

Sprawl City

Race, Politics, and
Planning in Atlanta

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Introduction: Anatomy of Sprawl

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Sprawl is a fact of life in urban America. Whether we like it or not, it is real and must be addressed with the urgency that the problem demands. Ask 10 people to define sprawl, and you will probably get 10 different definitions. Sprawl is random unplanned growth characterized by inadequate accessibility to essential land uses such as housing, jobs, and public services like schools, hospitals, and mass transit. Two decades of studies from all parts of the nation reveal that sprawl raises taxes. Low-density settlement sprawl increases the costs of maintaining roads, streets, sewers, water supplies, storm drains, and schools.¹

Sprawl is not new. Why should we be alarmed about sprawl? Is sprawl an unavoidable by-product of growth and a booming economy? It is quite clear that growth and sprawl are not synonymous. Nevertheless, suburban sprawl has been the dominant growth pattern for nearly all metropolitan areas in the United States for the past five decades.² Historically, the decentralization of employment centers has had a major role in shaping metropolitan growth patterns.

Sprawl has pushed housing, population, and jobs deeper into the suburbs. Today, over 60 percent of Americans live in suburbs. Suburbs are expected to account for 80 percent of future metropolitan growth if current trends hold. Sprawl development (highways, strip centers, giant shopping malls, subdivisions) is threatening the "exurbs," rural areas, and forests. Urban sprawl is consuming land faster than population is growing in many cities across the country. In order to take advantage of new suburban housing and jobs, one must have access to an automobile because public transit is usually inadequate or nonexistent.

Typically, strip malls, low-density residential housing subdivisions, and other isolated, scattered developments dot the landscape without any rhyme or reason. In the end, all Americans pay for sprawl with increased health and safety risks, worsening air and water pollution, urban decline, disappearing farmland and wildlife habitat, racial polarization, city/suburban disparities in public education, lack of affordable housing, and the erosion of community.³

The housing boom of the 1990s accelerated sprawl and changed the landscape of the nation's metropolitan areas. Low interest rates fueled this housing boom and offered opportunities for millions of families to realize the American Dream. Home ownership rates increased for all Americans. From 1993 to 1997, the number of home loans made to whites and blacks increased by 62 percent. Home loans jumped 58 percent for Hispanics, 29 percent for Asians, and 25 percent for Native Americans during this same period.⁴

An increasing number of Americans are challenging the wisdom of sprawl-driven development that threatens quality of life. Sprawl has "literally sucked the population, jobs, investment capital, and tax base from the urban core."⁵ America's cities have become forgotten places, only to get attention after conditions reach some crisis state or when human frustration spills over into major uprisings or riots.

From North to South and East to West, too many of our central cities are in crisis. Their inhabitants are at risk from deteriorating housing, poverty, economic abandonment, and infrastructure decline. The infrastructure in American cities is crumbling at the seams. The physical infrastructure includes such things as roads and bridges, housing stock, schools, public buildings, parks and recreational facilities, public transit, water supply, wastewater treatment, and waste disposal systems.

Taken as a whole, infrastructure decline has a negative impact on the well-being and quality of life for everyone, not just individuals who live in the city. Poor infrastructure conditions in urban areas are a result of a host of factors including the distribution of wealth, uneven development, racial and economic discrimination, redlining, housing and real estate practices, location decisions of industry, differential enforcement of land-use regulations, and unrestrained suburban growth.

The Role of Government

Decades of federal government policies played a key role in the development of spatially differentiated metropolitan areas where African Americans and other people of color are segregated from whites and the poor from more affluent citizens. Collectively, federal policies amounted to a "national suburban policy" that reshaped urban American in the postwar decades.⁶

Discrimination also played an important role in the spatial sorting of neighborhoods by race and income. Federal mortgage subsidies facilitated white movement out of the cities, at the same time that federal restrictions made lending difficult to African Americans desiring to move to the suburbs. Such policies fueled the white exodus to the suburbs and accelerated the abandonment of central cities.

