

GROWING SMARTER IN THE TRI-STATE REGION

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The bad news is that sprawl is devastating the American landscape, wrecking the economic viability of American communities, and damaging the quality of American life.

The good news is that people are getting fed up with it. At long last, concern over the impact of sprawl has entered the American mainstream.

Sprawl was the subject of major initiatives announced by the President and the Vice President in back-to-back speeches just a few weeks ago. Bipartisan caucuses focusing on community livability issues have been formed in both the House and Senate. Governors across the political spectrum have announced programs to control sprawl and manage growth. Foundations and nonprofit organizations of every stripe hold seminars and workshops on sprawl. Perhaps most impressive of all, in last November's elections voters from Cape Cod to California overwhelmingly approved some 200 ballot initiatives related to putting the brakes on sprawl. All told, voters committed an estimated \$7 billion to conservation, urban revitalization and growth-management initiatives.

What is it that has everyone so worried?

In simple terms, sprawl is the poorly planned, low-density, auto-oriented development that spreads out from the edges of communities. It devours countryside. It drains the life out of older communities, stops their economic pulse and often puts them in intensive cars.

Sprawl touches us all—and one way or another, we all pay for it.

We pay in open space and farmland lost.

Since 1950, Pennsylvania has lost more than 4 million acres of farmland, that's an area larger than Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. Metropolitan Phoenix now covers an area the size of Delaware. It's estimated that over the next 45 years, sprawl in the Central Valley of California will affect more than 3.6 million acres of America's most productive farmland.

We pay in time lost

A study last year reported that each driver in Washington spends about 59 hours a year—that's the equivalent of a week and a half of work—stuck in traffic. The price tag for time and fuel wasted is roughly \$860 annually for every man, woman and child in the Washington area. In Los Angeles, the average speed on the freeways is expected to drop to 11 miles per hour by 2010. A new term—"road rage"—has been coined to describe drivers' frustration over traffic.

We pay in higher taxes.

Over the decades, we've handed over our tax dollars to pay for infrastructure and services—things like police and fire protection, water and sewer lines, schools and streetlights—in our communities. Now we're being asked to pay higher taxes to duplicate those services in sprawling new developments, while the infrastructure we've already paid for lies abandoned or underused in our older city centers and suburbs. Even worse, local governments use our tax dollars to offer incentives and write-offs to sprawl developers—in effect, rewarding them for consuming our landscape and weakening our older communities.

Finally, we pay in the steady erosion of our quality of life.

Many inner cities are blighted by deterioration, poverty and disinvestment. Long commutes leave us less time with our families. Tranquil neighborhoods are destroyed by road-widening. Historic landmarks get demolished and carted off to the landfill. Everyplace winds up looking like Noplace.

Sprawl and its byproducts represent the number-one threat to community livability in America today. And in a competitive global marketplace, livability is the factor that will determine which communities thrive and which ones wither. Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Solow puts it this way: "Livability is not some middle-class luxury. It is an economic imperative."

Sitting here in midtown Manhattan, the impact of sprawl is a bit hard to see. But you don't have to travel far to find it. Let me give you some statistics to illustrate sprawl's impact on this region.

A generation ago only 19% of the Tri-State Metropolitan Region was covered by roads, offices, and houses; today the total is 30%. The region's population has grown only 13% in the past 30 years, but the amount of developed land has grown by 60%.

What's going up on all that newly-developed land? Jobs, for one thing. The core urban counties in the Tri-State Region lost more than 300,000 jobs from 1970 to 1995, while the outer suburban ring gained 2 million jobs.

This shift in jobs is reflected in a shift in population. More than 1.7 million housing units have been built in this region since 1970—four out of five of them in the outer suburbs. Urban counties had 53% of the region's population in 1960; by 1990 that figure was down to 43%.

This massive shift in population has turned many of the region's inner cities into enclaves of poverty. The urban counties have less than half of the region's population, but they are home to three-fourths of the region's poor. One recent study showed that residents in the suburbs of Newark had the fourth highest average per capita income among 74 urban areas nationwide, while residents of inner-city Newark itself had the second lowest.

Make no mistake. Problems arising from the impact of sprawl and urban disinvestment aren't confined to the angry streets of North Philadelphia or the endless miles of fast-food restaurants and big-box retailers that mar every highway leading into every city in America. They're right here too.

Increasingly, political leaders, planners and concerned citizens are talking about a new strategy to combat sprawl. Maryland Governor Parris Glendening has described it this way: “I’m not talking about no growth, or even slow growth. What we need is smart growth.”

