

Growth Management: Regionalism's Core Issue

David Rusk

A new association of business leadership groups in Pennsylvania, the Coalition of Mid-Sized Cities, has targeted enactment of a "Smart Growth," anti-sprawl law as its top priority. In Missouri a coalition of 80 churches—Protestant and Catholic, black and white, city and inner suburb—is lobbying for a new state growth management law for Greater St. Louis.

In Ohio, the just-formed First Suburbs Consortium, a dozen mayors from communities around Cleveland, told the Governor's Task Force on Agricultural Preservation that a strong state land-use law would be desirable to save farmland, but it is essential for the survival of older suburban communities.

Growth management is rapidly emerging as the top regional issue of the next decade. New recruits to the legislative struggle—business leaders, church coalitions, inner suburban mayors, and township supervisors—are joining forces with environmentalists and farmland preservationists, growth management's more traditional advocates.

"If regionalism isn't dealing with land use, fiscal disparities, housing, and education, regionalism isn't dealing with the issues that really matter," states Don Hutchinson, president of the Greater Baltimore Committee, the regional chamber of commerce.

Land use is the key, especially in the East and much of the Middle West where sprawling development patterns overlay a political map of thousands of cities, villages, and town-

ships with fixed jurisdictional boundaries.

Fiscal disparities, inequitable housing, and educational opportunities—laced with racial and class segregation—all flow from skewed development patterns

"Since the late 1940s, policies have consistently encouraged the abandonment of boroughs and cities in Pennsylvania, and discouraged the redevelopment of existing neighborhoods and established commercial and industrial sites," explains Tom Wolf, president of Better York, owner of a multi-state chain of builders-supply yards, and a leader of the Coalition of Mid-Sized Cities. In addition to Better York, the coalition includes a dozen business groups like the Lehigh Valley Partnership, the Lancaster Alliance, and the Erie Conference on Community Development.

"In the end, no one wins in a system that makes prosperity a temporary and fleeting phenomenon," Wolf continues. "No one wins in a system that has already condemned our cities and older boroughs to economic stagnation and decline. And no one wins in a system that ultimately threatens to do the same thing to our townships. The point is that public policies that encourage sprawl are neither smart nor right.

New Rules Needed

"We need to change the rules of the game," Wolf concludes. "Most of all we need

to change the rules governing land-use planning.”

That conclusion is seconded by the Rev. Sylvester Laudermill, chair of Metropolitan Congregations United for St. Louis. “St. Louis has been devastated by a growth machine that empties out our communities. In recent decades developers have consumed land at seven times the rate of our population growth. They’ve built twice as many new homes as there were new households for them.

“That’s a guaranteed formula for abandonment. In just 20 years St. Louis City lost 70,000 housing units,” Laudermill explains. “But the decline doesn’t stop with St. Louis. Many of our older suburbs are also declining.

“For years our congregations have fought to stabilize and redevelop our communities. But every month more homes are boarded up, more local stores have closed. We’ve concluded that we cannot win the battle for our neighborhoods—the ‘inside game’—unless we fight and win the ‘outside game’ as well.”

This past February, the Metropolitan Congregations United extracted a pledge from St. Louis area legislators to back their anti-sprawl agenda. The immediate result: a new Legislative Interim Committee on Urban Growth. The hotly debated hearings this fall were headline news in the St. Louis media. Now the church coalition has crafted a bill to vest regional land-use planning power in a new commission under the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council, the region’s council of governments. The regional commission would have the power to draw an urban growth boundary for the Missouri side of Greater St. Louis.

The St. Louis coalition is merely the spearhead of an anti-sprawl crusade mounted by interfaith coalitions in Gary-Hammond, Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, and a dozen other Midwestern regions. The ef-

fort is coordinated by the Chicago-based Gamaliel Foundation. “Yesterday’s winners are today’s losers,” might be the theme of Cleveland’s First Suburbs Consortium. Barely two decades ago, inner suburbs such as Euclid, Lakewood, and Maple Heights boasted above average household incomes. Now they’ve sunk 10 to 20 percentage points below the regional average as higher-end households move out into new subdivisions in farther out Geauga, Lake, and Portage Counties.

“Many older suburbs are more vulnerable to sprawl-driven disinvestment than Cleveland itself. They’re left with an aging housing stock, older strip shopping centers and first-generation malls that find it hard to compete with new regional malls and new higher end housing developments,” explains Dr. Tom Bier, head of housing research at Cleveland State University.

“Many older suburbs generally don’t have the legacy of charming old neighborhoods, fine parks, museums, or big centers of high-quality jobs found in central business districts, hospitals, and universities historically located in central cities. East Cleveland, for example, is in much tougher shape than Cleveland itself,” Bier notes. New York, St. Louis, and Cleveland share one characteristic—highly-fragmented local government. With 72 municipal governments in York County, 105 local governments in metro Cleveland, and 134 local governments just in the Missouri portion of Greater St. Louis, purely voluntary cooperation won’t produce a meaningful regional plan. As York’s Tom Wolf says, changing the rules of the game for land-use planning is essential, and only state legislatures can change those rules.

Different Rules Used

Across the continent, business and civic delegations, state and local politicians, and professional planners are flocking to Port-

land to see the practical results of nearly 25 years of operating under different rules of the game. In 1973 the Oregon legislature enacted the Statewide Land Use Law. It required that urban growth boundaries be drawn around cities throughout the state. Portland Metro, the nation's only directly elected regional government, is responsible for land use and transportation planning in the 1.5 million-person metropolitan area.

Anticipating a 50 percent growth of population over the next 45 years, last November the Portland Metro Council voted 5-2 to add less than 8 square miles to Portland's existing 342-square-mile urban growth boundary. (The two dissenting voters believed the expansion was too little.) Opposition to greater expansion was led by many local officials like Mayor Gussie McRobert of suburban Gresham, as well as many environmentally concerned citizens.

Portland's urban growth boundary has succeeded in protecting farmland in Oregon's rich Willamette Valley. If the Metro Council sticks to its plans, over the next 45 years, only about four square miles of current farmland will be urbanized—as much farmland as is subdivided in the state of Michigan every 10 days!

A big bonus is that shutting down sub-

urban sprawl has turned new private investment back inward into existing neighborhoods and retail areas. Mayor McRoberts' Gresham, Milwaukie, Oregon City, and other older suburbs are booming. Property values in Albina, Portland's poorest neighborhood, have doubled in just five years. As Metro Councilor Ed Washington, whose District 6 includes Albina, explained his vote for the small boundary expansion, "We are having redevelopment in my district for the first time in 40 years; we don't want to lose it."

You cannot win the "inside game" without playing the "outside game" as well. That lesson is bringing many new recruits into the swelling ranks of growth management advocates across the country. ■

David Rusk is an international consultant to metropolitan regions. He served in the New Mexico legislature and as mayor of Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has a Phi Beta Kappa Degree in Economics from the University of California at Berkeley. His recent books include *Cities Without Suburbs* and *Baltimore Unbound*. He is a member of the *Citistates Group*.