Government policies buttressed and tax dollars subsidized metropolitan decentralization through new roads and highways at the expense of public transit.⁷ Many highway construction projects often cut paths through people of color neighborhoods, physically isolating residents from their institutions and disrupting once stable communities.⁸ African Americans and Latino Americans are regularly displaced by highways, convention centers, sports arenas, and a host of downtown development projects. Most of those displaced are forced into other segregated areas with little say in the removal process.

Tax subsidies made it possible for new suburban employment centers to become dominant outside of central cities and to pull middle-income workers and homeowners from the urban core.⁹ Tax subsidies underwrite suburban homeowners at the rate of \$50 to \$90 billion a year, making it the largest and most expensive housing subsidy program in the country.¹⁰ However, not all groups have benefited from these housing subsidies. Discrimination plays a major role in restricting African Americans and other people of color to housing choices and options largely in central cities.

Discrimination costs African Americans and other people of color billions of dollars in lost wealth.¹¹ Housing discrimination alone costs African Americans and Latinos an estimated \$3 billion and \$2 billion per year, respectively.¹² Discrimination has become more sophisticated, subtle, and in many cases acceptable in suburban communities.¹³ Congress passed the Fair Housing Act in 1968 to address housing discrimination. The act was amended in 1988. Over five decades of federal housing policies, programs, and legislative mandates have not eliminated the institutional barriers to free choice.

Many urban neighborhoods have been strangled by the lack of long-term financing as a direct result of disinvestment and redlining practices by banks, savings and loans, mortgage firms, and insurance companies.¹⁴ The federal government recognized this problem when it passed the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) in 1977. The CRA requires banks and thrifts to lend within the areas where their depositors live. The CRA has been used in conjunction with the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, a law that requires banks and thrifts to disclose their mortgage lending by census tracts.

All communities are not created equal. Apartheid-type employment, housing, development, and transportation policies have resulted in limited

mobility, reduced neighborhood options, decreased residential choices, and diminished job opportunities for African Americans and other people of color who are concentrated in cities. American cities continue to be racially separate and unequal. Residential apartheid is the dominant housing pattern for most African Americans—the most racially segregated group in America.¹⁵

Residential apartheid did not result from some impersonal super-structural process. It is part of the national heritage.¹⁶ Some three decades ago, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders implicated white racism in creating and maintaining the black ghetto and the drift toward two “separate and unequal societies.”¹⁷ These same conditions exist today.¹⁸ The black ghetto, for example, is kept isolated and contained from the larger white society through well-defined institutional practices, private actions, and government policies.¹⁹

People of color in the housing market are routinely offered inferior products, charged higher fees, provided less counseling assistance, and treated less favorably than their white counterparts. A national study of some 3,800 test audits in two dozen metropolitan areas found that 53 percent of black testers seeking to rent apartments faced discrimination, while 59 percent of black testers seeking to buy homes faced discrimination by real estate sales people.²⁰ Discrimination is alive and well in the United States.

The drift toward racially segmented metropolitan areas is most pronounced in public education. Author Myron Orfield contends that “schools are the first victims and the most powerful perpetrator of metropolitan polarization.”²¹ Most urban public schools are more segregated today than they were in the 1970s. Nationally, over a third of black children attend schools where the enrollment is 90 percent to 100 percent minority.²² Race played a big part in white middle-class flight from cities and urban school districts.

Huge disparities exist between affluent suburban schools and their poor inner-city counterparts. These disparities are buttressed by the archaic school financing method: namely, property taxes. Our current taxing system encourages speculation, creates artificial land scarcity, rewards infrastructure abandonment, fosters scattered development, and promotes urban sprawl.²³ Sprawl development has now forced many suburban school districts to come face-to-face with overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure problems—problems long associated with cities.

