

Smart Growth: Retarding the Quality of Life

Americans have moved to the suburbs: Over the past 50 years, America's suburbs have grown to contain most urban residents. As the nation has become more affluent, people have chosen to live in single family dwellings on individual lots and have also obtained automobiles to provide unprecedented mobility.

The air is cleaner, but road expansion has lagged behind population growth: As population has continued to grow, the amount of new roadway constructed has fallen far short of the rise in automobile use. As a result, American urban areas are experiencing increased traffic congestion. At the same time, strategies to reduce air pollution have been successful, and the air in American urban areas is cleaner than it has been for years (in some cases more than a century).

A strong anti-suburban movement has developed. As development has continued, a powerful movement (including the Sierra Club and many urban planners) has arisen to oppose what they term as "urban sprawl." The low density suburbanization of US urban areas is perceived by the anti-sprawl movement as inefficiently using land, by consuming open space and valuable agricultural land. The anti-sprawl movement believes that suburbanization has resulted in an inappropriate amount of automobile use and highway construction and favors public transit and walking as alternatives. Moreover, they blame suburbanization for the decline of the nation's central cities.

The anti-sprawl movement suggests so-called "smart growth:" The anti-sprawl movement has embraced a set of policy initiatives called "smart growth." In general, smart growth would increase urban population densities, especially in particular corridors served by rail transit. Development would be corralled within urban growth boundaries or growth areas. There would be little or no highway construction, replaced instead by construction of urban rail systems. Attempts would be made to steer development toward patterns that would reduce home to work travel distances, making transit and walking more feasible. Development would be governed by strong regional or state land use plans. The anti-sprawl movement believes these policies will improve the quality of life, while reducing traffic congestion and air pollution.

The anti-sprawl diagnosis is flawed: The anti-sprawl movement, however, sees problems that simply do not exist.

- **Urbanization does not threaten agricultural land:** Since 1950, urban areas of more than 1,000,000 have consumed an amount of new land equal to barely 1/10 the area taken out of agricultural production. Agricultural land has been taken out of production as a result of improving agricultural productivity. Moreover, the US Department of Agriculture has indicated that urbanization *does not* pose a threat to agricultural production.
- **Most suburban growth is not from the cities:** While the nation's central cities have declined, only 15 percent of suburban growth has come from the cities. The 2000 Census indicates that a number of older central cities have begun to grow again. Most suburban growth is the result of simple population gain and the movement of people from rural to suburban areas. The same process is occurring throughout affluent nations, from Europe to Asia and Australia. In these nations, virtually all urban growth in recent decades has been suburban. Both US and foreign central cities have lost population.

Since 1950 Copenhagen has lost 40% of its population and Paris 25%.

