

Urban planning liberals think everyone agrees with them

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By [Randy W. Bright](#)

There seems to be a movement among liberals in urban planning circles who believe that conservatives are embracing liberal policies such as smart growth, sustainability, high-density development, new urbanism, transit-oriented communities and anti-sprawl concepts.

In fact, all new ideas, even those involving new urbanism, are a bit like eating a trout. Anyone who has eaten this delicacy knows that you can't swallow one whole or even take a bite like you are eating a hamburger. If you want to enjoy eating trout, you have to patiently separate the meat from the bones, and even after carefully doing so you will still discover a bone has slipped by.

Keeping that in mind, consider what was recently written in an article on [grist.org](#), referring to two supposedly conservative planners: "Lewis and Marohn both note that sprawl requires investments in public infrastructure like roads and sewers that cannot be economically supported by low-density, housing only areas. An efficient, lean government is actually most easily achieved in a dense area, where the same stretch of road serves far more people, firefighters and cops have much shorter distances to travel, and offices, shops, and homes are all in the same jurisdiction."

This blanket statement of fact is far from the truth. Let's begin with "sprawl requires investments in public infrastructure like roads and sewers that cannot be economically supported by low-density, housing only areas". While that may be true at its face (that infrastructure takes investments) the conclusion (that it cannot be supported by low-density, housing only areas) is not.

For many decades, so-called "sprawl" supported itself very well. It was not until cities got themselves deep into debt through bad investments (stadiums, etc.) and submissions to unions (creation of unsustainable long-term obligations), both of which are liberal policies, that investment into any kind of necessary infrastructure (roads, bridges, and utilities) became unaffordable.

The other side of this coin is the implication that high-density policies don't cost as much as sprawl. Anyone looked at the price of any kind of mass transit lately, especially light rail? Or redevelopment of utilities to serve more people in dense areas? Or the traffic that is generated by not developing more traffic lanes to handle high-density? Or the higher cost of living and housing costs caused by rising property values, caused by urban growth boundaries and policies? (For example, my recent visit to Seattle was great except for three things: traffic was a nightmare everywhere we went, there were few places to park, and the cost of everything like hotel and meals were higher.)

To which I would address the statement that "firefighters and cops have much shorter distances to travel..." What difference does distance make if traffic is so heavy that they can't get through? It was not that long ago that fire departments were begging their cities not to make

their streets more narrow (which in new urbanism must be done to add landscaping and bicycle lanes, at considerable cost) because they couldn't get their fire trucks through.

The author of the article claims that conservatives only argue with noted (liberal) urbanists, but don't take issue with the few conservatives who "favored smart growth". I submit that there is a reason why there are so few, and I would further submit that the few that do (if they are real conservatives) would eventually reject smart growth after even a cursory review of it. Why?

Because real conservatives look at everything through the lens of freedom, and there are great inconsistencies among liberal planners. For example, they believe that car drivers should pay more of their fair share of the cost of the roads they drive on (through a mileage tax), but they insist that light rail be subsidized by the government (preferably not their own).

The truth about all of these policies is that they are not organic, that is to say that for those policies to be fully accepted, they must be forced upon the public through mandatory codification.

The more we can get away from federal controls forcing these rules upon us, and the less disinformation we get from liberal urbanists, the more objective we can be in real community planning. It seems to me that if each community could take an objective look at their particular demographics, culture, economy and infrastructure, without the undue influence of liberal urbanists, the more natural and effective the development of their communities would be. They simply have to be able to sort out the bad ideas to get the best.



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