

Our future growth may in suburbs, not in central cities

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4714>

I read an interesting article on the New Geography website by Joel Kotkin entitled “Urban Legends: Why Suburbs, Not Dense Cities, Are the Future”. Kotkin is the editor of the website and is also a Distinguished Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University.

Kotkin says that the current worldview of development is that the suburbs are going to become a thing of the past, that we will rely more on public transit, our cities will become more densely developed, and we will all have less “personal space.” This worldview envisions the emergence of more and larger megacities whose work forces will provide more professional services and produce fewer manufactured goods.

Kotkin does not agree, but concedes that it is clear that the world’s cities are growing. Tokyo had a population of 26 million people in 1975, and there were only two other cities in the world at that time that had populations of more than 10 million. The U.N. predicts there will be 27 cities of more than 10 million by 2025. “The proportion of the world’s population living in cities, which has already shot up from 14 percent in 1900 to about 50 percent in 2008, could be 70 percent by 2050.

But here’s what the boosters don’t tell you: It’s far less clear whether centralization and concentration advocated by these new urban utopians is inevitable - and it’s not all that clear that it’s desirable.”

Kotkin points out that Third World megacities “face basic challenges in feeding their people, getting them to and from work, and maintaining a minimum level of health.” On the other hand, more advanced cities like London, Los Angeles, New York and Tokyo “all suffer growing income inequality and outward migration of middle class families.”

Kotkin sees dispersion, not dense development, as a more humane approach. “...what if we thought less about the benefits of urban density and more about the many possibilities for proliferating more human-scaled urban centers; what if healthy growth turns out to be best achieved through dispersion, not concentration?”

“Instead of overcrowded cities rimmed by hellish new slums, imagine a world filled with vibrant smaller cities, suburbs, and towns: which do you think is likelier to produce a higher quality of life, a cleaner environment, and a lifestyle conducive to creative thinking?...Innovators of all kinds seek to avoid the high property prices, overcrowding, and often harsh anti-business climates of the city center.”

Kotkin argues that suburbs are in fact cleaner and greener than cities are, and that income disparities are less extreme than in cities. Because of “chronically high housing costs and chronically low opportunity in economies”, “cities often offer a raw deal for the working class.”

Kotkin predicts that “the most advantaged city of the future could well turn out to be a much smaller one. Cities today are expanding at an unparalleled rate when it comes to size, but wealth, power, and general well-being lag behind.”

Another writer, Zachary Neal on the NewGeography website, wrote an article that agrees with Kotkin.

In the article, entitled “Cities: Size Does Not Matter Much Anymore,” Neal argues that successful cities will not depend so much on their size as on their connectivity with other cities and the world. He wrote, “size differences (between cities) play virtually no role in their economic development today. Instead, urban economies depend primarily on cities’ connections to one another through networks of transportation, communication, business transactions, and cultural exchanges. Well-connected cities, regardless of their size, are more likely to develop robust economies.”

He also states that “entrepreneurs increasingly seek to locate outside the city’s central core, in smaller suburbs or edge cities.”

The trend for the past thirty years, with a real push in the last five, has been toward dense development of cities, with a more or less standard approach of focusing on downtown development first and dense development from the center out. More recently the incentive for dense development of suburbs has been done by demonizing suburbs and the use of the car. But the reality is, most of the development that has taken place during that time has been in suburbs, and it has happened for a reason - that’s where most Americans want to live.

This trend is only being stopped in some places by new regulations that, for example, don’t allow suburbs to be built, or don’t allow a home lost to a fire to be replaced by anything but an apartment building, both of which should be considered an unconstitutional loss of property rights.

Now we have at least two academics, Kotkin and Neal, who give us even more pragmatic reasons to take a second look at dense development.

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