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To Stevenson City Council - NYTimes.com: Why America Should Sprawl

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The attached article "Why America Should Sprawl" looks at the Dalles – Fort Worth find a solution to the lack of affordable housing – to sprawl or build out housing.

On a very smaller scale, Stevenson has the Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Map which doubles the future size of Stevenson as well as 151 vacant lots itself.

The proposed Sewer Ordinance appears to anticipate and facilitate this future growth.

Rick Jessel

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/10/magazine/suburban-sprawl-texas.html?unlocked_article_code=1._04.LmUQ.bXxxleRvKweZ&smid=em-share



Why America Should Sprawl

The word has become an epithet for garish, reckless growth — but to fix the housing crisis, the country needs more of it.



By Conor Dougherty

Conor Dougherty covers housing and is the author of “Golden Gates: The Housing Crisis and a Reckoning for the American Dream.”

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The conference room next to Ross Perot Jr.’s office has a floor-to-ceiling map of the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. The map is in black and white, with pools of orange and blue shading representing the various warehouses, office buildings and housing developments that one of Perot’s companies, Hillwood, has splayed across the region since the late 1980s.

Perot, whose father made billions in the computer business and used that wealth to fund the outsider presidential campaigns that made him a household name, has amassed his own fortune by becoming one of the largest real estate developers in the country. When I met him in the conference room on a recent morning, Perot stood on the toes of his wingtips and stretched his arm overhead to point to the exurbs north of Dallas, where Hillwood has seven projects in development. There, under his fingers, lay one of the fastest-growing areas in the country.

A Hillwood executive took me on a helicopter tour to see the map in real life, promising that a view from 1,500 feet was the only way to understand just how fast the city is growing. The helicopter made a dusty landing about 40 miles from downtown Dallas, in an area where builders were laying down new traffic circles next to pastures grazed by herds of longhorn cattle.

Hillwood is a land developer that creates planned communities, building infrastructure and dividing up lots that major homebuilders like D.R. Horton and Pulte Homes then fill with houses. The executive took me around one of the firm's projects, quaintly named Pecan Square, which has a faux downtown complete with parks and pickleball courts; a co-working space on the square has been built with exposed ductwork, to give it an industrial vibe. Once finished, Pecan Square will have 3,100 homes, starting around \$415,000 for a three-bedroom.

Perot, who is now 66, plans to spend the rest of his life building such communities. The Dallas area has grown by about three million people over the past two decades, and, he predicted, it would continue to push outward for many decades more — 40 miles from downtown, then 50, until the metroplex bulges across the state line into Oklahoma, surpassing the population of the Chicago region and continuing to expand from there. “I told my kids, ‘All you got to do is fill in this map, and you’ll have a pretty good business,’” Perot said.

Perot's vision of Dallas as an endlessly expanding suburb has for decades been regarded by planners and environmentalists as a nightmare that needs to be slowed or stopped. The epithet is “sprawl,” a word that is used to deride edge city development, evoking lollipop cul-de-sacs lined with homes so similar they can be

distinguished only by the cars parked in front. Since the mid-20th century, critics have blamed sprawl for many of the country's deepest and most lasting problems, accusing it of chewing up farmland, spewing out greenhouse gases and carving American cities into rings of monotonous neighborhoods whose lonely and isolated residents are imprisoned by two-hour supercommutes. Environmental groups, a number of which were founded specifically to stop outward growth, have gone so far as to call sprawl a "curse" and a "cancer."

Anti-sprawl legislation has successfully limited or prohibited this sort of growth in much of the country. Consider the trajectory of California. In the 1960s and '70s, when the state added eight million residents and fruit trees were being ripped out to make space for ranch houses, its Legislature passed a flurry of land-use and environmental laws aimed at preserving agricultural land and containing development to major metropolitan areas. Those laws were celebrated for saving farming regions like Napa Valley and wild spaces like the Marin Headlands, but they also have made building so difficult that even environmentally friendly projects, like a small apartment building next to a commuter rail line in San Francisco, can be tied up in years of lawsuits that can add millions of dollars to the final cost.

Similar laws throughout the country have slowed the pace of construction and made housing far more expensive, contributing to one of the worst affordable housing crises in the nation's history. After two decades of underbuilding, economists estimate the country's housing shortage at somewhere between four million and eight million units. Last year was among the most difficult on record to buy a home; a quarter of tenants now spend more than half their income on rent and utilities; and the most recent homeless count, at about 770,000, was up nearly 20 percent from the previous year.