Catchy phrase, What does it mean? Let me answer that question by telling you what smart growth does:

- It recycles existing buildings and land whenever possible;
- It maintains local community character and identity;
- It preserves farms, forests, scenic vistas and environmentally sensitive areas;
- It promotes a sense of community;
- It revitalizes historic downtowns and residential neighborhoods;
- It fills in vacant or underused land in existing cities with new development that blends in with its surroundings;
- It gives people the option of walking, biking or using public transportation instead of driving everywhere;
- It creates well-designed new communities in places that can be served efficiently; and
- It protects the environment so that future generations can sustain their own economic prosperity.

Hugh McColl, president and CEO of Bank of America the largest bank in the country, had this to say last week: “Smart Growth is pro-growth. The goal is not to limit growth but to channel it to areas where [it can be] sustained over the long term. We depend on development to survive, but we also depend on the sustainable Health of the cities in which we do business.”

Clearly, more and more people—business leaders, public officials and private citizens alike—are realizing that the future of their communities lies in smart-growth policies and practices that emphasize two essential elements- sensible land-use planning and the revitalization of existing communities.

Land-use planning is a term that scares some people and puts others to sleep, but it’s a concept we have to come to terms with if we’re to deal effectively with sprawl. What’s more, we have to employ it on a bigger, broader scale than we’ve been accustomed to.

Urban decline and sprawl are practically guaranteed wherever there is a balkanized system of local jurisdictions. There’s a perfect example right here, in the Tri-State Region, which comprises some 2,000 units of government, most with their own budgets, most following their own development agendas.

When it comes to sprawl, city limits and county lines and state boundaries are often meaningless marks on a map. Limited jurisdiction makes it hard for local government to deal with an issue of this magnitude, and efforts to control sprawl in a limited area often just shift the problem from one community to another. It’s like trying to stop a flood with a picket fence.

What’s needed—what’s *essential* in fact—is action by the state government to develop growth-management legislation with teeth in it, legislation that requires local governments to work together

to develop rational strategies for using land more efficiently, to make thoughtful choices about where new development should and should not go, and to set up regulatory mechanisms that are fair, clear and farsighted.

Perhaps the best-known statewide land-use planning program in the Country today has been in place in Oregon since 1973. Oregon's law requires every community to calculate the amount of land it needs to accommodate growth during the next 20 years. Then it draws a circle—an urban growth boundary—around that land and concentrates development inside it.

The success of Oregon's law has drawn attention in other states. Washington State enacted legislation based on Oregon's in 1990. And since 1996, voters in a score of communities in California have approved the creation of urban growth boundaries around their towns. I can almost hear some of you saying, "That's all very good—but that's *the West Coast*, and it would never fly here."

Don't be so sure. Last May, Tennessee adopted a law that requires counties and municipalities to adopt "growth plans" by July 1, 2001, or risk losing state funding. The new law requires the adoption of 20-year "urban growth boundaries" and requires that growth plans must work to conserve the community's architectural, cultural and historical resources; provide a unified design for future development; and encourage high-density development in urban areas.

Let me reiterate: This isn't Oregon. It's Tennessee—a state with a strong tradition of political conservatism and a hearty dislike of "big government interference" in local issues. I'm sure that other states will be watching the law's implementation with great interest.

Oregon's legislation isn't the only model. Good examples of a different approach to statewide land-use planning can be found here on the East Coast.

Sprawl is not merely the natural product of market forces at work, as some people claim. The fact is that many state and local governments seem to work as hard as they can to make sure that sprawl keeps happening by offering incentives and subsidies for it. Last year, Maryland enacted a smart-growth program that attempts to shut off the state's subsidy pipeline. The new legislation requires that state programs that encourage growth—including highways, school construction, sewer and water lines, economic development assistance, and construction or leasing of state offices—be targeted to areas where significant investment in infrastructure has already occurred and where growth can be managed. Local governments can still decide where they want development to occur—but if they opt for development that will encourage sprawl, they can't assume that the state will help pay for it.

Taking a different approach, New Jersey residents last fall approved a constitutional amendment that dedicates up to \$98 million in tax revenue annually for historic preservation and farmland and open-space conservation. Over 10 years the legislation, which enjoyed strong backing from Governor Christine Todd Whitman, will protect a million acres of land. This action constitutes a particularly strong statement of concern by New Jersey residents over the future of their state. It also constitutes a marvelous gift to the new millennium.

This forward-looking initiative in New Jersey builds on a statewide development plan adopted in 1992- New Jersey's attention to the issue of land-use planning stands in sharp contrast to what's going on—or not going on—in the other states in the region. Despite some recent changes in its Conservation and Development Plan, Connecticut still has no statewide mechanism for ensuring that municipalities will cooperate in the development of their comprehensive plans. Here in New York there is no statewide planning process of any kind—but there is a glimmer of hope.