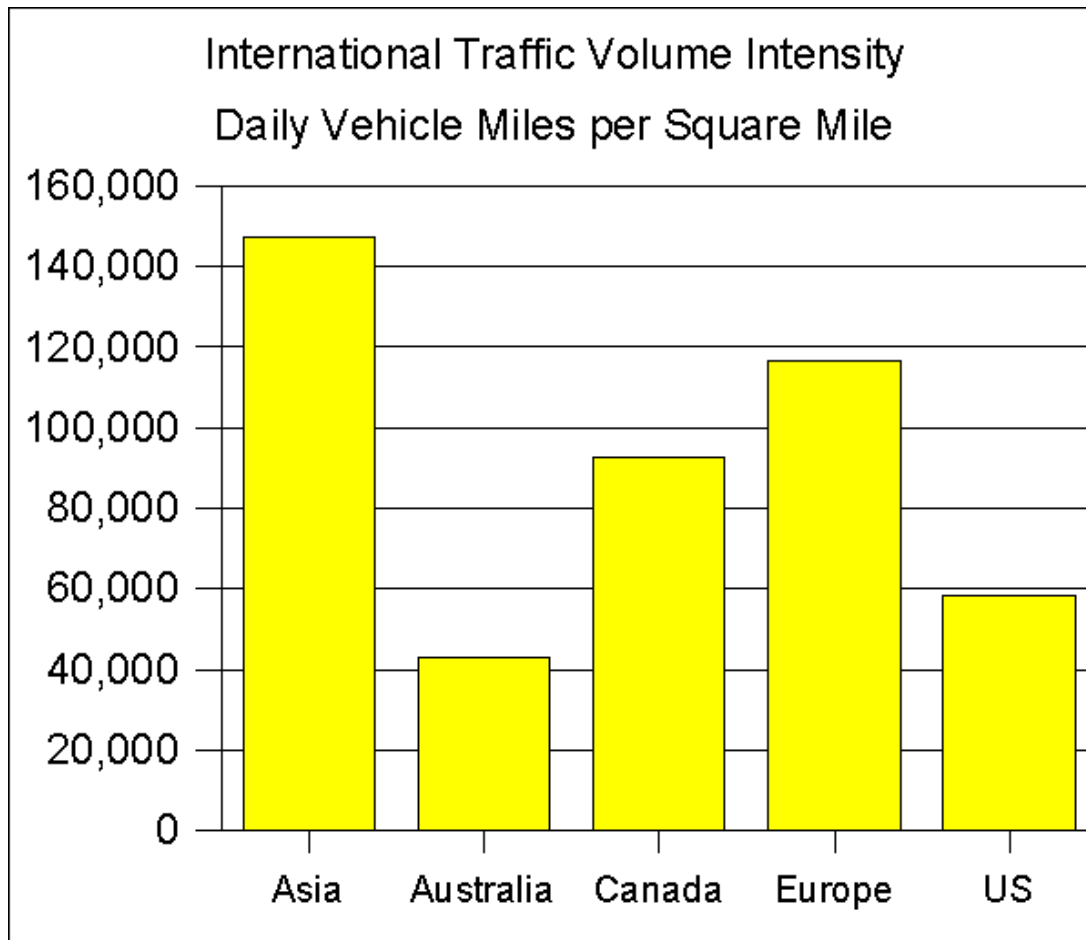
- **"Walkable" cities are an illusion:** Urban areas cannot practically be redesigned to significantly increase transit and walking. Whether in America or Europe, the vast majority of destinations are reasonably accessible only by automobile. Transit can be an effective alternative to the automobile only to dense core areas, such as the nation's largest downtowns.
- **Open space is expanding more rapidly than urbanization:** Large expanses of land are already protected as open space. All of the nation's urban development, in small towns and major metropolitan areas, accounts for only 3.5 percent percent of land (excluding Alaska). From 1949 to 1997, approximately 1.5 acres of rural parks have been established for each acre of new urbanization.

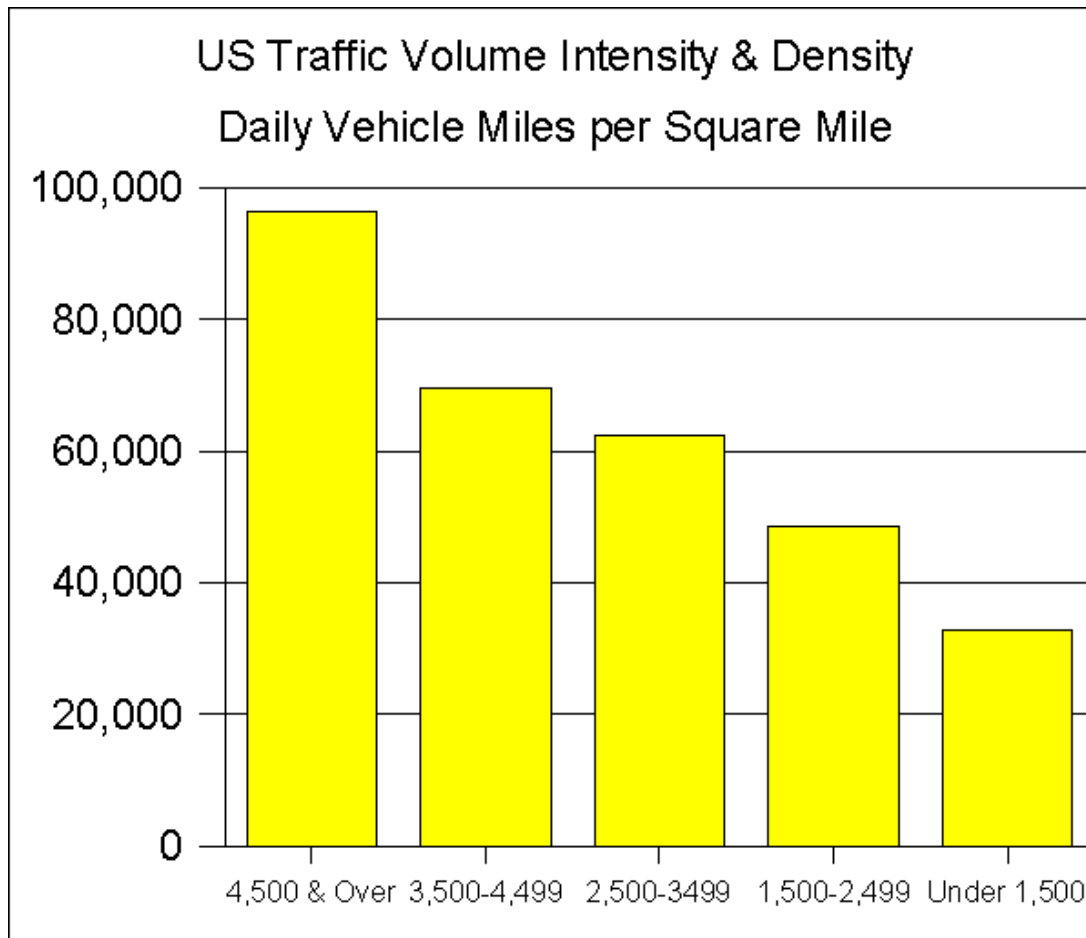
Smart growth would intensify the very problems it is supposed to solve. Smart growth promises more traffic congestion, air pollution and higher housing costs.

