The Urban Sprawl Debate: *Myths, Realities and Hidden Agendas*

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EVERYONE IS AGAINST urban sprawl. Judging by recent attention in professional journals and the popular media, the issue is high on political agendas. Unfortunately, few agree on what the term means, and thus discussions of its causes, consequences and potential solutions are at best confused, and at worst counterproductive.

To some observers, sprawl applies to any extension of the suburban margin; to others it is synonymous with the spread of development onto sensitive greenlands and agricultural soils, increases in highway congestion, or the proliferation of new subdivisions of homogeneous and low-density, single-family housing. The traditional definition of sprawl, however, is much more specific: it refers to suburban development that is "haphazard, disorganized, poorly serviced, and largely unplanned." By this rather strict standard, urban Canada has relatively little sprawl. Instead, the larger urban regions, notably Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, exhibit extremely rapid growth, most of which inevitably occurs on the outer suburban margin, typically at lower densities. Does such growth constitute sprawl? Does suburbia's negative image reflect poor planning or media hype?

In the following attempt to clarify the underlying elements of this debate, I pay particular attention to the current expression of that debate in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), to the merits of tighter regulation of residential uses and densities, and to the implicit agendas that have shaped the debate.

On density, suburbanization and intensification

What is myth and what reality with respect to urban densities and suburbanization? It may surprise some readers to learn that the densities of new residential developments in Toronto's outer suburbs are, on average, the highest on the continent. These densities have also been increasing over the last two decades because of market demand and the rising price of land, and despite higher standards for public space and servicing. With a few exceptions, most new suburban single-family housing features thirty- to forty-foot lot frontages, contrasting sharply with the fifty- to 100-foot frontages typical of the 1950s and 1960s.

The media also frequently gives the impression that all new housing is built in the new suburbs. In fact, many cities, particularly Toronto and Vancouver, have been remarkably successful at encouraging high proportions of new construction as residential in-fill within the existing urban envelope. That proportion is now estimated at between 20 and 25 per cent of all housing starts in the GTA, compared to less than 10 per cent in most U.S. metropolitan areas.

Would further intensification significantly reduce the extent and impact of suburban expansion? Of course, we could do more to increase residential densities by facilitating in-fill and reusing older brownfield sites. Providing physical infrastructure for housing on streets with thirty-foot lots is less expensive per dwelling unit than it is for streets with sixty-foot lots.[1] Yet these costs are a relatively small proportion of the costs of new housing and services, particularly in rapidly growing regions. Other local costs, such as those for schools, open space and community facilities, are essentially fixed. The largest and most variable costs are on the regional scale: in the arrangement of uses, the rapid growth of non-residential uses, and specifically in the disjuncture between residential and commercial-industrial activities.

An additional source of confusion, over and above the question of spatial scale, involves the measurement of density. Typically, densities are calculated using simple population numbers as the numerator in the density ratio. This ignores, among other factors, the impact of demographic change, as well as revisions in living arrangements on suburban forms in general and density ratios in particular. Average household size has declined by over 35 per cent since 1961, which translates into a requirement for 35 per cent more dwelling units to house the same total population. Smaller households usually result in a thinning of the population of all neighbourhoods, old and new, at least those with a fixed housing stock. Nevertheless, smaller lot sizes and a wider mix of dwelling types have combined to reverse past declines in population density. In parallel, densities of the residential built environment (e.g., dwelling units and capital investment) have increased even faster in most new suburban areas.

Even so, anti-sprawl advocates argue that we could shift many of these new units to brownfield sites. Is this realistic? There is certainly considerable potential for further residential intensification, but there are also real limits to the capacity of the in-fill process, and existing built-up areas, to absorb new growth in the volume required. The in-fill process is administratively complicated, politically sensitive, subject to liability risks, regulatory barriers and widespread "NIMBYism," and is constrained in the longer term by limited effective demand and high costs.

Even in an ideal world, where all of the various stakeholders, including conservative ratepayer groups, agreed with the objective of intensification, it would be a major achievement to maintain the exist-

ing proportion of brownfield construction, let alone increase that proportion to 40 or 50 per cent over the next decade, as is widely proposed. This suggests that most units will have to be built in the new suburbs on formerly rural lands. This is not sprawl, by conventional definition, but rather demand-driven suburbanization. It can be improved, but it cannot be wished away.