Most of the literature on race and the city focuses on the underclass and the underlying theoretical underpinning akin to a type of market-centered economics.²⁴ Racial issues are reduced to economic issues. But race must be treated as an independent variable. The modern American city has its roots in racism.²⁵ For example, insurance companies routinely used race as a fac-

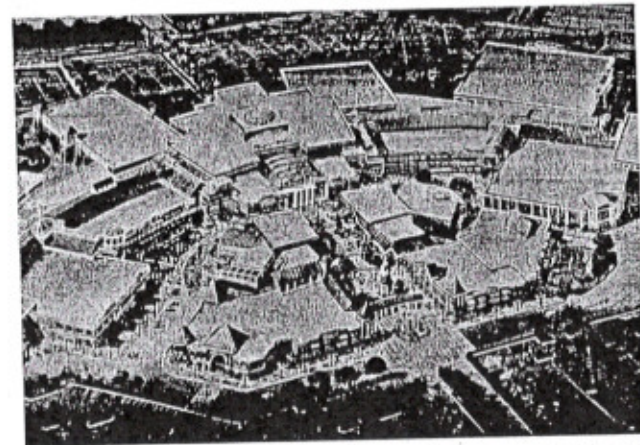
tor in appraising and underwriting property. Racial redlining results in homeowners in mostly black urban neighborhoods paying higher insurance premiums than their white suburban counterparts.²⁶ This scenario holds true even when the property loss ratios are greater in the suburbs.

Uneven Development and Widening Disparities

Racial segregation in housing, as well as in schools and jobs, is fundamental to the geography of the modern American city.²⁷ Spatial mobility and social mobility are interrelated. Sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton contend that “segregation constitutes a powerful impediment to black socioeconomic progress.”²⁸ Racial segregation results from continuing discrimination.²⁹

In the 1980s and 1990s, jobs moved away from the central city to the suburbs and outlying areas. Few attempts have been made by the government to reverse job flight and subsequent decline of urban centers. Poverty is becoming more concentrated in core inner-city neighborhoods where jobs are scarce.³⁰ Government-backed urban enterprise zones, special taxing districts, and economic investment incentives have amounted to more talk than action. Nevertheless, government still has an important role to play in rebuilding our cities.

Numerous examples abound where government actors have targeted regions for infrastructure improvements and amenities such as water irrigation systems, ship channels, road and bridge projects, mass transit systems, and even shopping malls. For example, the Georgia Department of



The 1.7 million square foot Mall of Georgia covers 100 acres and has parking spaces for 8,600 cars.

Transportation committed \$46 million in taxpayer money to make Gwinnett County's Mall of Georgia possible.³¹ The 1.7 million square foot, 100-acre mall, located in Atlanta's northern suburbs, has parking spaces for 8,600 cars. The giant mall opened in the fall of 1999 and is expected to generate nearly \$5 million a year in property taxes and \$6 million in sales taxes.³²

Clearly, economic development policies flow from forces of production and are often dominated and subsidized by federal, state, and local government actors. The absence of a coherent urban agenda in the 1990s allowed cities to become "invisible" places. The quality of life for millions of urban Americans is worse today than it was during the turbulent 1960s. A 1999 *USA Today* survey of experts singled out "wealth disparity" as the biggest issue in cities' development for the next 50 years.³³ The growing economic disparity between racial/ethnic groups has a direct correlation to institutional barriers in housing, lending, employment, education, health, and transportation. Even though the United States made significant gains in reducing poverty and wealth disparities during the 1960s, few substantial gains were made in the 1990s.

The chances of poor families escaping poverty have dropped since the 1970s. This fact is particularly distressing because of the alarming number of children now living in poverty. Today, one out of every four children under the age of six in the United States lives beneath the poverty level. Fifty-eight percent of the children in poverty are children of color. Among this group, African American children are 4 times more likely than white children to be poor; Latino children are 3.5 times and other racial/ethnic minority children are 2 times more likely than white children to be poor.

Besides acting to entrap a disproportionate number of people of color in poverty, institutional barriers compound the risks of life. There remain significant inequities for access to proper health care. African Americans, for example, are twice as likely as white Americans to be without a regular source of health care other than a health clinic or hospital emergency room. Hospitals and clinics in many inner-city neighborhoods are typically overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded.³⁴

Changing demographic trends point to a more diverse multiracial and multiethnic society. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the African American population will increase from 11.7 percent of the U.S. total in 1980 to 15 percent in 2020. By the same year, African Americans will be nearly one of five children of school age and one of six adults of prime working age. At the same time, immigration trends are also increasing the numbers and proportions of Asians and Latinos in the U.S. population. Much of this population is concentrated in the urban core of the nation's large metropolitan regions.

