

A sprawling issue with no quick fix

The issue: Tackling suburban sprawl and the assumptions we make about it.

We say: Sprawl is not a new phenomenon, nor is it an issue with an easy fix.

Acknowledging the complexity of a problem is often important to making the correct decisions to address it.

Take the case of urban sprawl, by which cities spread out widely from their core. The frequent results include headaches with traffic jams and the high cost of extending city utilities.

Here are two common assumptions about sprawl:

- U.S. cities, particularly those with an infatuation for automobile travel, stand out for the intensity of their sprawl problem.
- Portland, Ore., known for its aggressive land-use restrictions, is the most effective model for containing sprawl.

Both those assumptions can be called into question, though. *Sprawl*, a new book by Robert Bruegmann, explains that sprawl has been a universal characteristic of cities for millennia.

Pliny the Younger, a poet, lawyer and political leader in ancient Rome, lived in a villa that was 17 miles from Rome's core, Bruegmann notes. Wealthy Chinese wrote in the 14th century about the luxuries of suburban life. London's experience with suburbs extends back many centuries.

The degree of sprawl in Europe is generally comparable to that for U.S. cities, Bruegmann says.

As for Portland's experience with having perhaps the nation's most stringent land-use restrictions, that topic was examined in a panel discussion in September during a National Conference of Editorial Writers convention, held this year in Portland.

Despite its zoning strategy, Portland still suffers from sprawl-related challenges, the panelists said. One is the loss of 20,000 jobs in the downtown core. Another is deep anxiety about the financial squeeze on many working-class and even middle-class households as housing prices skyrocket, due in part to the zoning strategy.

These considerations do not mean that sprawl is a nonissue. It is a fact that excessive sprawl greatly increases the cost — borne by ratepayers — for extending utility lines to newly annexed areas. The traffic problem is also a reality. But as counties tackle this issue, it is best to understand the full context rather than rely on casual assumptions.

- This is the opinion of The Beacon News. It was written by the Omaha World-Herald.

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