

Voice For Liberty in Wichita

Individual liberty, limited government, and free markets in Wichita and Kansas

‘Sustainable planning’ not so sustainable

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The vast majority of Americans, surveys say, aspire to live in a single-family home with a yard. The vast majority of American travel — around 85 percent — is by automobile. Yet the Obama administration thinks more Americans should live in apartments and travel on foot, bicycle, or mass transit.

To promote this idea, the administration wants to give the south central [Regional Economic Area Partnership \(REAP\)](#) the opportunity to apply for a \$1.5 million grant to participate in “sustainable communities.” Also sometimes called “smart growth,” the ideas promoted by these programs are anything but sustainable or smart. (As members of REAP, the governing bodies for both Wichita and Sedgwick County endorsed this grant.)

The urban plans that come out of these kinds of programs typically call for:

- Redesigning streets to increase traffic congestion in order to discourage people from driving;
- Increasing subsidies to transit, bike paths, and other “alternative” forms of travel even though these alternatives are used by few people;
- Denying owners of land on the urban fringes the right to develop their property in order to make single-family housing more expensive;
- Subsidizing high-density, developments that combine housing with retail shops in the hope that people will walk to shopping rather than drive;
- Rezoning neighborhoods of single-family homes for apartments with zoning so strict that, if someone’s house burns down, they will have to replace it with an apartment.

My former hometown of Portland, Oregon has followed these policies for two decades, and the results have been a disaster. In their zeal to subsidize transit and high-density developments, the region’s officials have taken money from schools, libraries, fire, and police, leaving those programs starved and in disarray.

Since 1980, Portland has spent more than \$3 billion building light-rail lines. Far from improving transit, the share of commuters taking transit to work has fallen from 9.8

percent in 1980 to 7.5 percent today, mainly because the region cut bus service to pay for the trains. Traffic congestion quadrupled between 1984 and 2004, which planners say was necessary to get people to ride transit.

The region's housing policies made single-family homes so expensive that most families with children moved to distant suburbs where they can afford a house with a yard. Residents of subsidized high-density housing projects drive just about as much as anyone else in the Portland area, and developers have learned to their sorrow that if they follow planners' guidelines in providing less parking for these projects, they will end up with high vacancy rates.

Despite these problems, Portland has received lots of positive publicity. The reason for this is simple: by forcing out families with children, inner Portland is left mainly with young singles and childless couples who eat out a lot, making Portland a Mecca for tourists who like exciting new restaurants. This makes Portland a great place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there unless you like noisy, congested streets.

The idea of "sustainable communities" is that planners can socially engineer people into changing their travel behavior by redesigning cities to favor pedestrians and transit over automobiles. Beyond the fact that this is an outrageous intrusion of government into people's lives, it simply doesn't work. Such experts as University of California economist David Brownstone and University of Southern California planning professor Genevieve Giuliano have shown that the link between urban design and driving is too weak to make a difference.

To protect livability and avoid unsustainable subsidies to transit and high-density development, Wichita, Sedgwick County, and other REAP members of south central Kansas should reject the \$1.5 million grant offered by the federal government.