infamous Club of Rome report that suggested Western civilization was bumping up against the physical limits of growth because of scarce resources, pollution, the population bomb, yadda-yadda-yadda. Hirsch said "nonsense" to this scenario, but thought it possible that comfortable middle-class people might come to doubt the utility of further economic growth anyway. This, Hirsch thought, would represent a fundamental change in the social outlook of modern middle-class democracy.

At the heart of this attitude is a profound cognitive dissonance. All of us naturally want the fruits of growth for ourselves. We all want more income,

more education, and other personal amenities. It used to be that this desire led people to be generally pro-growth, which meant that we were all happy to hear the news that a new factory was going up in town. Somehow or other, we understood that in a dynamic world, general growth would benefit each of us, even if we were shopkeepers or insurance agents not directly employed at the new factory. But at some point, Hirsch predicted, the nexus between general growth and our own personal well-being would be broken.

Growing traffic congestion, Hirsch predicted, would be one of the first causes of this shift. Hirsch wrote:

Once this growth brings mass consumption to the point where it causes problems of congestion in the widest sense—bluntly, where consumption of jobholding by others tends to crowd you out—then the key to personal welfare gain is again the ability to stay ahead of the crowd.

Rapid growth brings not only congestion, but also rapid change. People move to the suburbs looking for some permanence, but find that the pace of change overwhelms them. As Hirsch put it:

This process of movement will in turn change the characteristics of suburban life, at first to its net benefit but after some point to its detriment. With a declining city on its inner side and another suburb rather than open country on its outer side, the essential character of a suburb will be altered and in part destroyed.

The most dramatic confirmation of

the Hirsch thesis comes from that Potemkin Village of contemporary urban planning and regional government—Portland, Oregon. In order to conserve land, it has been the policy of the regional government there to discourage or deny building permits for “big box” retailers such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot. That way, the planners said publicly a few years ago, we will have land available for the next Intel that comes to town with high-value-added industry and high-paying jobs.

Yet when Intel recently worked out plans to invest \$12 billion in a new facility there, the local government said “Fine—but just don’t create too many jobs.” Apparently the income taxes and other revenues that Intel will generate is not enough; the local county is going to levy a “growth impact fee” if Intel creates more than 1,000 new jobs on top of the 4,000 jobs it already provides. County administrator Charles Cameron told the *New York Times*: “We’re more concerned about retaining the economic strength we have rather than creating more.” And the director of Oregon’s state office of economic development said that “we aren’t just interested in jobs, jobs, jobs.”

An economic development director who is ambivalent about job creation is about as incongruous as a policeman ambivalent about catching criminals, or an evangelist indifferent to finding converts. But that is where our affluence has brought us. Limiting jobs will certainly preserve Portland’s quality of life—for those who already have a job. Are we so affluent and satisfied today that we can be indifferent to those

without jobs or in menial jobs who aspire to move up? In Portland the answer apparently is yes.

Another acute sign that general economic growth is less welcome than in a previous age can be seen in the backlash against strip malls. Pennsylvania's Governor Tom Ridge expressed the bipartisan consensus on this issue when he wrote recently in the *New York Times* that "certainly, politicians of both parties can agree that the strip-malling of America's rural landscape is a serious environmental problem." This judgment is too broad; after all, this is a nation in which Jerry Springer and professional wrestling enjoy enormous popularity. To paraphrase the old Yogi Berra quip, if strip malls are so unpopular, why are they so congested? Or, if everybody hates Wal-Mart so much, how do they stay in business? Surely they must have no customers.

The critics of strip malls do have a good point, though, even if they carry their rhetoric too far. As Winston Churchill once remarked, "First we shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us." The strip mall evolved to suit a particular purpose, but has come to defeat its own purpose in many ways. Strip malls were designed to be convenient primarily for the automobile, and planners wanted ample parking in front of stores so that cars would be diverted off the street as quickly as possible, thereby maximizing the through-traffic flow.

Most commercial/retail zoning codes won't allow a developer to build a "Main Street-style" arcade in which stores and offices front the sidewalk.

And our suburban zoning codes have tended to cause strip malls to cluster together along arterial streets and highways to the point where they create additional congestion.

Many strip mall streets are more congested on weekends than they are during peak commuting hours during the workweek. This makes some sense; if strip malls were scattered widely throughout a town, total driving would go up as shoppers drove to different locations. But the layout of strip mall districts is such that each store visit typically requires the shopper to get back in the car and get back on the arterial road to go one block down to the next destination. This is what gives rise to the familiar complaint that strip malls have no "sense of place," in addition to being impractical for pedestrians.

