

There's Nothing Libertarian About Sprawl

By Michael Cecire • Dec 17th, 2008 • Category: Environment, Feature

Like any small-'l' libertarian, there are those moments when perception or a comment from a self-described libertarian has me doubting our philosophical confederacy. My latest such experience involved incredulous cynicism directed at the anti-sprawl movement. A casual exchange at a West Philadelphia used book store alerted me to the anti-anti-sprawl libertarian.

Being in the business of economic development and public policy I was taken aback. Although well aware of the widespread hesitation surrounding the motivations of the so-called smart growth movement, I rarely came across outright denunciations of sprawl mitigation. Hearing such evidence slip from someone I presumed to be an ideological ally really piqued my curiosity as to the prevalence of such sentiment.

Beneath the first tranche of situational resistance to smart growth lies a very real and growing opposition. Mostly libertarian-leaning, this counter-movement relies on tenets of individualism and government non-interference to parry the growing momentum of the anti-sprawl chorus. They have a point. The smart growth movement is dominated by those who prefer the blunt instruments of government power to market choice. Understandably, the mere carriage of the anti-sprawl campaign by the left inevitably elicits strong reactions from those on the right, especially from those unable to divorce policy from its proponents.

A prominent pillar of the anti-anti-sprawl effort comes from the Independence Institute, whose richest barbs are reserved not for your generic proponent of density but for the trendy smart growth movement. In an interview with the Frontier Center for Public Policy, Jon Caldera of the Colorado-based Independence Institute offers the sound bite version of his organization's position:

In Colorado, for instance, where "smart growth" proponents have been very active and successful in many cities, the costs of buying a home have skyrocketed. The median price in Denver for a home is \$270,000 – in my hometown of Boulder it is over \$400,000 – in American dollars and that is directly because of "smart growth" activities. People should be free to own their property and do what they wish with their property.

There is both truth and omission here. Caldera's pricing assertions are not only correct, but follow nation-wide patterns. Enforced density has indeed bred higher prices. A well-known example of this effect came from Oregon's once-heralded Urban Growth Boundaries, which were meant to constrain development within a fixed area to encourage density and transit-friendly development. The result was not only a spike in real estate prices, but an embarrassing 'skip-over-effect' that produced greater sprawl, further away. UGBs have since died a convulsive death except in such places where the prepackaged high-brow language has been used to cloak intentions to price-out the poor.

The costs of density are not a function of density itself, but of supply and demand. Given the overwhelming incidence of sprawl in this country and the relatively low amount of high-density development, much of the price issue comes from the very market mechanisms that the Independence Institute claims to promote. High demand will produce conditions where units are allocated according to price. Though I suspect it might, it should come to no one's surprise that the unit-cost to deliver utilities is significantly lessened with higher density.

Even more troubling is the notion that opposing sprawl is somehow antithetical to property rights. This is wrong on so many levels. As prevailing zoning law exists today, land-use patterns are inherently biased against density and towards single-uses. In most cases it is illegal to reproduce a classic, mixed use American main street.

In essence, the prevailing zoning regime is one that discourages density, generally increasing the unit-cost of the dense, mixed-use developments that are available. The best way to alleviate density's high costs is a system that does not inherently favor sprawl and allows for greater density.

I am hardly an opponent of cars, but the uncertainties of the energy markets and the stop and go traffic in which Americans face are hardly the American dream. Indeed, there is nothing un-American about talking a leisurely walk to the drug store or the corner diner, but to build such places almost guarantees a bruising zoning board battle.

The grossest irony about smart growth's top-down approach to alleviating sprawl, which is fundamentally reliant on a multilayered, crisscrossing regulatory agenda, is that the anti-sprawl movement was pioneered by New Urbanism, a movement scaled to the individual. New Urbanism is a push to re-inject humanism into the urban landscape through the efficiency of land-use. Although New Urbanism certainly shares certain goals and philosophies with smart growth, its takes a grassroots, not overtly partisan approach that is grounded in considerations for human choice and economic growth.

The sprawl issue is not a left-right talking point, and it is certainly not a libertarian ideal; rather, it is a problem rooted in a zoning paradigm that limits choice, restricts use and produces a bevy of negative externalities for which the taxpayers end up footing the bill. To suggest that the bleak asphalt lakes and plastic canopies of signage is somehow the market's final product is not only ill-informed, but undermines free enterprise itself.