In Princeton, Texas, the nation's third-fastest-growing city, infrastructure has struggled to keep up with growth. Dan Winters for The New York Times

The second-order effects of the housing crisis are also enormous. The rising cost of rent has become one of the main drivers of inflation, which was a defining issue in the 2024 presidential election. Housing costs have made businesses less productive by preventing people from moving to the job markets most in need of workers. For all the focus on billionaires and stock prices, it's home values that are a primary source of wealth inequality and the root of a generational schism between the housing-rich baby boomers and young adults today. According to Edward Glaeser, an economics professor at Harvard, the housing crisis has become “a huge hindrance on the quest for well-being and the pursuit of happiness.”

The solution is to build more. That's not controversial — housing is one of the few remaining areas of bipartisan agreement. The rub, as always, is where and how to get it done. Over the past decade, dozens of cities and states have tried to spur construction by passing laws that aim to make neighborhoods denser: removing single-family zoning rules, reducing permitting times and exempting housing in established neighborhoods from environmental rules.

That shift is important, especially in cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles that have little chance of lowering housing costs or reducing their homeless populations without building up. But cities are difficult and expensive places to build because they lack open land. Adding density to already-bustling places is crucial for keeping up with demand and preventing the housing crisis from getting worse. It will not, however, add the millions of new units America needs. The only way to do that is to move out — in other words, to sprawl.

Like “privilege” and “gentrify,” “sprawl” is a word that has come to contain more emotion than meaning. New York is usually considered the antithesis of sprawl and Los Angeles the progenitor of it. And yet when you look at the density across both urban areas, Los Angeles is actually *more packed* than the New York region. There's of course no place in L.A. that's as dense as Manhattan. But the homes in L.A.'s suburbs are squeezed side by side for miles beyond the core city, while New York's outskirts are in general more spacious.

So what is sprawl, exactly? In his 2005 book, “Sprawl: A Compact History,” the architectural historian Robert Bruegmann described sprawl as low-density development that is scattered around the urban periphery. That description, he noted, captures what the edges of large cities have looked like for most of history. The fringes of ancient Rome were known as “suburbium,” meaning outside the walls. There, and in so many other large cities — London, Paris, New York — growth has almost always pressed outward through a buffer zone that is neither fully urban nor rural. This wasn't a permanent condition but rather the first step of growth, as, over time, the buffers filled in and were often incorporated into the city core: The Upper East Side of New York and the Hyde Park section of Chicago would have both been considered exurbs in their earliest stages of development.

Before the 19th century, regular travel between the core and the outlying areas of cities made sense only for those wealthy enough to afford carriages, boats and other forms of private transit. First railroads, then automobiles changed that, opening the gates of suburbia to the middle class. In his book, Bruegmann traces widespread anti-sprawl rhetoric to London in the 1920s, when it emerged as a way for aristocrats to denigrate their new middle-class neighbors under the guise of protecting nature. The word was popularized in the United States by a 1958 essay, “Urban Sprawl,” by the *Fortune* writer William H. Whyte Jr., who described the modern suburbs as “smog-filled deserts.”

“The attack on suburbs in the U.S. didn’t really become a dominant motif among the chattering classes until after World War II,” Bruegmann told me, “when the move out from the city by lower, middle and working classes in American cities became very obvious.” As millions of expanding families moved to larger homes in more spacious neighborhoods, artists and social critics followed with a long list of books (“*Revolutionary Road*”), songs (“*Little Boxes*”) and movies (“*The Stepford Wives*”) that criticized the conformity of suburbs and the American appetite for growth.

Cities and states responded by adopting anti-sprawl rules that created growth boundaries, made it easier to sue over new development and in some cases prevented even moderate density by limiting housing to multiacre parcels. The predictable result was that the pace of building slowed, housing costs exploded and anti-development sentiment became so pervasive that by the early 1980s the word “NIMBY” — short for “not in my backyard” — had proliferated to describe it.

One of the better accounts of this shift is a 1979 book, “*The Environmental Protection Hustle*,” by a professor of urban planning at M.I.T. named Bernard Frieden. Frieden documented how organizers in the San Francisco Bay Area were often as hostile to denser housing in urban neighborhoods as they were to low-slung developments on farmland. Chapters of the Sierra Club, he wrote, would protest exurban housing for being too sprawling, suburban housing for being insufficiently close to job centers and urban housing for taking up open space.

