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The End of Sprawl?

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By Eduardo M. Peñalver
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The collapse in the housing market and high gasoline prices are bad news for middle-class homeowners left to sift through the wreckage. But if there is consolation to be found amid the rubble, it may be that the inexorable spreading out that has characterized American life since World War II might finally be coming to an end. Given the connections between car-dependent suburban development and social ills from climate change and the destruction of wetlands to obesity and social isolation, the end can come none too soon.

American sprawl was built on the twin pillars of low gas prices and a relentless demand for housing that, combined with the effects of restrictive zoning in existing suburbs, pushed new development outward toward cheap rural land. Middle-class Americans, not able to find housing they could afford in existing suburbs, kept driving farther out into the countryside until they did. Gridlock in the suburbs and the expense of providing municipal services to sparsely populated communities imposed their own limits on how far we could spread. As a result, the density of metropolitan areas, which fell steadily in the postwar years, had begun to creep back up in the 1990s. Despite these infrastructural restraints, however, the now-defunct housing boom and cheap gas kept exerting centrifugal pressure on living patterns, pushing the edge of new development farther out into rural America.

Over the past year or so, both of these forces have dramatically weakened. With credit tight and the demand for housing drying up (sales of new homes fell last month to the lowest level in 12 years) new construction in the exurbs is grinding to a halt. The result is a decline in the building industry's appetite for rural land on the urban edge. The question now is whether that decline will last. In the past, a sudden drop-off in demand for housing in the exurbs would have represented merely a hiatus. Builders would have bided their time until the housing market recovered, and the outward push would soon have begun again. But persistently high gas prices may mean that the next building boom will take place not at the edges of metropolitan areas but far closer to their cores. People are more willing to drive 20 miles each way to work every day, burning a couple of gallons of gas in the process, when gas costs less than milk. But as gas prices climb, long car commutes become a rising tax on exurban homeownership, and the price people are willing to pay for homes in remote areas will fall.

Increasing gas prices may not be enough to cause people to move, which is why demand for gas proves so inelastic in the short term, but it can influence where people choose to live when they are forced to relocate for other reasons. The evidence that this is already occurring is, at this point, still somewhat anecdotal, but it is very suggestive. As the New Urbanist News reported this fall, during the present downturn, accompanied as it has been by high gas prices, homes close to urban centers or that have convenient access to transit seem to be holding their value better than houses in car-dependent communities at the urban edge. A recent story in the Minneapolis Star Tribune blamed flagging growth in the Twin Cities' outer suburbs on rising gas prices. If prices at the pump continue to increase, as many analysts expect, the eventual recovery of demand for new housing may not be accompanied by a resumption of America's relentless march into the cornfields.

The death of sprawl will present enormous challenges, chief among them the need to provide affordable middle-class housing in areas that are already built up. Accommodating a growing population in the era of high gas prices will mean increasing density and mixing land uses to enhance walkability and public

transit. And this must happen not just in urban centers but in existing suburbs, where growth is stymied by parochial and exclusionary zoning laws. Overcoming low-density, single-use zoning mandates so as to fairly allocate the costs of increased density will require coordination at regional levels. This in turn will require overcoming the balkanization of America's metropolitan areas. This shift toward a more regional outlook will force broad rethinking of how we fund and deliver services provided by local governments, most obviously (and explosively) public education.

Although the end of sprawl will require painful changes, it will also provide a badly needed opportunity to take stock of the car-dependent, privatized society that has evolved over the past 60 years and to begin imagining different ways of living and governing. We may discover that it's not so bad living closer to work, in transit- and pedestrian-friendly, diverse neighborhoods where we run into friends and neighbors as we walk to the store, school or the office. We may even find that we don't miss our cars and commutes, and the culture they created, nearly as much as we feared we would.

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