



# ON POINT

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## Regulatory Sprawl: Who Should Decide Where We Live?

By Jesse Walker

On September 9, the Sierra Club released a distraught report on urban sprawl, blaming the spread of suburbs for “increased traffic congestion, longer commutes, increased dependence on fossil fuels, crowded schools, worsening air and water pollution, lost open space and wetlands, increased flooding, destroyed wildlife habitat, higher taxes and dying city centers.”<sup>1</sup> A week before, Vice President Al Gore called sprawl a “blight” and called for a more restrictive approach to urban and suburban planning to improve “livability.”

**What causes sprawl?** Yet people keep moving to these places – suburbs, exurbs, edge cities – and often go out of their way to do so, implying that they find them, at the very least, more livable than the alternatives. In fact, sprawl is as much a product of people’s free choice as it is of public policy; and while it makes sense to criticize the policies that have decimated central cities and made the suburban alternative so asphalt-driven, the self-styled advocates of livability seem more intent on further restricting people’s freedom to live where and how they please. In the name of combating sprawl, their proposals threaten individuals’ right to use their property as they wish and communities’ right to local control of planning, zoning, transportation, and schools.

Thus, the Sierra Club report points approvingly to Oregon and Washington, two states that require all their cities to draw growth boundaries around themselves, channeling new development into the already urban zone. The effect is not only to restrict the right of property owners outside the boundary to build on their land, but to disenfranchise suburbanites, whose power to establish their own guidelines for local growth must give way to the larger, state-approved plan. Ironically, such laws also *encourage* the development of property within the boundary, even if the land is better suited for farming.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Dark Side of the American Dream: The Costs and Consequences of Suburban Sprawl,” September 9, 1998. Available at [http://www.sierraclub.org/transportation/sprawl/sprawl\\_report/](http://www.sierraclub.org/transportation/sprawl/sprawl_report/)

More generally, a growing group of political figures, including the vice president, have endorsed the idea of “regional governance,” in which local jurisdictions give up some or all of their powers to larger metropolitan bodies. The argument goes that small suburban and township governments are unsuited to deal with larger projects, such as mass transit.

**Costs invariably higher.** In fact, it is regional governance and outside subsidies that have overbuilt the highways that groups like the Sierra Club now decry, and we have little reason to suppose that the new, more “sustainable” transit alternatives they advocate – light rail, for example – will be any better. Such schemes almost invariably cost far more than planned, and they almost never carry as many people as projected. Furthermore, to the extent that people do use them, they would simply be another subsidy to sprawl. If the intent is to discourage new development outside the urban core, then little difference exists between a suburbanite who takes a train to the central city and one who drives in.

One reason why such transit systems rarely carry as many passengers as projected is that more and more people now commute, not from the suburb to the city, but from one suburb to another. Yet mass transit schemes rarely reflect this. The old system, in which planners rigidly separated suburban homes from urban jobs, is breaking down; work is following people to their new homes. As a result, along with higher speed limits and new roads, commute times – contrary to the Sierra Club’s report – have stayed more or less steady over the past couple of decades, increasing from an average of 22 minutes in 1980 to 23 minutes in 1990.<sup>2</sup> Any transit system that does not take this transformation into account is doomed to fail. So is any system that denies suburbanites the freedom that such varied destinations imply.

Sprawl poses problems, but so do all the alternatives. It is one thing to ask federal and state governments to stop subsidizing suburban development. It is quite another to ask them to fight suburbanization and replace the sovereignty of local governments with remote “regional” authorities and a statewide “growth management plan.” Such reforms undermine democratic input, make it easier for planners to violate property rights, and concentrate power in the hands of those special interests best able to negotiate the bureaucratic maze – usually downtown businesses looking for handouts. (The beneficiaries of regionalism always seem to reside in the central city’s business district, not its poor and middle-class neighborhoods.)

**Thinking about livability.** Far better to devolve power - from the feds to the states, from regional governments to local governments, from cities to neighborhoods, and from the public sector to the private. The vice president is right about one thing: we should be thinking about livability. But any useful investigation of that topic must begin by looking at how people actually *want* to live, as revealed by the choices they make. And any useful policies that follow must build on that freedom, not restrict it.

***For further information, see:***

James D. Riggle and Jonathan Tolman, “Taking Private Land for Private Interests: The Agenda and Policies of the American Farmland Trust,” Competitive Enterprise Institute, July 1998.

Jesse Walker, “Jacobean Tragedy,” *Reason*, July 1998

Jesse Walker, “Urban Sustainability,” *CEI UpDate*, June 1998

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<sup>2</sup> See Alan Pisarski, *Commuting in America II: The Second National Report on Community Patterns and Trends*, Eno Transportation Foundation, 1996.