

Virginia Viewpoint

A Workable Plan to Harm Minorities and the Poor

By Randal O'Toole

Summary

Smart-growth advocates doom their own efforts to failure. They plan based upon what they think the rest of us should have, rather than upon what we have indicated we want. Given their rather dubious track record, one must question the sustainability of such hubris.

Main text word count: 741

Those who advocate so-called *smart-growth* planning claim their policies will improve the livability of America's urban areas. But in fact they will merely improve the livability for a tiny elite, while they reduce livability for everyone else. Low-income people and minorities will be hardest hit, a fact that has prompted some to dub the war on sprawl "the new segregation."

At heart, the war on sprawl is a war on homeownership and automobility. Autos, we are told, are dangerous, polluting devices and we would be better off walking, cycling, or riding transit. The single-family home with a large yard is a waste of space, they say, and we would be better off living in apartments.

Yet homeownership and automobility are important sources of wealth. Autos help make us wealthy by giving us access to better jobs and lower-cost consumer goods, not to mention recreation and distant friends and relations.

Eighty-three years ago, the United States had the world's most extensive network of intercity passenger trains and urban streetcars. Yet automobiles allow the average American today to travel fourteen times as much as Americans did in 1920, and that mobility has made us rich.

Homeownership does more than provide us shelter. It also allows us to build our wealth by borrowing funds against the equity in our homes and investing those funds in new businesses. Most start-up businesses and many college educations in America are partly financed by second mortgages on the business owners' or parents' homes.

Unfortunately, the benefits of automobility and homeownership are not equally shared among all Americans. In particular, 95 percent of white families own or lease an automobile, but less than 75 percent of African-American families do. More than two out of three white families own their own homes, but only 45 percent of African-American families do. Policies that help these families buy cars and homes will help them build wealth and get out of poverty.

Smart growth calls for increased urban densities through urban-growth boundaries and minimum-density zoning and for construction of expensive

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rail-transit lines instead of increased road capacity. These policies will make it harder for poor families to get out of poverty.

Urban-growth boundaries and land-use regulation have driven housing prices up almost everywhere they have been used. In Columbia, South Carolina, which has had little land-use regulation, an African-American family can buy a nice, four-bedroom, two-bath home for \$143,000. That same home costs twice that much in Portland, Oregon, where planners drew an urban-growth boundary in 1979, and more than four times as much in San Jose, which drew its urban-growth boundary in 1974.

Researchers at the University of California have found that giving someone a cheap, serviceable car will do far more to help them get out of poverty than giving them a free transit pass. But once they have a car, will they be able to get to where they want to go? Not if smart-growth advocates have their way.

Anti-automobile policies promoted by various smart-growth groups aim to discourage driving by increasing traffic congestion. Portland, San Diego, the Twin Cities, and other urban areas that have adopted smart-growth policies have some of the fastest rising congestion in America. Portland planners gleefully predict that, because of their policies, the amount of time Portlanders waste in traffic will quadruple between 1997 and 2020.

The impacts of such congestion fall hardest on women, who tend to use cars for errands more than men, and low-income people, who tend to live in the most congested neighborhoods. Expensive and little-used rail transit systems will hardly make up for the increased congestion.

Planners in Cincinnati who wanted to build an expensive light-rail system estimated job accessibility before and after the rail lines were built. They found that accessibility for white, middle-class commuters remained virtually unchanged, but accessibility for low-income people and minorities would decline by 20 to 35 percent. Fortunately, voters rejected funding for the rail line.

People who want to live in high-density city centers and who are willing to pay the cost should be more than welcome to do so. Yet most families tend to prefer living in low-density suburbs and enjoying the liberating benefits of automobility.

So-called smart-growth policies that attempt to restrict those benefits harm everyone. But they especially harm low-income families who have few alternatives. Environmental justice demands that we allow these families to enjoy the same benefits of large backyard, low-density suburbs, and auto-liberation that most Americans take for granted.

(Randal O'Toole <rot@ti.org> is the director of the American Dream Coalition <americandreamcoalition.org> and a member of the Board of Scholars of the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, an education and research organization headquartered in Potomac Falls, Virginia. **Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliations are cited.**)

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John Taylor
Virginia Institute for Public Policy
20461 Tappahannock Place
Potomac Falls, Virginia
20165-4791

Phone: (703) 421-8635
Fax: (703) 421-8631

www.VirginiaInstitute.org
JTaylor@VirginiaInstitute.org

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