The increasingly popular complaint about strip malls is a reflection of what economists call the "wealth effect": as people get more affluent, they demand higher-quality goods. The strip mall has come to have some of the character of a LULU (locally undesirable land use), like the city landfill—indispensable, but not aesthetically pleasing. No one wants to live near the dump, and fewer and fewer people want to live by the strip mall. But we need to have both to serve the needs of the modern consumer.

Strip malls are highly utilitarian and efficient, and undoubtedly save time for consumers, contrary to the clichés. Consumer preference surveys also show that although consumers favor a lot of ideas offered by neotraditional or "new urbanist" planners to make our commercial and retail developments more

appealing, consumers still want convenient parking next to their dry cleaner on their way home from work. That means strip malls are here to stay. (It is worth noting in passing that some of the most highly touted “new urban” communities such as Kentlands, Maryland, include retail strip malls that are indistinguishable from those in a typical suburb. The lesson is clear: when private developers put their own capital on the line, they tend to heed the demands of consumers.)

The alternative is not to ban strip malls, but to consider some design innovations to make them work better. The physical segregation of individual stores in strip mall districts requiring a separate trip on the main road to get from one store to the next could be mitigated by interconnecting a strip mall district with a series of frontage roads and bridges. This would be much cheaper than widening the main road or building a bypass road.

Zoning codes should be scrapped so that Main Street-style developments can be built. As Mayor John Norquist of Milwaukee has pointed out, the only two Main Streets built in America since World War II are in Disneyland and Disney World. This is largely a function of stupid zoning and building codes—another example of government failure rather than market failure. Yet it is important to understand that a Main Street-style development is simply a strip mall turned backwards: the parking is in the back instead of the front. This may be preferable as a way of creating a “sense of place” where people will want to linger and socialize

instead of just making a quick in-and-out trip, but it is important to realize that the Main Street form won’t save very much land.

The other alternative is the large enclosed shopping mall—Minnesota’s Mall of America being the preeminent example of this form—where people do indeed leave their cars and walk for several hours, and that have a definite “sense of place” (though the enclosed mall is not suitable for certain kinds of retailing such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot). The enclosed shopping mall represents a new form of Main Street for many Americans—the mall has become a favorite meeting place for teens, for example—and as such receives even more scorn from liberal communitarian elites. “Malls are populated by transients and serve corporations, not the community,” huffs the late Christopher Lasch in his unintentionally ironic book *The Revolt of the Elites*.

Meanwhile, the liberal communitarian critics who worry that Main Street is endangered overlook, often willfully, the signs of Main Street-style community coming back. While Lasch and others wring their hands about the disappearance of the small corner drug-store where people would linger and pass community news, they are either oblivious to or condescending toward the emergence of coffeehouses such as Starbucks. That Starbucks and similar coffeehouses have become a popular destination for people to linger for hours came as a surprise to no one as much as Starbucks itself, whose original business model envisioned a simple variation of the fast-food outlet located

in downtowns. When Starbucks discovered that its most popular outlets were in neighborhoods rather than in business districts, and that people flocked to them as informal gathering places, it modified its business plan accordingly.

This is a good example of how “community” is something that evolves spontaneously and often in unpredictable ways. Suburbanites are rightly alienated by two generations’ worth of poor planning and rigid regulations that have obliterated older physical forms of community life such as Main Street, narrow residential streets, and mixed use. The lesson of successful community revitalization efforts and new spontaneous forms of community activity, however, is that success depends mostly on the private sector.

Unfortunately, too much of the smart growth movement, or its “new urbanist” variant, proceeds with the smug assurance that we need to give more power to government planners and regulators so that they can impose the solutions. It is significant that despite all of the talk among the smart growth movement that old zoning codes and regulations have stifled vibrant community life, there has been no effort anywhere to repeal these regulations.

Advocates of smart growth hold out Portland’s aggressive growth control and powerful regional government agency as a model for other major cities to emulate. Should the Twin Cities emulate Portland? Answering this question should start with consideration of the facts about growth in the Twin Cities area.

Urban Growth and Traffic Congestion in Minnesota

At the present time, the state of Minnesota is about 5 percent developed, which is near the national average for the continental United States. Three-fifths of Minnesota’s population is located in the Twin Cities area. According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, the Twin Cities metro area population will grow by about 20 percent, or about 425,000 people, by the year 2025. (Current Twin Cities population is approaching 2.9 million.)