Michael Cecire is an economic development practitioner living in the Philadelphia area and working with a New Jersey public investment agency. A former Peace Corps Volunteer, Cecire earned his Bachelor of Science in Anthropology from Virginia Commonwealth University and is currently pursuing graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published articles

with the London Telegraph, MichaelTotten.com, and TCS Daily.

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3 Responses »

1. **Dannty L. Newton** on **December 20th, 2008 at 12:33 pm**:

I think the problem with controlling sprawl is that the arguments for harm are too hard to prove. It is a fact that many city services can be made less expensive by dense populations but fewer connections per foot of pipe, mile of road and reel of wire has not turned into cheaper living in the city. It cost more to live in a city. Everything from garbage collection to police protection costs more, otherwise there would not be a city tax on top of what the county and the state wants. So what are they doing with all of the savings? Some people will always be drawn to urban areas and some people, if they get enough money, will go to Wyoming or Utah. A quest to urbanize all will eventually be a quest to fix something random in our genetic makeup.

To make matters worse, the sprawl controversy is made to look like a character disorder on the part of the non-participants. This rubs a lot of people the wrong way. Is it really the job of the people who would like to be left alone and with more choices to conform to the anal retentive fixations of those who want fewer choices? Fixation on sprawl means turning to the power of the government to bring what seems like order out of what seems like chaos. The sprawlphobes have a lot to prove before they should be given the keys to the kingdom and the power to transform everyone's life into their brand of Utopia.

2. **James** on **December 23rd, 2008 at 12:59 pm**:

The arguments for harm in allowing sprawl are not hard to prove. Sprawl does create traffic problems because we do not put enough effort into mass transit. Sprawl does cause excess pollution because of too many vehicles on the road. Sprawl does eat up land that could be conserved. But the main argument to allow sprawl is quite clear — freedom of choice in the kind of lifestyle one may choose to live. That is a constitutional guarantee, and it is not up to liberals who believe everyone should live on top of each other like they do in Europe to exert a European standard that numerous polls show Americans do not want.

It is imperative that we provide ample diversity in housing styles and locations. If someone wants to live on the 35th floor of a high-rise apartment building that has offices and shops on the bottom floors where they can walk or take public transit everywhere they need to go, they should be able to do so. Similarly, if someone wants to live in a subdivision of 2,000-square-foot homes on half-acre plots of land 10 miles outside of town and drive to and from work everyday, they should have that right. Ordering people to live a certain way goes against the ideals this country was founded upon. Build mixed-use; there are people who want to live in that kind of development. But subdivisions have their supporters and its own market as well.

3. Mat on December 31st, 2008 at 10:31 am:

It's odd in one sense that libertarians see conspiracy in the smart growth movement, because part of the reason it came about was because of their concerns about what came before it. The predecessor of smart growth was exclusionary anti-growth regimes, which aimed to prevent the ills associated with growth by stopping growth. Think ultra large-lot zoning and building permit moratoria. This was the approach back in the 1970s and 80s. Smart growth at least tries to reach a compromise by letting housing supply and the rest of the built environment expand, with higher density in designated locations being the tradeoff. Then traditional urban design principles are applied to the greater density to make it as functional and appealing as possible.

On the other hand, it's to be expected that libertarians would oppose smart growth too, because it doesn't comport with their dogma of freedom to the max everywhere, always. Libertarians, like all utopians, are not very good at accepting compromise. But the reality is that urban development is always going to be regulated by the government to some degree. Vast majorities like it that way, when it comes down to brass tacks. We all like to do whatever we want but don't like it when another guy doing whatever he wants does something that diminishes our ability to do what we want. Nothing demonstrates that principle more than land use.

If we are going to regulate land use (and we will), we ought to at least come up with a system that produces a built environment that is functional and enjoyable to live in. Smart growth is an attempt to do this, and it's much better than the old way of trying to protect a community's status quo by halting growth or only allowing in people from the same socioeconomic group.

Land use is a complex issue fraught with conflict and compromise (and I haven't even mentioned the really thorny issues like infrastructure financing). Libertarians like the guy in the bookstore would serve themselves better by engaging in productive discussion rather than staking out ideologically pure positions and viewing as enemies those who are inclined to work with them in a spirit of reasonable compromise.

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