What, then, is the problem?

Given that low-density unplanned residential sprawl is not widespread, if suburban growth is as inevitable as expected population growth suggests, what is the primary problem? Three issues seem to be more important. One is the challenge, indeed the obligation, to provide sufficient space to accommodate anticipated growth while minimizing its negative side effects. Rapid growth does tend to overwhelm the ability of municipalities to plan and deliver appropriate social services (schools, for example) and to finance new infrastructure (such as sewers, roads, and transit). It also adds to feelings of unease among residents that their current life styles and living conditions are at risk.

One common response to this sense of risk, and to the negative images of sprawl, is to recommend slower population growth. But how? Growth in the Toronto region is driven overwhelmingly by immigration (75 per cent), and secondarily by natural increase (25 per cent), not by domestic in-migrants. Thus, reducing the overall growth rate is largely a question of changing immigration policies, which is beyond local control. In the absence of lower immigration levels, governments must plan for anticipated levels of growth in ways that are efficient, equitable, and sensitive to social and environmental issues. The paranoia regarding sprawl tends to divert attention from addressing these genuine concerns.

Second, the main contributors to low-density suburban development are not residential uses but non-residential activities (commercial, industrial, distributional uses, hobby farms, golf courses, and so forth). While suburban residential (net) densities have been increasing in most areas, measured both in population and dwelling units, the densities of other users of urban space, including public-sector uses, have been decreasing. Surprisingly, no one seems to notice. Why, we might ask, is so little attention paid to the increasing rates of land consumption among non-residential uses? Is it because these uses provide play space for the well-to-do, or generate substantial tax revenues for cash-starved local governments?

The third problem is lack of regional coordination. The overwhelming source of our suburban problems is not residential sprawl but the weakness of regional integration of transportation, infrastructure provision and land use, and specifically of housing and extensive non-residential uses. There are, for instance, few examples in Toronto's outer suburbs of employment and living spaces being carefully coordinated, or of new developments being closely linked either to the GO system or to local transit.

Frequent calls to increase residential densities still further, as reflected (incorrectly it seems) in the design of "new urbanism" communities, serve no useful purpose if the contribution of commercial-industrial uses and the issue of coordination are not addressed. Indeed, such policies may aggravate certain problems (affordability and access to jobs, for example), especially if these policies are implemented in stark isolation from other actions.

Why the anti-sprawl rhetoric? Hidden agendas?

Why is the confusion over density and the nature of sprawl so entrenched in the media and in the public mind? One explanation is that the current anti-sprawl rhetoric serves as a protective "all-reason" umbrella under which special-interest groups and politicians can cluster in order to advance their own political agendas, and in so doing shield themselves from potential criticism over those agendas. Such agendas, however rational for individuals, are often unrelated to broader issues of the form and quality of suburban development. Since no one openly advocates sprawl as such, taking a position against sprawl is safe. Residential uses are also the largest consumer of suburban land and thus represent an easy target. For politicians, an anti-sprawl posture often offers the benefit of appearing concerned for the quality of urban life while not having to make hard choices on other problems.

For special interest groups on the urban fringe, the anti-sprawl umbrella serves a variety of other purposes. For some, it is a means of preserving semi-rural habitats. For individuals, such a stance may be understandable; in a collective sense, however, it is inequitable and socially exclusionary. Those residents generally do not pay the full costs of their choice of location, and their actions implicitly limit the rights of others, including the next generation, to live there. For others, sprawl represents an environmental crusade with undeniably valid objectives, but one which is often one-dimensional and whose remedial costs are seldom specified. Typically, those costs are also unevenly distributed across communities and social classes. Their anti-sprawl rhetoric may also reflect their concerns over the increasing social and ethno-cultural diversity of the suburbs.

What might be done?

An initial step in clarifying the issues would be to separate myth from reality. First, as a precondition for action, we must accept the simple fact that suburban growth is likely to continue as long as populations continue to grow and a significant proportion of households express a desire for single-family housing. This is not an excuse for suburbanization, but rather a statement that lamenting sprawl is not a recipe for effective action.