While Minnesota’s population as a whole is expected to grow by as much as 900,000 by the year 2025, California’s population, by comparison, is expected to grow by 16 million, which would be the equivalent of moving nearly the entire population of New York state (currently 18 million) to California. Texas will grow by 7.5 million, and Florida by 6 million. Next to these states’ growth troubles, Minnesota’s are modest. Despite the frequent claim that farmland is in danger of disappearing, there is little evidence that this is the case.

Reliable current data on land use trends are difficult to come by, but the 1992 National Resources Inventory found that the total amount of developed land in all of Minnesota increased by 240,000 acres, or about 375 square miles, between 1982 and 1992. This represents less than one-half of one percent (0.47 percent) of Minnesota’s total land area. It is worth noting in passing that single-family-housing starts in the 1990s have been slightly

below the level of the 1980s, while multifamily-housing starts are far below the levels of the 1980s—a function mostly of changes in the tax laws—which suggests that there has been no change in the rate of land consumption, and perhaps even a slight decline, in the 1990s. (New figures from the 1997 National Resources Inventory should be available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture this fall, allowing a fresh look at this question.)

The data on farmland suggest that there is little justification for the familiar theme about “vanishing farmland.” According to the Census of Agriculture, land classified as “cropland” in Minnesota declined by 384,000 acres from 1987 to 1997, but, significantly, the amount of harvested cropland—land on which crops are actually grown—increased by 2.3 million acres between 1987 and 1997. Most changes in agricultural land use are driven by the farm commodity economy and not by urban expansion pressures. Although certain sectors of the farm economy are facing distress in Minnesota as in other states because of falling prices, the Census of Agriculture figures suggest that Minnesota agriculture is generally healthy.

Traffic congestion is another story. Sure enough, the proportion of Twin Cities freeways rated as congested has risen from 20 percent in 1982 to 55 percent in 1996. Total vehicle miles traveled (VMT) on Twin Cities freeways and major arterial roads has doubled since 1982, while the number of freeway and arterial road lane miles has increased by only a third.

This disproportion between the growth in lane miles and the growth of VMT is typical of American cities in recent years. It is commonly supposed that the rapid increase in VMT is a reflection of sprawl and declining suburban population density. In fact, the increase in driving stems mostly from rising affluence. Women joining the workforce, and minorities joining the middle class and acquiring cars, account for a majority of the increase in VMT in the United States over the past twenty-five years. The average commute-to-work time and distance has not significantly increased during this period.

Even though Twin Cities traffic congestion has steadily increased over the past decade, public transit ridership declined nearly 40 percent between 1980 and 1995, despite millions in new public transit facilities. (Public transit notched a small increase in ridership in 1998 because of new expansion of transit facilities.) Public transit now accounts for only about 2.5 percent of all trips in the Twin Cities metro area. Even with congestion, Twin Cities work-trip travel times by car are one-third faster than on public transit.

Yet in the face of rising demand for road space and falling demand for public transit, the Twin Cities’ Metropolitan Council, following in lockstep with nearly every other enlightened planning agency in the nation, proposes to build more transit and fewer roads. Instead, the council wants to “encourage behavioral and land use changes that will result in fewer vehicle trips.” This view has come to be so widely

accepted that few people consider how perverse it would be if we applied the same attitude to any other infrastructure need. When supermarkets get congested and the shelves are picked bare every day, we don't as a matter of course say, "We shouldn't build a new supermarket—people will only buy more food and get fat. They should go on diets instead."

A better analogy might be phone service, which also exposes the fallacy and points the way out. If the phone companies decided to accommodate all the demand for phone service at one uniform low price, they would likely have to build vastly more phone lines and switching equipment to meet the demand, or else the phone lines would be busy—congested—a lot more than they are now. In the case of our roads, which are indirectly priced through the uniform gas tax, we ration space through congestion rather than price.

If the telecommunications industry decided to stop building new telephone transmission networks, it is doubtful they would attempt to cope with rising demand by suggesting that we go back to using party lines or telling us we should make fewer phone calls, or shorter phone calls. More likely they would allocate the scarce time on the wires and cells exactly as it is done now—by peak-demand pricing.

The Metropolitan Council's Transportation Policy Plan speaks of using incentives to reduce travel, such as charging more for parking, but makes no mention of even experimenting with the most effective incentive of all:

pricing road use directly, and with varying rates for peak and off-peak use. Other nations such as South Korea are making very effective use of road pricing; only cities in the United States seem to be putting up fierce resistance to the idea. (The current funding mechanism for roads will be obsolete in another generation anyway. If we do indeed make the transition to low- or no-emission vehicles, such as fuel-cell cars or hydrogen cars, then the gas tax will vanish as a revenue source for transportation.)