By the year 2020, the racial and ethnic population in the United States will

have more than doubled, to 115 million. By the middle of the twenty-first century, whites will no longer constitute the majority population in the United States.³⁵ Increasingly, the well-being of the American society will be more and more dependent upon the vitality and productivity of people of color in metropolitan areas. Society at large wins when the infrastructure in cities, suburbs, and rural areas is kept healthy, vibrant, and safe.

The "New Capital" of Sprawl

Communities are now questioning the costs and benefits of suburban sprawl. They are beginning to tackle the problems associated with urban decline and unregulated growth in the suburbs, rural areas, farmlands, and "greenfields."³⁶ Some urban planners, business leaders, and homeowners are now challenging the growth model that created sprawl. The Atlanta metropolitan region has become the "epicenter of the nation's struggle with road congestion, air pollution, and overdevelopment."³⁷ Atlanta is considered the "capital" of the New South.³⁸ It is also the "new poster child" for sprawl.

Atlanta is basically flat and landlocked, with no major bodies of water or mountains to constrain outward growth. The city has come a long way since its humble beginning as an Indian village called Standing Peachtree, which was located at the confluence of Peachtree Creek and the Chattahoochee



Atlanta is the epicenter of a struggle to arrest traffic congestion, air pollution, and overdevelopment.

River.³⁹ Atlanta was burned to the ground by Union forces in 1864. By the 1880s, city officials were successful in promoting Atlanta as the "Gateway to the South." By 1895, Atlanta was celebrating its rebirth as the "Capital of the New South."⁴⁰

A century later, Atlanta and its suburban neighbors are still capitalizing on the region's "growth machine" imagery. Atlanta became the "Mecca" of the Southeast.⁴¹ It emerged as the commercial and financial center of the southeastern United States. The Atlanta region is the center for federal operations as well as the center of communications and transportation. From its Atlanta home base, CNN is beamed around the world. It is hard to fly south without passing through Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport, the busiest airport in the nation.

Metropolitan Atlanta has experienced constant growth since the 1900s. The region has grown in population at an annual rate of 2.9 percent since 1950. The 1960s were considered the boom years in which Atlanta established its regional dominance. The 1970s and 1980s were characterized as a time during which the city became increasingly black. Since 1960, Atlanta has experienced a steady decrease in its share of the metropolitan region's population.

Metropolitan Atlanta continued to experience record growth in the 1990s. An average of 69,100 people moved into the metropolitan area each year during the 1990s, compared to 61,788 in the 1980s.⁴² The 10-county metropolitan area (Cherokee, Cobb, Douglas, Clayton, Fayette, Fulton, Henry, Gwinnett, DeKalb, and Rockdale) has a population of over 3 million persons. Atlanta added more people in the 1990s than any other metropolitan region in the country. Metro Atlanta is the least densely populated metropolitan area in the United States—only 1,370 persons per square mile, compared with 5,400 persons per square mile in Los Angeles.

Between 1990 and 1997, the Atlanta region added 475,600 persons. Population growth was slow in the city of Atlanta, increasing by only 2,647, or less than 1 percent of the total population gain. On the other hand, the northern portion of the region gained 325,939 residents, or 68.5 percent of the region's population growth; the southern part of the region gained 147,014 persons, or 30.9 percent of the population gains during 1990–1997.

In just one 12-month period (from April 1998 to April 1999), metro Atlanta grew by 94,300 people—the second-largest increase in the region's history. On the other hand, the city of Atlanta grew by only 900 people during this same period.⁴³ In 1998, population growth was 100 times greater in Atlanta's suburbs than in Atlanta's urban core. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) predicts some population slowdown in the coming years.⁴⁴ However, Gwinnett, Cobb, and Fulton counties added large numbers of people in the later 1990s. Gwinnett County added over 20,300 (6.6%

