

Drive in the country brings questions about the future

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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This weekend was a rarity of late. Considering my packed schedule, my wife and I actually managed two outings in the same weekend. Saturday evening we got in my small plane and did some sightseeing around the Tulsa area, and Sunday we drove on Route 66 from Bristow, which is west of Tulsa, to Arcadia, which is north of Oklahoma City, to see the famed Pops convenience store .

Given that most planners would probably consider the Tulsa region to be an example of the worst kind of sprawl, from the air you would expect to see a clear delineation between the leap-frogging, mindless, treeless subdivisions and forests and pasturelands that surround it.

What you will actually find is a blending of the urban and rural, with the density of homes gradually decreasing the further from the city core they are. In fact, there is a dense canopy of trees in the inhabited areas of the city and its suburbs, and there are vast areas of forests around the city that remain nearly uninhabited.

As you fly farther west between Tulsa and Oklahoma City, you will see fewer forested areas, but large areas of pasture and woods with small towns scattered around, many of them on Route 66.

As we drove the two lane highway, we saw a much different picture, probably not unlike what you would see in any other state. There were some new and well-kept buildings, mostly homes, but they were far outnumbered by the dilapidated buildings that lined the route. Old homes that had been abandoned years ago that were slowly collapsing; homes that were still occupied but whose lawns were littered with junk and trash; trailer homes that looked inhabitable, but probably were lived in. The poverty in some places was almost unimaginable.

The towns that we passed through as we made our way to Arcadia were in better condition, but I could not help but think that eventually these towns would become ghost towns, abandoned over time as young people leave to never return, and the older population simply dies until there is no one left.

There was a time when these small towns were the engines of our nation's economy, the source of labor and materials for the output of goods and crops. Though most of our agricultural land is still being farmed, the factories left long ago for Mexico, then China, taking millions of jobs from Americans who would, if given the opportunity, stay in the small towns where they were born.

In my opinion, heavy-handed regulations and organized labor share much of the blame for the demise of American jobs and cities.

How did America become saturated with small towns during the 19th century, only to be given a death blow? If the brave settlers and entrepreneurs of that time had faced the massive regulations and labor costs that we face today, would those towns have ever existed? And if they had never existed, how would the production of goods in the industrial era ever taken place, or could this nation have ever been able to feed itself without the farming communities that now pepper the American landscape?

Even the guru of urbanism, Andres Duany, recently voiced concern, stating, "Our thesis is studying the great American continental expansion of the latter half of the 19th century, when thousands of towns and cities were founded in the absence of financing. We must understand what allowed that and what makes it seem impossible today. Among the constituent elements are a very light hand of government and , often, management genius – as well as normative patterns like the continental survey, the town grid, etc. But the key element is successional urbanism. Start small at the inauguration, and later build well, culminating in the climax condition of the magnificent cities of the 1920's."

The national debt, regulations of all sorts, and organized labor, all have contributed to the demise of small towns (and even large ones like Detroit). The federal government, and to extents that vary according to each state, state governments, have a stranglehold on American lives and new development in America.

While planners look for ways to get Americans out of their car, fewer Americans can afford a car and the prosperity that mobility puts within their reach.

The answer to making America prosperous again is to embrace the deconstruction of government to the point that a few wise but restrained regulations and a robust market force can deliver jobs and opportunities to all Americans. It is time for a radical transformation of America that would take it back to its roots. Without it, small town America is unlikely to see the end of this century, to the detriment of the entire nation.

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