Is Regionalism the Answer?

The bureaucratic fixation with intrusive "demand management" schemes for reducing traffic congestion is merely one expression of the enthusiasm for solving urban problems through expansion of administrative power. At its highest expression, this enthusiasm manifests itself in the desire for a new, general layer of regional government. Regional planning for transportation is an obvious necessity, though it would be better if such planning eschewed the anti-auto bias that is evident in the Metropolitan Council's plans.

More problematic is regional government planning authority over housing and revenue. Myron Orfield successfully sponsored legislation to enable redistribution of the tax base between well-off boroughs and not-so-well-off boroughs in the Twin Cities area. There is a decent abstract case for regional tax base sharing where it reduces the incentives for local jurisdictions to engage in "fiscal

zoning”: favoring shopping malls and car dealerships over moderate-cost housing. But tax base sharing also reduces the disciplining effect of taxpayers being able to “vote with their feet” by leaving a jurisdiction when it fails to keep its house in order.

Just as states whose taxes and regulations prove too burdensome experience a flight of business, capital, and talented people, so too cities that fail to remain competitive should not be relieved of the consequences of bad government. Several studies have found that taxes are higher in metropolitan regimes with regional government or consolidated governments.

Higher taxes and spending as government ascends the ladder of centralization is not a new story line. Granting regional government more power over housing would be, however. This regional solution is aimed at a genuine problem: exclusionary zoning. Local governments, often heeding the demands of existing neighborhoods, favor single-family homes and disfavor lower-income and multifamily housing. Many states and metropolitan areas have attempted to solve this problem with “regional fair share” housing mandates or inclusionary zoning—requiring each city or each subdivision to allocate a portion of its land for affordable housing.

“Regional fair share” housing mandates and inclusionary zoning have become a panacea for the affordable housing problem, but they have proven to be relatively ineffective in most areas. Such programs simply can’t provide enough housing units to meet the

need. Local governments are also skillful at evading the intent of these policies by manipulating the criteria or definition of “affordable” in their building permit process. Some studies have shown that the scarce supply of below-market inclusionary units often does not go to truly low-income households, but is snapped up by insiders—“yuppies-in-training”—who are especially well placed to take advantage of the lotteries and other schemes for allocating the below-market units.

To surmount these weaknesses, a regional government or state housing authority either has to become a direct permitting agency whose power supersedes the local government (this is what California’s Coastal Commission quickly evolved into), or it must have the power to withhold state tax revenues from “nonconforming” jurisdictions. The latter is what Orfield wants to do in the Twin Cities. His Comprehensive Choice Housing Act would freeze state aid to cities that failed to conform to their “fair share” affordable housing quota (which would be set by an administrative law judge), and would also deny nonconforming jurisdictions access to tax-increment financing. The opposition of Governor Arne Carlson prevented this bill from becoming law.

The defects of this approach are evident. To the resistance that neighborhoods display toward lower-income housing, the regionalist’s response is—cram it down their throats. The housing component of regionalism shows that in practice, regionalism offers

administration that is more centralized and less accountable to local voters. Local voters would find that the administrative apparatus of the regional body was beyond their control. And that is by design.

The simple alternative of amending the state's zoning and enabling act to respect property rights by mandating a minimum zoning entitlement (the Kemp Commission on Affordable Housing in 1991 recommended eight units to the acre be allowed—allowed, not mandated—in state zoning laws) is never considered in the regionalist credo. Such an answer runs counter to the basic imperative of the regionalist view, which is that urban problems can be solved only through greater political control of people and resources.

Jane Jacobs put her finger on the problem with this approach nearly forty years ago. "The voters," she wrote in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*:

sensibly decline to federate into a system where bigness means local helplessness, ruthless, oversimplified planning, and administrative chaos—for that is just what municipal bigness means today. How is helplessness against conquering planners an improvement over no planning? How is bigger administration, with labyrinths nobody can comprehend or navigate, an improvement over crazy-quilt township and suburban government?

This is one passage that Jacobs's newfound champions in the smart growth movement never mention.

Conclusion: Prospects and Alternatives

Orfield and other progressive reformers may succeed someday in getting some of their regional proposals adopted, but they will be forever a source of political conflict and local resentment.

The traveling road show touting the virtues of the Portland, Oregon, regional government tends to downplay the growing backlash there. The citizens of Milwaukie, an inner-ring suburb that is supposed to benefit the most from regionalism, recalled its mayor and two city council members in 1997 because of their support for the regional agency's plans for Milwaukie. Other Portland-area cities have held advisory referenda on the regional agency's plans and have voted their disapproval by lopsided majorities.

