The Ideology of the Cancer Cell
C. Uhl

It was Edward Abbey who said it best: "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell." But these days we still hear the mantra, "Growth is inevitable; there is nothing that can be done." Finally, a sane, logical voice has come forward to challenge this assumption. Eben Fodor is the author of Better not Bigger. Fodor says "This sort of resignation that growth is inevitable is simplistic at best. At worse, it shows a callous attitude toward the legitimate concerns of citizens and a reckless disregard for the long-term consequences of endless urban growth."

In a lucid analysis Fodor reveals ten ways that cities actively subsidize growth (e.g., economic subsidies, tax subsides, below cost services, free infrastructure, relaxed regulations, etc.). He concludes: "Those who say there is nothing we can do to slow growth fail to recognize or acknowledge that we are actively encouraging it."

Fodor believes that citizens have been generally ineffective at stopping unwanted growth in their communities because they fail to recognize the powerful workings of what he calls the "urban growth machine"--the consortium of landowners, real estate developers, mortgage bankers, Realtors, construction companies, contractors, cement and sand and gravel companies, and building suppliers that have a common economic interest in aggressively promoting growth. The members of these groups tend to be wealthy and politically influential and they are organized (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce, Association of Realtors, Home Builders Association, and so forth).

Fodor observes, "There is what can only be called a giant public relations campaign being waged in our cities, counties, and states. This campaign is primarily the work of the real estate development industry--the engine of the urban growth machine--that doesn't want you to question the benefits of continued growth nor be aware of the costs it creates. Their rhetoric includes statements like: 'Growth creates jobs,' 'You have to grow or die,' 'Growth generates new tax revenues.'" Fodor calls these the "growth myths." There are twelve in all and he questions them one by one.

*Myth 1: Growth provides tax revenues? Reality check: Growth tends to raise local tax rates. Harvard economists Alan Altshuler and Jose Gomez-Ibanez report that: "The available evidence shows that development does not cover new public costs; that is, it brings in less revenue for local governments than the price of servicing it." The explanation for this is fairly obvious. The taxes paid by new developments are seldom designed to adequately cover the additional capital costs of the new and expanded facilities (roads, sewers, water treatment, schools, libraries, police services, parks) that the development requires. For example, Fodor reports that "a new house can cost local taxpayers $20,000 to $30,000 or more for the new public facilities required to serve it."

*Myth 2: We have to grow to provide jobs for people in the community. Reality check: Faster growing communities end up with similar unemployment rates to those of slower growing communities. For example, when Santa Barbara Professor, Harvey Molotch, compared unemployment rates in the 25 fastest growing US cities with rates in the 25 slowest growing cities over a twenty-year period, he found no statistical correlation between the growth rates and unemployment rates. According to Fodor, "Faster-growing cities are undoubtedly creating new jobs, but it seems they are also attracting new residents who don't find jobs. The faster-growing city ends up being a bigger city, with a similar unemployment rate and a larger number of people unemployed."

*Myth 3: Growth is inevitable. Reality check: The statement that 'growth is inevitable' is an insult to democratic processes. We are not helpless victims of change; we do not have to accept whatever growth is thrust upon us. Indeed, there are many tools at our disposal for regulating, even stopping growth. Here are some examples:

--Development impact fees: Developers are obligated to pay fees to fully cover the costs of expanded facilities such as schools, roads, sewage treatment, water supply, parks, etc.

--Growth rate limits: The community can decide to place a cap on the amount of new development allowed each year. Boulder, CO, has recently done this.

--Urban growth boundaries and greenbelts: A physical boundary is placed around an urban settlement; land outside the boundary is considered rural and uses are restricted to farming, forestry, etc. Cities in Oregon have successfully done this. The result: more orderly development of urban areas, lower costs to provide urban services, and protection of rural lands.

These are just three of the more than 15 options presented in Fodor's book.

As we consider how to tame the "growth machine," we might do well to remember the words of the historian Arnold Toynbee: "True growth is the ability of a society to transfer increasing amounts of energy and attention from the material side of life to the non-material side and thereby to advance its culture, capacity for compassion, sense of community, and strength of democracy."