Earlier today many of you heard the keynote address by Rochester Mayor William A. Johnson, Jr. In March of last year, the New York Conference of Mayors endorsed a resolution by Mayor Johnson, calling on state government to study smart growth initiatives for New York. And in January of this year, smart-growth legislation was introduced in both houses of the New York State Legislature.

The fledgling coalition for smart growth in New York needs your support. Its very existence is encouraging, but it has an enormous and difficult job ahead if New Yorkers are to get the kind of legislative support for smart growth that they need and deserve.

Just a moment ago I mentioned the New Jersey initiative that will protect of a million acres of land. I want to say a bit more about that.

There's no question that one very important aspect of good land-use planning is protecting open space. In this regard I want to commend the Regional Plan Association's Greensward Plan: It's a realistic appraisal of the importance of greenspace in strengthening community livability, and it's a visionary blueprint for achieving an open space system that could be a national model of its kind.

But we could buy all the open land in the country and still not solve the problem of sprawl. It's important to emphasize—as your Third Regional Plan does very well—that greenspace conservation is just one component. in a comprehensive plan to ensure smart growth. We also need to focus energies and resources on reclaiming the streets and neighborhoods where people live—the towns, inner cities and older suburbs that we've neglected so badly for the past half-century. You can't have smart growth without reinvestment in existing counties.

Allow me to restate that fact in a stronger way: Reinvestment in existing communities *is* smart growth.

If you've read anything about urban design in the past few years, you've heard about the work of designers and planners who embrace the principles of the New Urbanism. You've seen pictures of the now communities they've created—places that feature narrow streets and closely-spaced houses with sidewalks and front porches and other traditional design features. The work of the New Urbanists and the public's response to it have opened up a spirited debate on what constitutes “good” development, and that's something for which all of us should be grateful.

The New Urbanists are making great strides in many areas. But ironically, many of their widely-publicized communities are located close to older communities where a fully-developed infrastructure is already in place, and where the environment and character that the new towns are trying so hard to recreate are just waiting to be rediscovered.

Instead of focusing so much energy on creating new “traditional” towns, we should be, developing strategies for reinvesting in the *real* traditional communities we already have. By reviving time-honored approaches to urban design, the New Urbanists have created residential neighborhoods that are an enormous improvement over the land-devouring subdivisions that characterize postwar suburban sprawl. That’s a great achievement. But in addition to creating new, thoughtfully-designed communities on farmland or the suburban fringe, we should also renew and enhance the communities that are our great legacy from the past. More than anywhere else, we need the vision of the New Urbanism on our old streets.

In a sense, it all comes down to choosing where to make investments. If federal, state and local governments choose to pour funding into more beltways and more suburban infrastructure, sprawl will continue to spread like an epidemic. But if those governments make a commitment to existing communities, it can have an enormous, positive impact on the critical need to keep people in urban neighborhoods and give others a reason to move back to the city.

There are some very simple steps state governments can take to fight sprawl and restore communities: They can amend their building codes to make them more “rehab-friendly.” They can remove their constitutional ban against the use of state gas tax revenues for mass transit projects. And while they’re encouraging others to set up shop in existing communities, they can commit to staying downtown themselves.

With a workforce numbering in the thousands, decisions about where state government locates its offices can have a huge impact on a community’s economic health. But only a few governors have issued executive orders mandating the location of state offices downtown. Just over a month ago, Governor Frank O’Bannon of Indiana signed an order directing state agencies, “wherever operationally appropriate and economically prudent,” to locate their facilities downtown and to “give first consideration to historic properties within downtowns or historic districts.” What sets the Indiana order apart from other similar initiatives is that it includes a specific goal for compliance: By mid-2003, the state hopes to have 66% of all state facilities located downtown—a 40% increase over current levels.

Governor O’Bannon’s action parallels an executive order from the President requiring that federal agencies make every effort to locate in downtown areas. Similar orders from the governors of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut could help strengthen downtowns across the region.

Encouraging development in existing communities, particularly in designated historic districts and older neighborhoods, requires sensitivity and a strong commitment to maintain the character and quality of the existing community. Not all development is appropriate, as we’re in dealing with an issue that has become particularly troublesome here in the Northeast. As successful revitalization efforts lure shoppers back to Main Street, national drugstore chains are following them. The result is what some communities are calling “the drugstore invasion.” In many cases, chains identify the heart of downtown—“the corner of Main and Main”—as their prime target for massive store expansion efforts. This willingness to make an investment in the downtown economy is praiseworthy—but the chains’ site-development strategies are not always sensitive to Main Street’s unique character. In too many communities, significant historic buildings are being tom down to

provide space for free-standing, single-story, cookie-cutter-designed stores with expansive parking lots and drive-through windows. Last year in New York State alone, 16 communities lost landmarks—even, in some cases, entire commercial blocks—to chain drugstores. We want investment in existing communities—but we don't want development that turns America's Main Streets into cut-rate versions of suburban strip malls.

