

If You Love the Free Market, You Should Hate Mandated Suburban Sprawl



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By Ben Adler

There's nothing like a blogospheric spat about suburban sprawl. Matt Yglesias notes, and some conservatives concur, that sprawl is determined by heavy-handed government regulation requiring minimum parking requirements, large lot sizes, and segregation of uses. Yglesias asks why self-identified libertarians Randal O'Toole and John Stossel don't want to let the magic of the market do its work. O'Toole counters on the Cato Institute blog that land-use regulations are typically imposed in previously developed areas to ensure their continued identity. In other words, he says, "all that zoning has done has been to affirm the kind of development that people want."

There is an element of truth to that, but as a libertarian argument, it does not make sense. Aren't libertarians supposed to believe that even when the majority agrees on what is a desirable regulation they still should not impose it lest they infringe upon the liberty of the minority? Otherwise, libertarianism is defined downward to merely respecting individual liberties except for when the plurality of the handful of people who vote in local elections choose representatives who appoint bureaucrats who draw up regulations. There is a word for that, and it is liberalism. It's a perfectly good way to run a federal system of government, but it's by no means libertarianism. It seems that O'Toole is more of a cultural conservative, defending sprawl as the will of the people, than a libertarian, at least on this issue.

Anyway, O'Toole's premise is only partially true. As I reported last year, fast-growing fringe suburbs often zone undeveloped areas at curiously low densities. Yglesias writes:

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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.

You need not guess. There have been surveys describing walkable urbanism, auto-dependent suburban development, and rural densities, and asking which one most Americans want to live in. About one third choose walkable urbanism, but less than 10 percent of the country's habitats currently meet that definition. Hence, the high prices that Matt notes are prevalent in places such as New York City, where Stossel lives, and San Francisco. So why don't O'Toole and Stossel want to let the Invisible Hand fix this imbalance?