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Zoning and Sprawl

— By [Kevin Drum](#) | Thu Mar. 18, 2010 4:28 PM PDT

Matt Yglesias has been making the case recently that zoning and land use laws encourage sprawl, and if we did away with them we'd have a greater number of dense, walkable neighborhoods. [Randall O'Toole took exception](#), so Matt condensed his argument into [PowerPoint form](#):

- 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.

There's a lot I could say about this, but that's a mistake in a blog post. So I'll stick to one main point: these regulations aren't something that's been imposed by "government." They exist because people really, really, *really* want them.



I need to be clear here: I'm neither praising nor condemning this, just describing how things are. To get an idea of how strongly people feel about this, you really need to come live in a suburb for a while. But failing that, consider the balance of power here. Corporations would like to be able to build wherever and whatever they want. Wealthy land developers would like to be able to build wherever and whatever they want. And local governments hate single-family neighborhoods because they're a net tax loss: they cost more in services than they return in property tax remittances. And yet, even with corporations, wealthy developers, *and* local governments all on one side, suburban zoning is ubiquitous. This is a triumvirate that, under normal circumstances, could get practically anything they wanted, but in this case it's not even a close fight. Suburban residents have them completely overwhelmed.

That's how strong the desire is for suburban sprawl. Again: I'm not taking a position on whether this is good or bad. And I'm not saying the fight is hopeless. I'm just saying that everyone needs to understand what they're up against here. It's not zoning per se that causes sprawl, it's the fact that lots of registered voters actively want sprawl and have successfully demanded rules that keep density at bay. These kinds of land use regulations aren't going away without the mother of all knock-down-drag-out fights first.

And now for a second point, even though I said I wouldn't make one: walkability is *very* difficult to create. It's not enough to build a bunch of houses with shopping nearby. It's not enough to have a few big apartment buildings. And there's no practical way to convert an existing suburb into a high-density area. The thing is, you can't be 90% walkable. You have to be 100% walkable, and for a development of any size you have to *jam* people together to get enough density to truly make that happen. You will never get this

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outside a central business core where the price of land is so high that you have no choice.

So....I dunno. Maybe eventually we'll run out of oil and everyone will have to move into urban cores whether they like it or not. Short of that, though, I just don't see how it's going to happen. Working to keep existing city centers walkable seems eminently doable and eminently worth doing. Outside of that, though, building a truly walkable neighborhood strikes me as the next best thing to impossible.

So here's a serious question: outside of a big city core, has anyone ever successfully built a walkable, high-density suburb? Not a village or a small town. I mean something really dense and walkable: a place where sidewalks are busy, mass transit is good, and there are plenty of high-rise apartment buildings. I know the New Urbanist folks talk about this a lot, but do any actually exist? Educate me, peeps.

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Kevin Drum is a political blogger for Mother Jones. For more of his stories, click [here](#).



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I've never understood the

Submitted by *Another Brad (not verified)* on Thu Mar. 18, 2010 4:48 PM PDT.

I've never understood the young liberal twerps' fascination with trying to get people to live in a way they manifestly don't want to. I guess that's why they're liberals - control, coercion, and knowing what's best for others is the standard m.o.



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Submitted by *Cranky Observer (not verified)* on Thu Mar. 18, 2010 5:48 PM PDT.

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Duncan Black has [pointed out repeatedly](#) that if his condo in the City of Philadelphia (a conversion of a 1920s apartment building) were to burn down he and his condo association would not be allowed to rebuild it, even as an exact duplicate of what is there today (and what made the neighborhood so attractive to people willing to buy condos).

Even inside the limits of a major city the car-centric people have changed the zoning so far in the direction of favoring cars over people that those same cities could not be recreated under their own laws. It is very hard to see how the people who are buying