I haven't mentioned the most important element in downtown reinvestment: housing.

When newscasters and political leaders want to show us how the cities are supposedly rebounding from decades of they generally offer as evidence big, glitzy projects like the new downtown stadium in Hartford or the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. Showplaces like these are good news, certainly, but they are not enough by themselves to revitalize downtowns.

It's as simple as this: A downtown that's alive is a downtown where people live.

I don't have to tell you about the concept of developing new living space downtown, because it may have been born and refined right here in New York. In a very real sense, the lofts of Soho and other downtown neighborhoods are the laboratory where the whole country learned (or at least fantasized about) what real urban life could be.

The idea of living downtown isn't new to New Yorkers—but it may surprise you to learn how widely the idea is taking root in cities all over the country. An article in Newsweek earlier this month highlighted a recent study of 24 cities which found that every one of them expects its downtown population to increase over the next decade. This includes some cities whose populations have been slinking for decades, like Philadelphia and Detroit, and some that are practically poster children for sprawl, like Atlanta and Los Angeles. The article goes on to describe, the boom in in-town living in places as diverse and widely scattered as Houston, Indianapolis and Spokane.

Obviously, not everyone wants to live in the city, and we shouldn't expect them to. But when people do want to stay in or move into urban neighborhoods, we shouldn't go out of our way to make it difficult for them to do so.

When people leave the city, it's often because leaving is the rational thing to do. More than anything else, urban flight is an indictment of bad schools, crime and poor public services. As-if this "push" weren't enough people are "pulled" out of the city by policies and practices that make homes and infrastructure in the suburbs less expensive and easier to build.

To replace this lethal "push-pull" combination, we need public policy that favors existing communities. Fifty years ago the government began to offer economic inducements to families that wanted to flee to the suburbs; it's time to offer those same kinds of inducements to entice middle-class residents to return to, or stay in, the city.

Here's an example:

In many places it is still very difficult to obtain private financing for downtown housing. Even when lenders are willing to take some risks, developers are reluctant to undertake expensive projects in a market with which they have comparatively little experience. They need an incentive to overcome their skittishness about the supposed risks of downtown housing.

Recognizing this fact, in 1995 the Washington State legislature passed a law that allows cities to provide a property-tax exemption for up to 10 years to owners who rehab vacant housing, convert existing buildings to housing or build new housing units in downtown areas. During the first three years of the program, the City of Tacoma has seen the development of more, than 700 units of housing—including market-rate, moderate-income and low-income units—a total investment of more than \$33 million dollars.

We need more housing policies and programs like this one that advance the goal of economic integration of our communities and lessen the concentration of poor households in inner—city areas. We must attract middle-income families back to the towns and cities, and we must improve the quality of housing for lower-income people.

One way to do this is by enacting the Historic Homeownership Association Act. This legislation, which has broad bipartisan support in both houses of Congress, would extend federal tax credits to homeowners who renovate their historic homes, giving residents of older neighborhoods incentives to stay and invest in their community's future, and providing an incentive for others to move back into the city. By offering a way to put deteriorated property back on the tax rolls while making homeownership more affordable for lower-income residents, this law could greatly benefit communities all over the country. New York, State has some 600 historic districts where this legislation could make a real difference. Obviously, this one act won't solve America's urban problems—but it can help, and a step in the right direction is better than standing still.

Sprawl isn't close to being licked yet. But there is good reason to believe that citizens are finally waking up to the fact that they have the right—and the means—to shape the future of the communities in which they and their children will live.

Sprawl is finally being recognized for what it is: an issue in which we all have a huge stake. Quality-of-life concerns can't be compartmentalized, and that fact has led to the formation of important and wide-ranging partnerships among diverse voting blocs and advocacy groups. Conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts find themselves allied with historic preservationists, while inner-city residents find common ground with suburbanites, farmers and rural landowners.

That's good, because winning the fight against sprawl will take all of us.

If we're going to make a real difference in the look and livability of America's communities, we need the best minds of our generation to help us repair the urban fabric that we've ripped so many holes in over the years.

We need the most creative designers available to help us figure out how to turn urban liabilities into assets, how to recast the spaces that nobody notices into places that are lively and safe and supportive, how to transform Noplace into someplace special.

We need visionary thinkers who recognize that by saving and enhancing the livability of places that people care about, we're creating opportunities for meaningful contact with the history and traditions that make up our shared heritage—and thereby strengthening the glue that holds us together as a society.

Working together, we need to summon the will to stop merely accepting the kind of communities we get and start demanding the kind of communities we want.

The choice is ours, and the time to make that choice is now.

[Richard Moe is president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and co-author, with Carter Wilkie, of Changing Places: Rebuilding Community in the Age of Sprawl.]