Our challenge is to design objectives that more accurately reflect the development trajectory of large and growing urban regions. These should not be pie-in-the-sky objectives or pious statements against sprawl, which are comforting to some but largely useless as guidelines for policy decisions. Nor should they be objectives that benefit one special-interest use or user in isolation from, or at the expense of, the needs of others. Instead, they should provide concrete goals and targets that recognize the difficult trade-offs involved in satisfying the often conflicting demands for economic spaces and environmental conservation. They should also recognize the uneven costs and benefits that flow from those decisions, and identify the needs of the next generation for affordable housing and living space. The fourth challenge is to address the excessive use of space by non-residential uses, and to insist that such activities pay the true spillover costs of their developments.

Misleading positions

Residential density, then, is not the crucial question (although it is obviously relevant) in planning new suburban areas. Rather, the issues are the mix of uses, declining non-residential densities, and the lack of strategic coordination between housing and other land uses in ways that facilitate service provision, conservation and transit use. Despite the anti-sprawl rhetoric, tighter restrictions on residential uses alone are not the answer. These will only force up the price of land and housing, and thus increase the affordability problems facing current renters and the next generation of homeowners, as Portland's experience has demonstrated. The argument here is simple: much of the anti-sprawl rhetoric focused on residential uses and densities in isolation is misdirected, counter-productive and socially

inequitable. It is underpinned by political and social agendas that often have little or nothing to do with the density or quality of suburban spaces. Politicians currently in power owe it to the next generation to avoid increasing prices by restricting suburban housing based on some fuzzy concept of sprawl, while ignoring non-residential uses and public infrastructure standards.

What we can do is to address directly the social, inter-generational and environmental costs of the current form and density of development, particularly those imposed by commercial-industrial and other non-residential uses. Planners should insist that those uses are linked, wherever possible, to both regional and local transit systems. Further, governments should remove tax inequities and reduce or eliminate subsidies that discourage the efficient use of land—especially for low-density commercial, industrial and transportation uses. Specifically, these initiatives require the creation of a regional authority that has, first, the resources and responsibility to influence all forms of suburban uses, and second, the mandate to shape the linkages between such uses, especially those that cross municipal boundaries.

Some might argue that the battle for a more rational, functionally integrated, eco- and transit-friendly suburban form was lost decades ago; that the mould is cast, and everyone must live with the results and their social costs. I disagree. Given the massive growth anticipated in the Toronto region over the next twenty years, we still have the opportunity to remake the suburban landscape, and to integrate the new with the old. It will, however, take effective leadership, clear visions, and strategic investments.

Sources

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Summary

This paper argues that the intense anti-sprawl rhetoric focused on suburban residential growth, especially in Toronto, is misplaced, and is driven largely by implicit agendas other than the effective management of urban development. The paper makes three points. First, by conventional definitions we have little sprawl, but rather extremely rapid population growth, which we have a collective obligation to accommodate. Second, the principal source of decreasing suburban densities is not the residential sector but low-density, non-residential uses. Residential densities, in contrast, have been increasing, especially dwelling-unit density. Third, the other major problems are the lack of coordination between residential and non-residential activities, and the weak integration of both with transit provision.

Sommaire

Le discours alarmiste concernant l'expansion des banlieues, particulièrement dans la région de Toronto, est le résultat de préoccupations ambiguës plutôt que d'un souci d'efficacité en gestion urbaine. Tout d'abord, dans le sens strict, il s'agit d'une croissance très rapide de la population, que la collectivité doit assumer, plutôt que d'une expansion tentaculaire urbaine. Ensuite, le secteur résidentiel n'est pas un facteur d'une suburbanisation décroissante autant qu'une utilisation non résidentielle, à faible densité, des espaces disponibles. La densité des secteurs résidentiels, plus particulièrement des unités résidentielles, a pour sa part augmenté. Enfin, la faible intégration des activités résidentielles et non résidentielles et les lacunes en ce qui concerne le transport urbain représentent des obstacles majeurs.

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Note

1 See Pamela Blais, *Inching Toward Sustainability: The Evolving Structure of the GTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto and Metropole Consultants, 2000).