



“Urban Sprawl” for Dummies?

by Samuel A. Walker

Summary

Policy-makers and activists who favor government “solutions” to the perceived problem of “urban sprawl” miss the real problem: the deterioration of citizens’ quality of life in our cities. Public officials should instead address the problems that are causing people and businesses to leave cities in the first place: high taxes, burdensome regulations, inefficient city services, and poor schools.

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The concept of “urban sprawl” has empowered officials to impose growth control policies that limit private, individual, and community choices in favor of restrictive government directives.

It’s difficult for officials and citizens to deal with an issue when the terms have been pre-packaged by one side in the public debate. By drum-beating the term “urban sprawl” for years, policy-makers and activists who favor government solutions to perceived problems have been able to take much of the public focus off some of their own most persistent urban failures.

Par for the course is that the term used to describe the solution to “urban sprawl” places a negative label upon all those who notice the sleight of hand. After all, the only people who would oppose “smart growth” must be, well, dummies. So maybe it’s time for a short lesson entitled, “Urban Sprawl for Dummies.”

First, we must acknowledge that the real problem is the deterioration of the quality of life in our cities and a refusal to acknowledge their causes in poor policy. Public school systems are willing to fail generations of minority youth rather than admit that market-oriented reforms such as school choice might work. City governments are allowed to deliver services incompetently rather than adopt more efficient, private-sector alternatives. Crime-ridden urban environments are only now being changed through older, more traditional law enforcement methods—methods government planners discarded as anachronistic decades ago.

As cities consider bold new proposals aimed at reversing decades of failed policies, the architects of those policies are looking for a way to divert attention from their failures. In the concept of “urban sprawl,” those favoring the failed government “solutions” have found a way to: a) refocus attention away from the real problems; b) avoid having to admit they were wrong about many things; and c) not just *keep* their coercive government powers, but actually *expand* them.

According to Albany Law School professor Patricia Salkin, the concept of urban sprawl inspired more than 1,000 legislative bills in 1999 alone, and 20 percent of these passed. The idea has empowered city governments and state legislatures to impose a host of growth control policies that limit private, individual, and community choices in favor of vast, restrictive government directives.

America has added 120 million people to its population since 1950. That works out to about 55 million new homes. Those homes have to be built somewhere. But where—and how?

“New Urbanist” developments like Cherry Hill Village in Canton Township may provide an answer. There, private developers, on their own initiative, built high population density housing that minimizes car usage because of mixed-use zoning that allows residential and commercial properties to be built side-by-side.

The point policy-makers should understand about “sprawl” is that it’s not wrong for individuals, families, and businesses to choose the most viable options open to them. Whenever an alarmist shows a picture of ugly housing developments “encroaching” upon pristine farmland, it might be appropriate to show him a picture of a typical inner-city neighborhood and ask which he would prefer, if his living arrangements were at issue. In fact, ask him where he lives now.

Policy-makers instead must look at the factors that cause families to leave cities. It’s time to focus on such things as making schools not just tolerable but great. There are a number of ways to do this, whether by opening more charter schools or providing tax credits to help parents pay tuition at alternative public or private schools.

City officials also could do other things to fix the schools, improve the quality of city services, and lighten the tax load on citizens. They could loosen teacher certification so top-notch professionals who want to can become teachers. They could contract out garbage pickup, water and sewer services—even rodent control—so service providers will go out of business if they fail to show up on time to fix a problem. They could post a friendly, neighborhood patrolman on foot to walk the precinct. They could avoid traffic problems in the city and avert “sprawling” developments by easing tough zoning requirements so stores can be built close enough for people to walk or ride a bike there.

In short, the solution to “urban sprawl” lies in fixing the problems that cause people and businesses to leave cities in the first place. But people must be allowed to come up with their own solutions. No one-size-fits-all solution government officials try to impose has worked or is likely to work, even if they do think it’s “smart.”

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(Samuel A. Walker is a communications specialist for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a Midland-based public policy education and research institute. More information on “urban sprawl” and the environment is available at www.mackinac.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

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