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Gavin Salee

gavinsalee@earthlink.net

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Suburbanization: not a Good Fit for the Future

By Gavin Salee
Email: gavinsalee@earthlink.net

A study conducted by Edward Glaeser, a Harvard economist, showed that there is a big gap in carbon usage between city dwellers suburbanites in the area. Due to the larger homes found in suburban areas, the increased utilities they require, and the longer distance their owners must drive to work, the carbon footprint for urban house is much lower than suburban homes (1). Suburban living is not only carbon intensive, but it is harmful to the environment. According to the U.S. Geological Survey Nebraska alone has already lost 35% of its wetland coverage. Wetlands are an excellent source for runoff control making them a buffer to floods as well as contribute to groundwater replenishment (3). The main contributor to this has been land development, and wetland loss is just one of many environmental issues brought about by development. If suburban development continues, we will see more wetland loss along with the loss of areas with agricultural potential. You may be surprised to find that our habits of suburban development did not arise because of the luxuries they provide, but because of the low costs of energy available during the 19th century as well as the counter intuitive environmental policy of recent green goals.

Suburban development first began as a result of inexpensive gasoline prices. In the 1940's and 50's, one could literally save up their spare change and have more than enough money to fill their tanks. As time went on more and more people began to move to the suburbs. And why not? House and property size were bigger and less expensive, neighborhoods were

more family friendly, and with such low costs of gasoline driving to work in a city was not an issue. With better roads and highway systems being developed (also a result of cheap gas) even more people poured into the suburbs, and the pattern still continued. Unfortunately, there was a dark side to suburban sprawl. Those who could not afford a car could not leave the city. Slums began to form and education systems began to become less affective. This resulted in a downward spiral. With worse education systems and less family friendly areas even more people wanted to move out of the city, accelerating the problem for those who could not afford to leave; and all of this stemming from the low costs of gasoline.

More recently, there is another pattern of suburban sprawl beginning to emerge. This surge is not an effect of low gasoline prices, but actually comes from efforts to reduce emissions. In areas that are making an effort to cut down their carbon footprint, there are also more strict zoning restrictions. One survey found that there was a negative correlation between the Wharton Residential Land Use Index, which rates the restrictiveness of building in the area, and the emissions of the individuals living there. Areas that had a smaller carbon footprint were the areas where it was the hardest to build. One would think that in order to reduce emissions the areas with the smallest footprints should be where we should be building, when in reality the exact opposite was found to be occurring: places where green goals of decreasing carbon were actually doing the opposite. Cities like San Francisco that have minimal emissions per capita were pushing new construction into the suburbs where the per person carbon usage was much higher, increasing the net amount of emissions.

If the future as any hope of on reducing carbon emissions, we need to take every step available in order to make significant progress. Changing our habits of suburban development is one of those steps. Individuals in cities and high population density areas produce fewer

emissions and put less strain on the environment. In order actually begin making a difference we need to take a serious look at changing zoning and energy policies. Instead of restricting building in areas of small emission per capita, it needs to be encouraged. New building code regulation will have to be carefully designed allowing city style to be maintained as well as allowing increased higher density neighborhoods as they have a smaller footprint. Instead of allowing gasoline consumption to continue without a concern of its cost, taxes need to be imposed. Of course no one will embrace a gasoline tax with open arms but it is time to begin making the mature decisions. We need to look to the future and reexamine how we have been living and begin making changes if we are to survive. Tough choices will have to be made and a gasoline tax will be just one of many.

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