

Sprawl: Too Much of a Good Thing?

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Can we escape the "sprawl" phenomenon that is so clearly under way here in the Centre Region? Perhaps, but to do so would require a conceptual shift--a new way of thinking about transportation. We would need to, in a sense, reinvent our transport system.

We might take some tips and inspiration from the business sector. Successful businesses and organizations, of necessity, "reinvent" themselves every five to ten years. They do this by looking to the future and developing a vision for what they want to be five or ten years hence; then comes a strategic plan and concrete performance objectives.

We inhabitants of the Centre Region, even more than our businesses, are in need of a vision for what we would like our transport system to be 5-10 years from now. Here is a sample vision.

Ten years hence we have laws that prohibit the spread of commercial and residential structures outside of a specified distance from our cities (these are called "growth boundaries"). As a result, we no longer put housing developments on farm land. Rather our new housing is centrally located and compact; it is modelled after traditional neighborhoods and, thus, is designed to promote social interaction and reduce reliance on private cars. We have half the number of cars--half the traffic--that we now have. Some of our downtown streets are closed to traffic or reduced to a single lane with a speed limit of 15 mph. Cars are present but the pedestrian and bicycle use are actively encouraged: cars always yield the right-of way (as is now the case in Holland).

Postscript: All this was possible, in part, because planners and citizens slowly began to experience a conceptual shift in the late 1990s; they began to realize that the hundreds of millions of dollars that were earmarked for new roads projects could, instead, be used to begin to establish a public transportation system that was fast, efficient, and pleasurable to use.

How might a community like ours move toward creating such a future? I suppose, like any other daunting task, we do it in small steps. Using traffic diverters is one step. By judiciously using diverters we proclaim that we value calm, friendly neighborhoods more than we value fast travel. Creating and maintaining effective "growth boundaries" to contain sprawl, like cities in Oregon have done, is another important step. Coordinating decision-making among municipalities through citizen-controlled bodies so that our various political units don't operate at cross purposes (producing the chaos of growth that we are now witnessing) will also be important. Building housing that embodies the principles of ecological design (e.g., low energy and materials use) while offering a sense of community, such as Ithaca, New York, is yet another step. And, of course, creating an efficient, friendly public transport systems is central to this entire enterprise. Each of these steps, and there are more, will be difficult because each one requires that we free ourselves from outmoded ways of thinking; we are being challenged, it seems, to adopt a new mentality.

It is easier, of course, to opt for quick solutions. We are told that more roads will help solve our problems. We can complete the Inner Loop, extend University Drive out to Atherton,

widen Science Park Road, Blue Course Drive and West College Avenue, and so forth. We are told that we need to act now--that the number of cars on West College will jump from 12,000 to 25,000 in the next decade. Ditto for Science Park Road. Hence, it is argued that building and widening roads is a sign of **vision**--preparing for the future. I suggest, instead, that we need to take our time. This is a complex problem. Let's think it through carefully.

Building new roads and widening existing ones will work for a time but, ironically, such measures may take us away from, rather than toward, lasting solutions. Perhaps it is time to ask if more roads, wider roads, more cars, more big box stores offering minimum-wage jobs, more housing developments on our valley bottom farmland, are in keeping with our values and with our collective vision for what we want our region to develop **toward**. If we want to preserve what is precious--if we value our mountains, our cold-water streams, our fertile farmland, our local businesses, our local craft and performing arts, and our rich cultural heritage--then steps leading to more roads, more cars, more sprawl may not be the answer.

The idea that one step toward solving our traffic congestion problem may lie in having a moratorium on road building or in controlling car movements may seem counter intuitive. But consider two things. First, more roads induce more traffic. Study after study has shown that building more roads invariably leads to more sprawl which leads to more traffic (as people are able to travel farther in shorter amounts of time). This has been acknowledged by traffic planners since the 1950s. Second, when the temptation to build roads is resisted, things settle down, and people travel less; they discover alternatives. For example, when San Francisco recently shut down the earthquake-damaged Central Freeway to make repairs, the rush hour traffic decreased along several major highways: 80,000 cars per day seemingly disappeared. People adapted: they took buses and trains, they car-pooled, they biked, they telecommuted.

In conclusion, I am suggesting that by mindlessly building more roads and saying that sprawl is "inevitable," we, in effect, forfeit our right to create our own future. Sprawl is not inevitable. We must have the wisdom to question assumptions and the courage to speak. If we do this, remarkable things might happen. Ten years ago who among us would have forecast the incredible changes in public attitude toward smoking in public places. What happened? We spoke out and as we did this a new concept took root in our collective mentality: we came to understand that we have a right not to be forced to breath cigarette smoke in public places! Now, we are again in need of a new mentality. Many, I think, have come to recognize that more roads, more cars, more malls, and more farm land turned into housing developments do not square with their most heartfelt values. This is the old mentality. Many have also come to recognize that our leaders seem to be asking the wrong questions. Again the old mentality.

And so we must begin to give voice to our concerns and forthrightly articulate a vision for the transportation system best suited to our region. We must, in effect, address the real questions, the deeper challenges, confronting us--namely: 1) protecting the integrity of our neighborhoods, 2) establishing growth boundaries to maintain the rural character of our region, 3) coordenating regional government decision making to ensure that our decisions are wise, and 4) reducing the need for cars and roads by creating a truly effective public transportation system. These are the real challenges and we citizens, it seems, must lead the way. In so doing, we might

succeed in maintaining the beauty and integrity of our region, while also rediscovering what it means to live in a participatory democracy.