

October 24, 2005

Is L.A. the Poster Child of Sprawl? Hardly.

University of Illinois professor and author Robert Bruegmann had an interesting piece in the *L.A. Times* yesterday that debunks the myth that L.A. epitomizes urban sprawl. Here's a taste:

...[I]n fact, Los Angeles is not a particularly good example of urban sprawl. Take the part about being unplanned. The truth is that New York, Chicago and most of the older American cities had their greatest growth before there was anything resembling real public planning; the most basic American land planning tool, zoning, did not come into widespread use until the 1920s.

L.A., by contrast, was one of the country's zoning pioneers. It has had most of its growth since the 1920s, during a period when planning was already important, and particularly since World War II, when California cities have been subject to more planning than cities virtually anywhere else in the country.

Then there is the part about how the city is too dispersed. Although it is true that the Los Angeles region in its early years had widely scattered settlements, these settlements were not particularly low in density. Since World War II, moreover, the density of the Los Angeles region has climbed dramatically, while that of older cities in the North and East has plummeted. The result is that today the Los Angeles urbanized area, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, has just over 7,000 people per square mile — by a fair margin the densest in the United States.

Many people think that this must be a statistical trick because no part of the L.A. region could possibly be as dense as Manhattan or central Chicago. But there is no trick. Los Angeles has always had relatively small lot sizes, very little abandonment and, because of the difficulty in obtaining water, almost none of the really low-density suburban and exurban development that extends for dozens of miles in all directions outside older cities in the northern and eastern United States.

Check out the [whole thing](#). One particularly salient point he makes is that L.A. has densified dramatically since the rise of automobility last century, and that L.A.'s legendary traffic congestion has come about not because of sprawling low-density development, but rather because of increasing density combined with a lack of new capacity.

He also takes a parting shot at sprawl critics:

Of course, none of these objections to standard wisdom are likely to sway many highbrow critics of sprawl. Their desire to see L.A. as sprawl and therefore as not truly urban is based less on rational analysis than on subjective aesthetic judgments and class resentment.

But there are major problems with their position. First, there is considerable room for doubt that sprawl is necessarily the major problem that many anti-

sprawl crusaders believe it to be. But, in any case, Los Angeles is not a good model of sprawl. The urban area of New York or Boston, for example, each surrounded by a huge low-density penumbra, would make a better poster child for sprawl than the dispersed but relatively dense and compact Los Angeles.

Well put.

Posted by lengilroy at October 24, 2005 12:54 PM