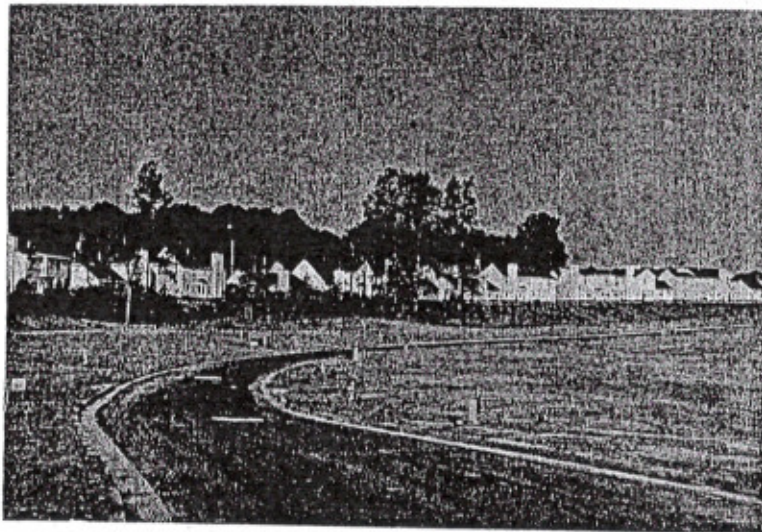


Population growth in Atlanta's suburbs was 100 times greater than in the city's urban core (courtesy of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*).

increase) to its 499,200 population during the 1997–1998 period; Cobb County added 15,100 persons (2.7% increase) to its 550,000 population, and Fulton County added 13,200 (1.7% increase) to its 773,000 population during the 1997–1998 period. Experts forecast the region to grow by a million more people by 2025. Most of this population increase is expected in Atlanta's sprawling suburbs.

The boundaries of the Atlanta metropolitan region doubled in the 1990s. The region measured 65 miles from north to south in 1990. Today, Atlanta's economic dominance reaches well beyond 110 miles from north to south.⁴⁵ Much of the region's growth in the 1990s was characterized by suburban sprawl and economic disinvestment in Atlanta's central city.⁴⁶ Record numbers of building permits contributed to the region being called "Hotlanta." The Atlanta region led the nation in residential construction during the 1990–1996 period.

In 1996, the Atlanta region issued 48,262 residential building permits—the busiest housing market in the nation. Following Atlanta, the other "hot" housing-construction markets making the top ten list included Phoenix–Mesa (39,354); Chicago (34,254); Las Vegas (32,410); Washington, D.C. (31,076); Dallas (28,522); Houston (20,821); Detroit (19,925); Portland, OR–Vancouver, WA (19,346); and Charlotte–Rock Hill–Gastonia (18,458).⁴⁷ Sunbelt cities were favorite places for new housing. Five of the



Low-density sprawl settlement increases the cost of maintaining roads, streets, sewers, water, storm drains, and schools.

seven busiest residential housing markets were located in the Sunbelt region in 1996.

Metro Atlanta's economic engine was in part powered by prosperity: housing and job booms. New subdivisions mushroomed across Atlanta's suburbs, forests, and rural farmland. Over 80 percent of the new housing built in the 10-county region consisted of single-family units. During the period from 1990 to 1998, the Atlanta region added over 228,573 housing units, a 21.7 percent increase.⁴⁸

The Atlanta regional economy boomed in the 1990s. Newcomers chose the Atlanta region for an obvious reason—jobs. Unemployment remained low and job growth remained strong. Between 1990 and 1997, over 348,000 jobs were added to the region. Most new jobs and newcomers settled outside the city. The city of Atlanta lagged far behind its job-rich suburbs. The region's city-suburban jobs gap widened in the 1990s. The city captured about 40 percent of the region's jobs in 1980. By 1990, Atlanta's share had slipped to 28.3 percent and by 1997, to 19.08 percent.⁴⁹

Clearly, Atlanta's northern suburbs reaped the lion's share of jobs and economic development. From 1990 to 1997, Atlanta's northern suburbs added 272,915 jobs. This accounted for 78.4 percent of all jobs added in the region. Another 70,582 jobs, or 20.3 percent, were added in the southern part of the

region. Only 4,503 jobs were added in the region's central core of Atlanta, representing just 1.3 percent of all jobs created during the height of the region's booming economy.⁵⁰

Flight of jobs and white, middle-income families to the suburbs has contributed to and exacerbated both economic and racial polarization in metro Atlanta's housing and schools. Central city Atlanta has become increasingly black and poor. The region's middle-income suburbs that encircle the city are largely white. While suburbanization largely meant out-migration of whites, some middle-income and poor black Atlantans also found expanded home ownership opportunities in Atlanta suburbs, while low-income blacks found suburban rental units in the post-1996 Olympic apartment glut period. Black expansion into Atlanta's suburbs quite often reflected the segregated housing pattern typical of central-city neighborhoods. It is not uncommon to find enclaves of mostly black "apartment ghettos" in Atlanta's close-in and older suburbs in Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett counties. However, a number of obstacles still keep many blacks out of the suburbs, including low income, housing discrimination, restrictive zoning practices, inadequate public transportation, and fear.