Frieden's book points to a second distinguishing feature of postwar sprawl: Because most of today's suburbs were built after zoning and land-use laws became more widespread and stringent, it has been harder to fill in the closest suburbs with density the way older cities did. This has increased the pressure to grow outward. Since 1950, big American cities have added very little new housing in established neighborhoods, according to an analysis by Issi Romem, an economist at MetroSight, an economic research and consulting firm. It might not seem that way when you look out on the glass-tower apartments and condominiums that have risen in the downtowns of big and even midsize U.S. cities. But those projects are frequently part of an industrial redevelopment, like Mission Bay in San Francisco or Hudson Yards in New York. They rarely disrupt neighborhoods zoned for single-family homes, which account for a majority of the land mass in many U.S. metro areas.

California and other states have spent much of the past decade trying to get out of this predicament by undoing single-family zoning laws and streamlining permitting for apartments, backyard cottages and other higher-density housing. These attempts to make it easier to fill in nearby suburbs where prices are highest — to fill in the previous generation's sprawl — is the same process maturing cities have gone through for centuries. But density is gradual and takes decades to be effective. "Infill" — housing built in populated areas — is difficult and expensive. For all the vitriol this has caused in City Council meetings and legislatures, the overall pace of building has barely budged.

Even if all the regulatory restraints were removed tomorrow, developers couldn't find enough land to satisfy America's housing needs inside established areas. Consequently, much of the nation's housing growth has moved to states in the South and Southwest, where a surplus of open land and willingness to sprawl has turned the Sun Belt into a kind of national sponge that sops up housing demand from higher-cost cities. The largest metro areas there have about 20 percent of the nation's population, but over the past five years they have built 42 percent of the nation's new single-family homes, according to a recent report by Cullum Clark, an economist at the George W. Bush Institute, a research center in Dallas.

Lora Karacic became a real estate agent in Dallas in 2021, when the pandemic slowed air travel and she was furloughed from her job as a flight attendant. Her timing turned out to be perfect: In the past five years, the Dallas metro area has led the nation in both population and housing growth. Last year alone, Dallas permitted the construction of 72,000 new homes, or about three-quarters as many as the entire state of California, according to Moody's Analytics.



Celina, Texas, has 54,000 residents, compared with 8,000 a decade ago. Dan Winters for The New York Times

I recently visited Karacic and her partner, Zack Srisauy, at their home in Celina, Tex., which is about 40 miles north of Dallas. A color-changing Tesla sat in the driveway. On Instagram, Karacic has racked up more than 100,000 followers, who scroll through her videos of spacious houses in the Dallas exurbs with walk-in

closets and kitchen islands that have the dimensions of a conference-room table. Karacic and Srisaury are partners in business as well as life: He films, she tours, then they organize meetups with new clients over direct message.

I asked the couple how much of their business consisted of people moving to Texas from out of state.

“Like 75 percent,” Karacic said.

“Yeah, maybe even 80,” Srisaury added.

Celina was recently declared the fastest-growing city in the country. The area had 8,000 residents a decade ago. Now it has 54,000, and the population is projected to hit 110,000 by 2030. Nearby, Hillwood is building a community called Ramble, which is scheduled to offer 4,000 new homes starting next year. Four months ago, Karacic and Srisaury decided to relocate to Celina from a more central part of Dallas in order to be closer to the houses they sell, paying \$500,000 for a four-bedroom house. They told me they had gotten tired of spending hours in traffic on the way to showings.

“All the business is up here,” Karacic said.

There were just two stoplights in Princeton, Tex., when Eugene Escobar Jr. moved there. That was a dozen years ago, back when Princeton was a town of fewer than 10,000 that sat beyond Dallas but wasn’t yet part of it. The subdivisions had started arriving, but a good amount of the housing still consisted of faded homes with clapboard siding and chain-link fences.



Celina, Texas. Dan Winters for The New York Times

Escobar, a 33-year-old from Harlem, paid \$240,000 for a 3,500-square-foot home, where he still lives with his wife and four of his children. He runs a tech-support business from a desk by his pool table, and he recently became the city's first Black mayor, in an election dominated by debates over runaway growth. Since Escobar arrived, the population of Princeton has quintupled to just under 50,000 residents, according to city estimates, overwhelming the roads, the sewers and the local Police Department. Now the nation's third-fastest-growing city, Princeton has become a case study in what happens when development outpaces planning.

When I met Escobar on a recent afternoon, we drove past newly graded fields, half-built apartment complexes and subdivisions with names like Monticello Park and Sicily. Most of the drive was along a four-lane road packed with cars going 15

miles per hour. Despite the boom in residents, Princeton still has just a handful of restaurants and few places to take children beyond private backyards. There are not many local jobs, so most of Princeton's residents commute out of town for work. The largest employer is the local government.