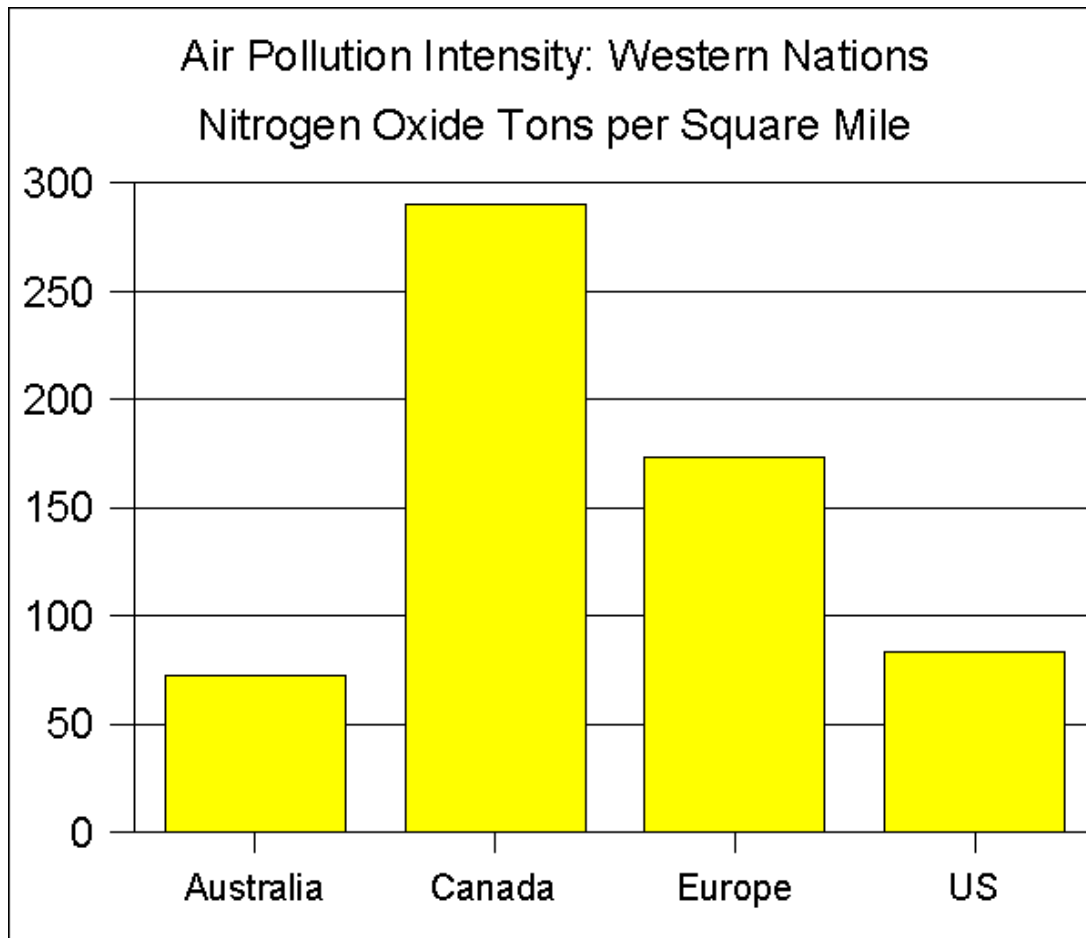
- **Smart growth increases traffic intensity:** The higher densities that would be the result of smart growth would increase traffic congestion. International and US evidence strongly shows that higher population densities are associated with greater traffic congestion (charts). ⁽¹⁾
- **Smart growth increases air pollution intensity:** Automobile produced air pollution tends to be reduced as traffic flows faster and more freely. International and US experience shows that the slower, more stop-and-go traffic smart growth would increase air pollution (charts).
- **Smart growth reduces housing affordability:** Urban growth boundaries (growth areas) ration land for development. As with any commodity (such as gasoline), rationing of land drives up housing prices. For example, where smart growth policies have been most comprehensively adopted, Portland, Oregon, housing affordability has declined considerably more than in any other major metropolitan area (chart). ⁽²⁾ This makes it difficult for low income and many minority citizens to purchase their own homes. The now discontinued "red-lining" that denied home ownership to minorities is being replaced with "green-lining," whereby smart growth policies based upon psuedo-environmental concerns deny home ownership to low income households. Smart growth replaces the exclusionary zoning that discouraged affordable housing with exclusionary regional planning.