An increasing number of the region's middle-income blacks are choosing black neighborhoods over integrated or all-white areas. These affluent suburban blacks have to grapple with some of the same sprawl-induced traffic congestion, air pollution, and development problems as their white suburban counterparts. For example, southern DeKalb County rivals Prince George County, Maryland, as one of the most affluent African American communities in the nation. Nevertheless, many obstacles still disproportionately and adversely affect affluent and poor black communities; these include housing discrimination, redlining by banks and insurance companies, inadequate public transportation, encroachment from nonresidential activities, and environmental hazards from locally unwanted land uses or LULUs.

Threatened Quality of Life

Sprawl-related problems have caused some businesses to think twice about the Atlanta region. In 1996, the Atlanta region topped the list of 18 metropolitan areas rated for potential business investments. In 1998, the region slipped to 16th place. Some businesses are not willing to make the investment in metro Atlanta because of the region's severe traffic congestion, air pollution, and other environmental problems.

Sprawl-fueled development has scalped the region's landscape of tree cover. Deforestation and loss of vegetation increase the region's "heat island," thereby raising Atlantans' summer electric bills. Loss of vegetation also exacerbates soil erosion and adds to the region's air pollution problem. From

1973 to 1998, the region lost over 341,000 acres of tree cover. The region has lost an average of 50 acres of tree cover per day since 1987.⁵¹ Much of this loss is a direct result of low-density sprawl development encroaching into forests and rural areas.

In 1998, the Sierra Club rated Atlanta as the "most sprawl threatened" large city (over one million population) in the nation.⁵² Other sprawl-threatened big cities that made the Sierra Club's "top ten" list included St. Louis, Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, Kansas City, Denver, Seattle, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Fort Lauderdale, and Chicago. The criteria for the ranking included such factors as population trends, land use, traffic congestion, and open space.⁵³

From New York to Los Angeles and many smaller cities in between, people are talking about sprawl. If nothing else, anti-sprawl and "smart growth" gatherings are bringing diverse populations and constituents into the same room. People are beginning to talk to each other. However, talk is cheap, and the stakes are high. Atlantans are calling for action, not a debate about sprawl. Numerous articles have been written about sprawl. Nearly all of these stories cite the case of Atlanta as the symbol of what not to do. No city wants to become another "Sprawlanta." Some Atlantans are even complaining about Atlanta—something they would never have done a decade ago.

The Cost of Gridlock

From the ground and from the air, Atlanta looks a lot like many other sprawl-threatened cities. Sprawl has created a car-dependent citizenry. Everyone who drives feels the effects of congestion, longer commutes, and wasted time and energy spent in heavy traffic. The Texas Transportation Institute rated traffic gridlock in the nation's 68 largest metropolitan areas and found that the average driver spent 34 hours a year stuck in traffic. Drivers in the 20 most-congested metropolitan areas spent more than 40 hours in gridlock and wasted four extra tanks of gasoline. Atlanta ranked fourth, behind Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Seattle as the metropolitan areas with the worst traffic congestion. Drivers in Los Angeles spent 82 hours annually in gridlock, compared to 76 hours in Washington, D.C., 69 hours in Seattle, 68 hours in Atlanta, and 66 hours in Boston.

