

## Matt Yglesias

Today at 12:58 pm

### “Libertarians,” Sprawl, and Land Use

Randal O’Toole has a [baffling and bafflingly long post](#) dedicated to trying to rebut my very simple view of the relationship between “sprawl” and land-use regulations. So I’ll just restate my argument in briefer form and ask O’Toole to say what, if anything, in it he disagrees with:

- Throughout America there are many regulations that restrict the density of the built environment.
- Were it not for these restrictions, people would build more densely.
- Were the built environment more densely built, the metro areas would be less sprawling.

O’Toole seems to want to engage in a complicated counterfactual hypothetical about whether or not most people would still prefer to live in large single-family homes even in the absence of regulatory restrictions. I don’t have a particular guess as to what the majority opinion would be, but I assume that we would have a mix. He also seems to want to engage in a viciously polarized debate about apartments versus single-family homes, but single-family developments vary widely in their residential density. So even restricting our attention exclusively to suburban living I maintain that absent lot size regulations, lot sizes would be smaller and there would be less sprawl.

What’s more, regardless of *majority* preference, I think the high cost of housing in New York, Boston, Washington, San Francisco, Santa Monica, etc. indicates that there’s market demand for walkable urbanism and that if it were easier for developers to build more densely in those areas more people would live in them.



I'm not personally interested in debating the “smart growth” slogan. My point is that from a policy point of view excessive regulation of land use in already developed areas is bad for the economy and for the environment. And to be specific and clear about this, I don't think the problem is “libertarian” hypocrites per se, the problem is *specifically John Stossel and Randall O'Toole* who are stridently opposed to anti-sprawl regulations but seem totally uninterested in sprawl-promoting ones. I believe that Stossel, for example, lives on the Upper East Side in Manhattan a neighborhood whose classic tall apartment buildings with no attached parking facilities would be totally illegal to build in virtually ever contemporary American city. That's a shocking fact of which few are aware and would be well-worth doing an episode on.

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