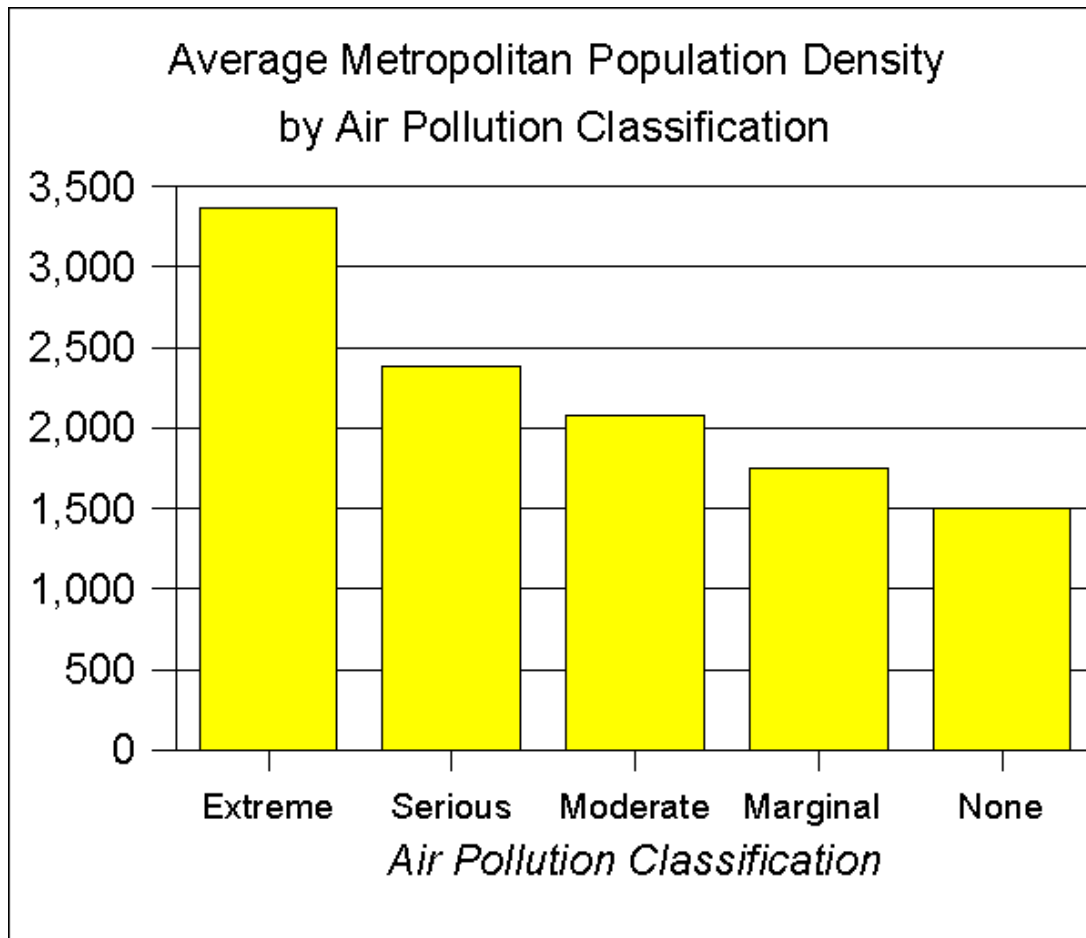
From Social Engineering to Freedom: The smart growth movement has identified no problem of sufficient magnitude to justify its draconian proposals.