Congestion is hitting drivers in their wallets; traffic delays cost Americans \$72 billion in 1997. While the nation's biggest urban population grew by 22 percent over the past 15 years, congestion grew by a staggering 235 percent. In addition to more cars on the road, people are driving farther and taking more trips. The number of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) jumped 125 percent over the past 27 years, from 1.1 trillion to 2.5 trillion miles annually.⁵⁴ Traffic gridlock costs metro Atlanta drivers \$2.27 billion per year in fuel and

lost productivity. Nationally, the total vehicle miles driven increased 59 percent from 1980 to 1995. The amount of driving has risen a whopping 139 percent in metro Atlanta since 1982.⁵⁵

Metro Atlantans drive an average of 34 miles per day. This is 50 percent further than drivers in Los Angeles—a region that is synonymous with the automobile. In 1986, metro Atlanta had 1.9 million registered vehicles. In 1995, the region had more than 2.5 million vehicles clogging the streets. The largest increase in motor vehicles occurred in Atlanta's northern suburbs. The Georgia Department of Transportation adopted the "build them and they will come" road-building program as its regional-planning model. Mobility is equated with driving since mass transit has not penetrated much of the Atlanta region.

More highways translate into more cars. More cars mean more congestion and more pollution. Another harmful by-product of air pollution is increased asthma and other respiratory illnesses. Environmental justice leader Carl Anthony, who directs the San Francisco-based Urban Habitat Program, says "suburbs are making us sick."⁵⁶ A 1999 report from the Clean Air Task Force linked asthma and respiratory problems with smog.⁵⁷ The study tracked hospital and emergency room visits in 37 eastern states between April and October 1997. High smog levels were associated with rising respiratory-related hospital admissions and emergency room visits. Atlanta had 580 hospital admissions and 1,740 emergency room visits linked to bad air. A sampling of the smog-related emergency room visits in other cities included 12,300 in New York, 4,800 in Philadelphia, 4,500 in Chicago, 3,600 in Miami-Fort Lauderdale, 2,700 in Detroit, and 2,400 in Washington, D.C.

A 1994 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study also linked ground-level ozone to asthma in Atlanta. Atlanta is a nonattainment area for ground-level ozone. The CDC researchers found that visits by children to the emergency room at Atlanta's Grady Memorial Hospital increased by one-third following days with peak ozone levels.⁵⁸ Atlanta can take some pride in not being the "number one smog city." On October 7, 1999, Houston earned that unfortunate title, supplanting Los Angeles. Houston experienced 44 days of ozone levels that exceeded national health standards. Los Angeles registered 43 days.⁵⁹ However, all is not well in Atlanta—the region had 37 consecutive unhealthy ozone days in the summer of 1999. It also experienced a record 69 smog-alert days in 1999.

Lack of real alternatives to driving is partly to blame for Atlanta's soaring traffic gridlock, smog, and rising asthma problem. Atlanta is not alone in this dilemma. Nationally, nearly 8 of every 10 commuters drive alone to work. Only 9.3 percent of the U.S. population use a nonautomobile mode of travel

(public transit, bicycle, walk) to get to work. A little over 11 percent of the nation's commuters car pool to work. Public transit is not a real option in many of the nation's sprawling suburbs.

Nationally, about 5.3 percent of Americans take public transit to work. Over 47.3 percent of workers in New York, 19.5 percent in the San Francisco Bay Area, 17.1 percent in Chicago, and 14.2 percent in Boston commute using public transit. Only 6.5 percent of workers in Los Angeles and 4.7 percent in Atlanta (less than the national average) commute to work via public transit. Poor planning has gotten us in this fix. Regional planning that incorporates "smart growth" principles may get us out of this quagmire. It should be noted that "smart growth is not antigrowth."⁶⁰ The U.S. EPA's Smart Growth Network delineated some major elements of smart growth:

[Smart growth] recognizes that how buildings are built and where development takes place are factors that make development either a community asset or liability. Smart growth advocates seek growth and development where it will build community, protect environmental amenities, promote fiscal health and keep taxes low, maximize return on public and private investment, and encourage economic efficiency.⁶¹

Transportation and land use are major components in the smart-growth movement. Deciding where transportation investments should go lies at the heart of many smart-growth debates in most metropolitan regions. Automobile-dominated transportation and energy policies have subsidized sprawl. For example, Georgia's low motor-fuels tax encourages driving and road building. The 7.5 cent gasoline tax is one of the lowest in the country. The tax is restricted by state law to be used only for roads.