"We went from a farm town to a city of 47,000, and in the next three years it will be 80,000," Escobar said. "The city allowed a lot of developers to come in and was looking at the tax money but didn't realize, 'Hey, the water is behind, the police are behind.'"

Last year, the City Council voted to impose a moratorium on all new housing projects in hopes of giving infrastructure time to catch up. The moratorium hasn't slowed much down, because Texas law prohibits cities from stopping development that has already been approved. It nevertheless sent a message: Residents, having bought into what they thought was a bright future, are now worried about where the city is headed.

Escobar became a politician in hopes of helping it change course. His reward has been a full-time job with no pay that requires him to spend every other Monday in City Council meetings, where he sits at the center of the council dais, six feet from the microphone where residents comment and complain about the growing pains he ran for office to solve. "Until you're in the shoes, you really don't understand how much pressure that you're under all the time," Escobar said.

Princeton's godawful traffic and its views of pastures being consumed by tract homes are exactly the sorts of scenes opponents of sprawl have in their heads. But this is how cities are built: through a chaotic and uneven process in which the mix of homes, jobs and infrastructure is constantly shifting and never quite in balance. Instead of endless sprawl, it's better to think of boomtowns like Princeton as economic nodes in a broader region. Their relationship to Dallas proper is akin to Newark's relationship to New York or Oakland's to San Francisco: They begin as satellites of the core city but, over time, become their own cores.

That process is well underway in Texas: As the population of Dallas's northern region has exploded, jobs have followed. Plano and Frisco, two Dallas suburbs that have each surpassed 200,000 residents, are rapidly adding offices and apartment buildings and have daytime populations that roughly equal or exceed their nighttime populations, becoming cities in their own right. Modern, car-centric cities will probably never become as dense as places whose streets were designed for pedestrians, but the basic process of expanding outward with housing, then jobs, is unchanged. Over decades, places like Plano and Frisco will come to look and feel more like central Dallas. "Sprawl is a way of thinking that is centered on the core city, that imagines somehow that people, however far out their homes are, they're going to commute to the core," says Clark, of the George W. Bush Institute. "That's increasingly unmoored from the reality of how people are living."

Policy wonks on the political right have been preaching this for years. One of them is Judge Glock, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute who has written essays with titles like "Sprawl Is Good" and "Sprawl Is Still the Future." Glock is not a reflexive defender of the suburbs: In an interview, he praised many of the efforts to repeal single-family zoning laws and add small apartments to neighborhoods where they have long been banned. "But the importance of outward growth has been massively underestimated," he said.

As the scale of America's housing crisis has grown, that position has moved toward consensus. Around the country, Democrats in state and federal office have started pushing proposals to amend urban growth boundaries, sell off federal land and pare back environmental laws that aim to keep growth from pressing outward. The liberal journalists Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's recent book, "Abundance," champions the idea that it has become too hard to build housing and infrastructure in the places where Democrats govern. Even Alan Durning, founder of the Sightline Institute, a think tank that advocates for dense housing and renewable energy, says he has come to the conclusion that new cities are likely to be part of the solution to America's housing shortage. Those cities are already being built, right in plain sight, the same way they always have been: on the edges of the cities we already have.



McKinney, Texas. Dan Winters for The New York Times

Certainly the process is smoother in some places than in others. Developers like Hillwood usually make sure to secure a water supply and build enough infrastructure to make growth feasible over the long term, designing “total

communities” around a denser core with walkable streets, rowhouses, grocery stores, parks and other spaces for gatherings like concerts and fairs. Other developers, often those who cater to a lower-income demographic, simply build houses, which, if they multiply too fast, can turn a town into a disjointed collection of subdivisions and test a city’s ability to maintain infrastructure. That puts the onus on the local government and mayors like Escobar to create a more complete place with things to do and places to shop.

Toward the end of my interview with Escobar, we swung by his home, a two-story brick house with a collection of scooters and toys in the entryway. Escobar told me he moved to Princeton because he could find a big house there for less than \$300,000, but now the city is home, and he didn’t like where it was headed. Over the next four years, he said, his goal is to redevelop the downtown, try to attract offices where locals can work and build out a park system that voters recently funded with a bond measure. “You ask anybody what they love about Princeton, and it’s simply just the affordability,” Escobar told me. “We need to be more than that.”

Conor Dougherty covers housing and development, focusing on the rising costs of homeownership. He is based in Los Angeles.

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