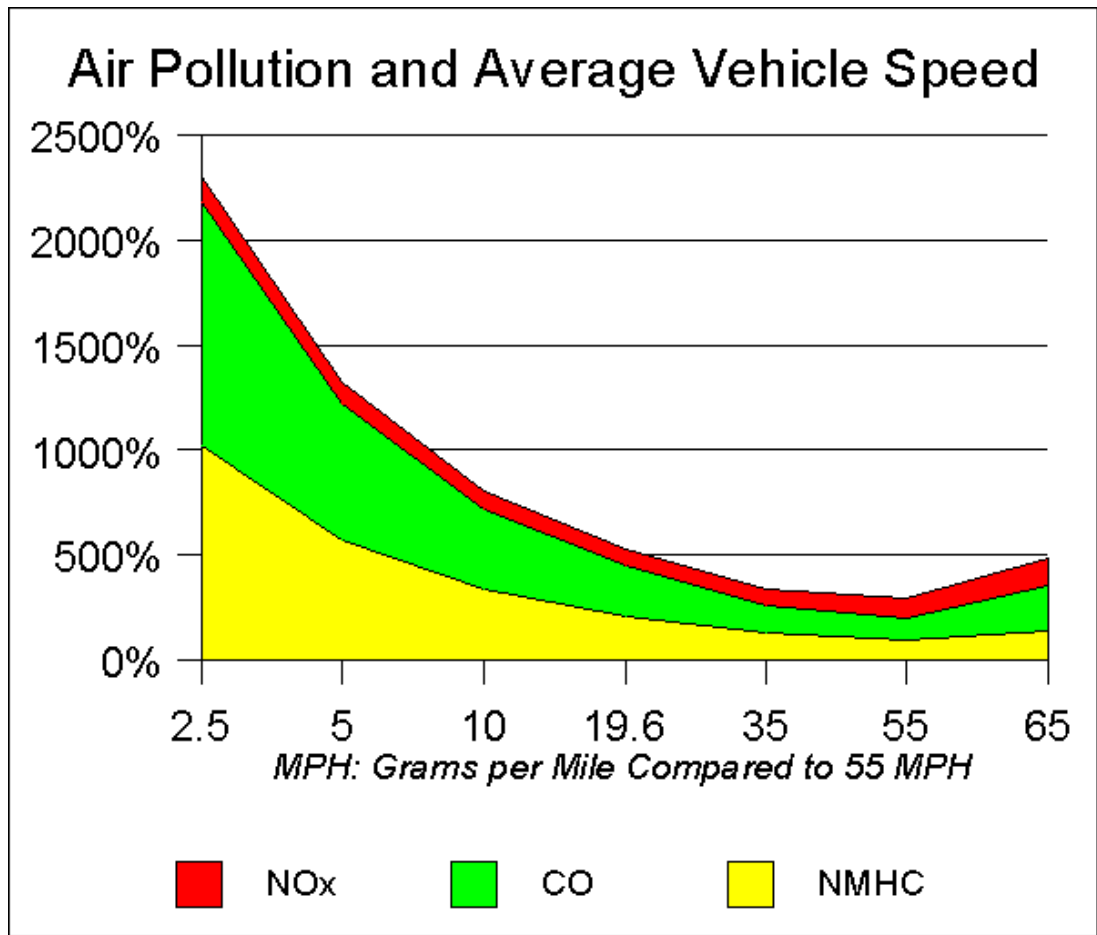
- **Sufficient road capacity should be provided to accommodate growth:** As urban areas continue to expand in response to population growth and greater affluence, sufficient street and highway capacity should be provided, so that traffic congestion and air pollution are minimized. The role of urban planning is not evangelization or social engineering, it is providing for the infrastructure required by the people.
- **People should be allowed to live and work where and how they like:** As the "Lone Mountain Compact" ⁽³⁾ puts it, *absent a material threat to others or the community, people should be allowed to live and work where and how they like*