Each day, environmentalists and new converts and coalitions from the Atlanta area business establishment, inner-city, suburbs, and rural communities are joining the local grassroots anti-sprawl campaigns to make the region healthier and safer. Even some suburban communities are beginning to plan for linked and coordinated regional public transit. Atlantans are demanding bicycle lanes, sidewalks, and safe streets for walking. Sidewalks could greatly improve pedestrian safety and reduce fatalities in high-risk cities such as Fort Lauderdale, Miami, and Atlanta—the nation's three most dangerous large metropolitan areas for walking.⁶²

Thoughts on the Future

The 1990s saw the Atlanta region's population grow at record speed. The region's housing starts, job growth, and low unemployment rate were envied

by many other cities and metropolitan areas. However, there was a down side to the region's sprawl-dominated growth. Sprawl placed the health of the region and its residents at risk. Polluted rivers and streams, clogged freeways, and fouled air threatened the quality of life and business climate that attracted people and jobs to the area in the first place.

Although Atlanta's share of the metropolitan population, housing, and jobs experienced a steady decline over the years, the health of the city is still important to the region's overall vitality. Atlanta matters. Atlanta is not an island. The city of 400,000 (in a region of 3 million) is still the cultural, educational, sports, and financial core of the region. What happens inside and outside Atlanta's city limits affects everyone in the region. Sprawl development accelerates urban core disinvestment, infrastructure decline, and segregation by race and income. The future of the region is intricately bound to how government, business, and community leaders address sprawl and Atlanta's quality of life issues.

It should not take articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, or the *New York Times* for Atlantans to know and understand that the region is in serious trouble. The problem is not one of "bad press" that can be resolved with a well-financed "media blitz." Sprawl is real. Real problems need real solutions. Nevertheless, when the national press sounds the alarm that the region's traffic congestion and poor air quality may keep new businesses from relocating to the area, even the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce takes the "wake-up call" and becomes an antisprawl advocate. But words do not automatically translate into action. Only time will tell if the region's business and political leaders will heed the call to rein in sprawl-driven development and adopt a "smart-growth" approach.

Will the Atlanta region take a bold stance and address urban reinvestment and redevelopment, fair housing, public schools, public transit, and environmental and public health needs? Transportation and land-use policies are implicated in all of these issues. The 10-county Atlanta region has a regional transit system only in name. The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) serves just two counties, Fulton and DeKalb. Cobb County created its own transit system with limited links to MARTA. Gwinnett and Clayton recently approved plans for a bus system. While these decisions represent forward movement, the automobile is still king and rules the road in Atlanta. Overdependence on the automobile remains the number one culprit in the region's nonattainment dilemma.

Historically, planning agencies (Atlanta Regional Commission and Georgia Department of Transportation) were unwilling or unable to address the mounting traffic, air quality, and cross-jurisdictional land-use problems associated with the region's needs. In 1999, Georgia's newly elected governor,

Roy Barnes, created the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), a new superagency whose mission is to increase public transportation services in the region, rein in sprawl, and ultimately improve the region's air quality. GRTA has a big challenge. The Sierra Club's 1999 report, *Solving Sprawl*, gives high marks to the governor for forcing the state and local governments to take strong steps to strengthen regional transportation coordination.⁶³ GRTA is a major player: "While each region will have to devise its own means for building regional cooperation, the public and private leadership that spawned GRTA exemplifies the kind of bold action that will be needed if we are to begin to undo the problems of suburban sprawl."⁶⁴ The report concludes that "local governments in Georgia have the smart growth tools to stop sprawl."⁶⁵

Clearly, city, county, state, and federal officials need to work cooperatively to arrest the region's traffic congestion, air quality problem, declining urban infrastructure, and growing social and economic disparities between the "haves" and the "have nots." Having the tools to stop sprawl and using those tools are two different issues. Sprawl was not created overnight. The solution will take time. Public and private interests—working together and across political, geographic, class, and racial boundaries—can solve this problem. Everybody wins when bold steps are taken to address and eliminate suburban sprawl.

Notes

1. Donella Meadows, "The Escalating Costs of Sprawling Growth," *Neighborhood Works* 20 (November/December 1997), p. 7.
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