

Debunking Friday the 13th: 13 Myths of Urban Sprawl

Written By: Wendell Cox

Published In: *News Releases*

Publication Date: June 12, 2003

Publisher: The Heartland Institute

Simply described as the geographical spreading out of urban areas, "urban sprawl" has become the stuff of public policy hysteria. A well-financed movement blames sprawl for everything from a lack of community spirit to obesity.

The movement has labeled itself "smart growth," but more descriptive--and more accurate--would be "anti-opportunity." It would force housing prices up, depriving millions of households, disproportionately minority, of home ownership. It would increase commuter travel times and reduce the number of jobs accessible, to the disproportionate harm of lower-income households, especially minorities.

The "smart growth" movement is a serious threat to the American Dream of home ownership, employment, and prosperity. Far more dangerous than black cats, ladders, and Friday the 13th, it jeopardizes the lives of millions of Americans. The 13 myths debunked below explain why.

Myth #1: Smart Growth Does Not Reduce Housing Affordability. Rationing raises prices. Smart growth measures ration land by forcing higher densities through urban growth boundaries, excessive impact fees, down-zoning and other restrictions on development. This drives prices higher, making housing less affordable.

Myth #2: Higher Densities Mean Less Traffic Congestion. National and international evidence clearly shows higher densities increase traffic congestion. Per-capita travel by automobile may decline a bit as densities rise, but not enough to keep traffic from getting a lot worse. Adding more of anything to a constricted space--putting more people into smaller urban areas--increases crowding.

Myth #3. Lower Densities Mean Higher Costs of Government. The smart-growth folks say we can "no longer afford" our low-density life style, claiming higher taxes and fees are caused by lower densities. But the data show lower-density cities have *lower* expenditure levels than higher-density cities. Moreover, cities with newer housing stock (second- and third-ring suburbs) have *lower* public expenditures than central cities and first-ring suburbs.

Myth #4: Higher Densities Mean Less Air Pollution. EPA research concludes air pollution emissions are higher where traffic speeds are slower, and emissions are higher where there is more stop-and-go traffic. Higher densities mean more traffic congestion, which in turn means slower traffic speeds and more stop-and-go travel. More tail pipes do not emit less pollution.

Myth #5: Central Cities Are the Victims of Suburban Growth. America's central cities have lost population, while suburbs have gained. It does not, however, follow that city losses occurred because of suburban growth.

Over the past half-century, America has become increasingly urban, as rural residents have moved to urban areas, where they have accounted for much of suburban growth. And cities have driven away many who would have stayed. "Cities" are hardly the victims here. City residents are: residents who felt they had no choice but to leave, and even more so those who have no choice but to stay, captive to governments qualifying as third world by their performance.

Myth #6: Rail Transit Reduces Traffic Congestion. There is no evidence--none--that new rail transit has materially reduced traffic congestion in any urban area. Building rail is justified principally by an irresistible urge to spend taxpayers' money. The higher the cost, railvangelists claim, the greater the benefit. Of course, the historic rail systems serving the pre-automobile cores of New York, Chicago, Paris, London, Tokyo, or Hong Kong are essential. But Sioux City, Iowa is not Hong Kong. Neither, for that matter, is Portland.

Myth #7: Rail Transit Is Needed for "Transportation Choice." From Cincinnati to Austin, transit spending advocates quickly abandon their baseless traffic congestion claims when challenged. They shift to what they call "transportation choice"--the idea that building rail transit provides choices for people. But choices for whom? At most, rail transit serves the small percentage of people who work downtown--the only destination to which transit provides what can be considered automobile-competitive service. To provide genuine transit choice for all would require annual expenditures that rival the gross income of any urban area.

Myth #8: We Can't Built Our Way Out of Congestion. This proceeds from the belief that new roadway capacity creates new traffic (the "induced traffic" effect)--suggesting a corollary that building more maternity wards would increase the birth rate. This leads to a further conclusion that, given enough road capacity, Americans will eventually spend 36 to 72 hours per day behind the wheel.

More rational minds at the Federal Highway Administration found little induced traffic effect, and even that withers away when travel time (rather than distance) is considered.

Myth #9: The Jobs-Housing Balance. "Planners," the smart growth movement claim, should design transportation and land use so as to minimize the distance between work and home. This may be the most bankrupt, and surely the most arrogant, of the smart growth myths. Herding cats would have at least as high a probability of success.

According to Census data, barely 20 percent of households consider proximity to work as the principal reason for selecting their home neighborhood. A jobs-housing

balance requires other balances as well--jobs-housing-education, jobs-housing-leisure, etc. Are "planners" really in the best position to decide?

Myth #10: Higher Densities Mean A Lower Cost of Living. Periodically, smart-growth studies emerge claiming household transportation expenditures are higher where densities are lower. But there is more to life than transportation. Housing and food expenditures are so much lower where densities are *lower*, that any transportation cost advantage for higher density areas is more than erased.

Myth #11: Europe Doesn't Sprawl. American urban planners by the thousands have made overseas pilgrimages, frequenting sidewalk cafes across the street from the Louvre in Paris, wondering why Phoenix or Boston looks so different. What they fail to realize is that not even Paris is like Paris.

The few square miles of central Paris in which the myopic rail-bound pilgrims sit is in the middle of 1,000 square miles of urban sprawl. The situation is similar throughout Western Europe, where virtually all growth in urban areas has been suburban growth, and where virtually all major cities have experienced population losses. Urban population densities have fallen faster in Europe and Canada than in the United States.

Myth #12: Urbanization is Consuming Agricultural Land. Until the Clinton Agriculture Department set them straight, this was one of the principal tenets of the smart-growth movement. In fact, some 400 years after Jamestown, as The Heritage Foundation's Ron Utt always reminds us, only 3 percent of the nation is urbanized: 97 percent of it is rural.

There is less agricultural land in the United States than there used to be, but not because it has been consumed by urbanization. Agriculture has become more productive. Since 1950, agricultural production has doubled, and more farmland than the area of Texas and Oklahoma combined has been returned to emptiness: open space.

Myth #13: Things are Going Our Way. Anti-sprawl types often project their personal experiences into universal truths.

Transit ridership increases on a minuscule base are reported as if they represented a major switch in travel behavior; going from 10 riders to 20 represents a touted "100 percent increase." Friends move into chic new urban developments, leading some to claim people "are forsaking suburbs" for the city.

Someone should teach these people to use simple reference books, like *The World Almanac*, which can be easily obtained at the nearest big box store.