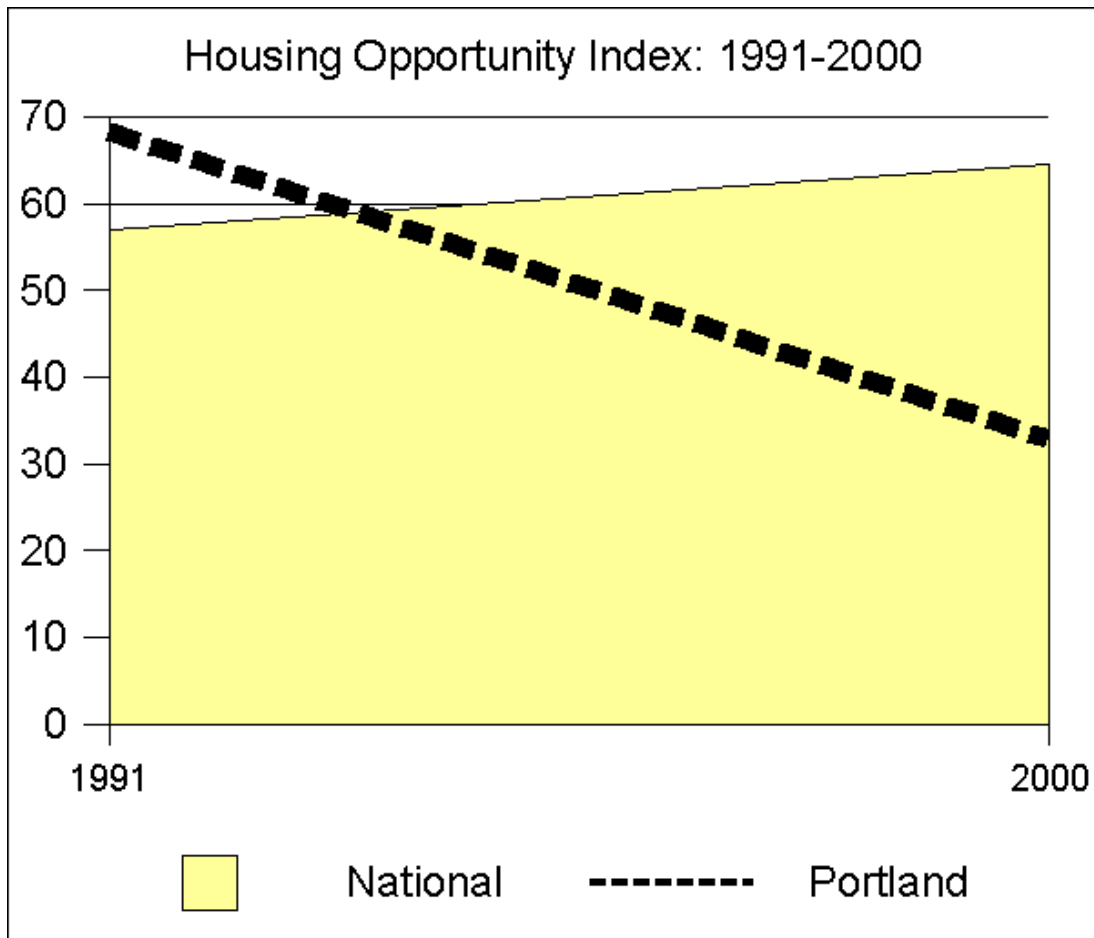












Notes

1. Internet: <http://www.i2i.org/SuptDocs/Enviro/AirPollutionSmartGrowth.htm>
2. Internet: <http://www.i2i.org/SuptDocs/Enviro/HousingAffordability.htm>
3. Internet: <http://www.demographia.com/db-lonemtnpress.htm>

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Demographia is "pro-choice" with respect to urban development.
People should have the freedom to live and work where and how they like.

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