Voters have twice rejected bond measures to expand Portland's lightly used light-rail system. (Vice President Gore credulously claimed that Portland's light rail carried 40 percent of all commuters in Portland, when the system carries no more than 1.5 percent on a good day. Not a single reporter noticed this blooper.) Portland's Metro agency is less than ten years old, and it is worth noting that the ballot title for the initiative that created Portland's Metro in 1992 read: "Limits Regional Government."

What Portland's short experience teaches is that aggressive growth management and regionalism are popular generally, but unpopular locally. This is

a recipe for permanent political instability and conflict, and will surely lead to its undoing in the fullness of time. Twin Cities residents are right to be skeptical about this approach.

The basic problem with grand regionalist schemes is that they represent a big “systemic” answer to common problems that require local leadership to fix. “Sprawl” is a convenient scapegoat for the ills of poorly governed cities, and the entire theory behind regionalism has an iron determinism that seems compelling on the surface. But in fact there are lots of examples of inner-ring suburbs that have done splendidly over the past decade while their region’s periphery continues to sprawl. Among them are Pasadena, Long Beach, Burbank, and Glendale, close in to Los Angeles, which is itself enjoying a revival that no one expected to occur after the Rodney King riots of 1992. Even Dearborn, Michigan, is experiencing rising population and rising income at the moment. These cities have escaped the determinism of what David Rusk calls the “sprawl machine” because of sound local public and private sector leadership.

Improving our cities and suburbs might better begin with exactly the opposite approach: more decentralization. Good urban policy should follow what has worked in other areas such as transportation and communications, and maximize dispersed decision making. Urban scholars Witold Rybczynski and Peter Linneman recommend that older central cities consider deannexing land to private developers, who could create new “suburban-style”

communities within the urban core. In some cases the land could be sold as well as deannexed, providing much-needed funds for the city to spend on repairing crumbling infrastructure. Cities should also consider simply tearing down older high-density row housing that no one wants to live in today (and that is often abandoned), and replacing it with more suburban-style densities. Philadelphia and Detroit, among other older troubled cities, have begun doing this. In other words, older cities should consider shrinking deliberately. This is exactly the opposite of Rusk’s strategy for saving the central city.

There is little future in central cities blaming their troubles on suburban flight, notwithstanding Orfield and Rusk’s view that a political coalition between central cities and inner-ring suburbs is ripe for action. Not only are there numerous examples of inner-ring suburbs thriving amidst the supposed scourge of sprawl, but the turnaround of several large cities indicates that the pessimism about central cities is overdone. Again, cities that are enjoying a renaissance are those with determined, “no excuses” leadership like New York under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Milwaukee under Mayor Norquist.

If you had predicted a decade ago that not only would there be a huge decline in the crime rate, but New York City would lead the way, most sensible people would have sent for the men in the white coats to cart you away for some therapeutic help. And the favorable trends in crime owe not to any “systemic” scheme to address “root causes,” but to a simple back-to-basics

approach that emphasizes local leadership and accountability. In New York, precinct captains were held accountable for crime rates in their area, and lost their jobs if they failed to deliver. New Yorkers now tell opinion surveys that they are optimistic about their city again, after two decades when a majority said they were ready to leave.

Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley is now trying a similar approach with the public schools there, firing hundreds of administrators and holding new ones accountable. Early results look promising. As with crime ten years ago, so today we are at the point of maximum pessimism about our urban schools. Yet there are numerous examples, recently catalogued by Samuel Casey Carter at the Heritage Foundation, of poor, central-city public schools that are achieving top results in standardized tests. In every case, the key ingredient is not more money or some fancy system, but sound local leadership (in most cases openly defying the education bureaucracy).

If urban schools are unable to emulate the no-nonsense, back-to-basics approach that has produced success for law enforcement, then school choice will become all the more necessary as an urban renewal strategy. A 1997 Calvert Institute survey of more than a thousand African American families who had moved from Baltimore to the suburbs found that a majority would have stayed in the city if they could have chosen private schools for their children.

The examples of successful central-city and suburban leadership are a rebuke to the theorists who think that only grand regional schemes involving more administration and more spending can save urban America. The Twin Cities would be wise to avoid going down this one-way street, for it is a dead-end street. All that a bigger regional bureaucracy ensures is that little will really be done to fix urban problems. Both central cities and suburbs deserve better. n