



February 5, 2004

Regions That Work: Cities & Suburbs Living In Harmony

The increased recognition that suburban islands of prosperity cannot long exist in seas of urban despair has helped pave the way for today's emerging Smart Growth movement. However, what "Smart Growth" means often depends on where you stand—it can mean anything from economic efficiency to environmental protection to social equity. In this synopsis of "Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together," coauthors Peter Dreier and Manuel Pastor, Jr. insist that only by crafting a political and civic coalition from all three pillars can metropolitan regions truly prosper.

Today, two-thirds of Americans living in major metropolitan areas—about half of the nation's population—reside in suburbs. In every region of the country, even where city populations are increasing, the fastest-growing parts of the metropolitan areas are the surrounding suburbs. Thus, addressing the problems of cities such as L.A.—and the poverty populations living there—requires appealing to some segment of the suburban electorate.

But why should suburbanites care about cities? Some leaders invoke an appeal to compassion or what cynics might call "do-gooderism" or charity. Others suggest that suburbanites should support urban policy as a form of "riot insurance," a view which promotes the notion that cities are dangerous war zones that need to be contained before the problems spread.

A more compelling argument—the one we develop at length in

Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together

—is that the fate of cities and their suburbs is increasingly linked. Cities and suburbs have become interdependent parts of shared regional economies, partly because both city and suburb are both affected by economic changes at the regional level. They are also interdependent parts of a regional environment, with rapid development in one area having physical, social, and economic effects on another.

Partly because of the recognition of this increasing city-suburb interdependence, in recent years we have seen the emergence of a movement for "smart growth." Until a few years ago, this notion—basically, to limit suburban sprawl through zoning, taxing, and public investment policies—was of interest only to city planners and environmentalists. However, in the past year alone, almost every major newspaper has run at least one front-page article on the dangers of uncontrolled sprawl and its impact on traffic congestion, the environment and the frayed nerves of commuters.

Republican and Democratic Governors alike have embraced "smart growth" as a solution, triggered in part by voter initiatives in many states to limit sprawl. Business leaders have joined environmentalists at conferences on smart growth and "sustainable" development. Big-city mayors have been enthusiasts because they want to see more investment in the inner city. Even real estate developers have jumped on the bandwagon; for example, the Urban Land Institute, a major industry think tank and lobby group, recently published a report endorsing smart growth.

When an idea becomes this appealing to so many different constituencies, there are alternative explanations. One is that its essential logic is so correct that everyone must agree: who, after all, is in favor of dumb growth? Or traffic gridlock? The second explanation is that the idea means many different things to different people: when both shopping mall developers and Sierra Club activists say they favor "smart growth," surely different understandings are at work.

In fact, there are three major approaches to "smart growth," each with its own political constituency and policy agenda. Some support smart growth (and regionalism) because they believe it will foster efficiency and economic growth. Efforts to get local governments in the same area to adopt the same building codes, to participate in joint purchasing agreements, to share a common fire department, or to create a regional agency to attract business, follow this logic. A particularly effective proponent of this sort of regionalism is Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network, a business-led effort based in San Jose, California.

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Others support smart growth because of its ability to contain sprawl and protect the environment, particularly outlying open space; a classic example here is Portland, an area which has actually developed a form of metropolitan-level government that steers development and protects the natural habitat.



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A third and still emerging variant of smart growth and regionalism focuses on equity. The emphasis here is on how greater regional cooperation can reduce poverty, promote a broader tax base, and provide for a more equitable distribution of resources for schools and other public services. The equity policy agenda includes portable housing vouchers and scattered-site mixed-income housing to help the poor move out of ghettos and closer to jobs; region-level job connection programs and "reverse commuting" to facilitate employment for the poor; regional tax-sharing schemes that can more fairly spread the social costs of whatever poverty pockets remain; and regional "living wage" laws to lift working families above the poverty line.

While the efficiency and environmental variants of smart growth have solid support in the business and environmental communities, the political coalition for equity-oriented regionalism is more complex. There are at least four main potential constituencies for the equity-oriented approach: big-city mayors who may see regionalism as a way to bring the urban agenda to the fore; residents of the inner-ring suburbs who are frustrated that new infrastructure spending is heading outward as their older communities disintegrate; leaders of community based organizations (CBOs) and community development corporations (CDCs) who have tired of being "managers of decline" as the region passes them by; and labor unions, particularly metropolitan-based central labor councils, that see the fates of their (often immobile) workers tied to the fortunes of the regional economy.

Crafting a political and civic coalition from these divergent interests is difficult. Urban mayors have often alienated their own inner-city communities with previous schemes of



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urban renewal. Inner-ring suburbanites often feel lucky to be one step away from the worst of neighborhoods and may hesitate to form alliances with those "left behind" in the cities. Community activists are sometimes suspicious of those who have moved one municipality away-and they also resent being asked to divert attention from what seems like the more immediate need to address neighborhood poverty. Labor unions have formed some innovative alliances with community groups to address the epidemic of low-wage employment, but they have yet to tackle social and environmental concerns like sprawl, transportation, and housing that affect their members.

But as we argue in *Regions That Work*, even business leaders and suburbanites have a stake in addressing inner city poverty as part of the "smart growth" agenda. Our statistical study of 74 metropolitan regions, as well as our case studies of successful regions, uncovered an intriguing (though largely invisible) reality: Poverty within inner-city neighborhoods, along with economic inequality across the metropolitan area, drags down the whole region. Islands of suburban prosperity, in short, cannot long exist in seas of urban despair.

The lesson is particularly relevant for L.A. While this region was beset by widening inequality in the last two decades, other metropolitan areas were able to raise per capita income, reduce central city poverty, and slow the concentration of poverty. Key elements of these success stories included a committed business leadership, strong community organizations, city-suburb linkages, informal public-private partnerships, and the willingness of local governments to use public policy creatively.

In reality, equity, the environment and efficiency are three interrelated pillars of a healthy and sustainable region: combining all three makes sense for both the poor and the larger region. To do this requires further elaboration of the equity case for regionalism, one that will bring new regional leaders to the anti-poverty agenda even as it convinces neighborhood-based community and union activists to add regional issues to their already overcrowded plate. *Regions That Work* provides an intellectual and policy bridge between the focus on urban neighborhoods and the focus on metropolitan regions.

Crossing that bridge will require good old-fashioned community organizing, albeit with a focus on regional opportunities. The \$2.4 billion Alameda Corridor project reflects both the potential and challenge. It will strengthen the entire regional economy by improving the flow of goods from the ports, and the construction phase alone will generate hundreds of jobs. It could substantially improve the environment by substituting rail transport for diesel trucks and facilitating auto traffic across the corridor. And while its initial design had little focus on social equity, community-based groups like the Alameda Corridor Jobs Coalition have bargained to create a program to link job training and decent employment opportunities from this regional project to low-skill workers in the surrounding communities.



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In our view, the time is ripe to connect city and suburb, neighborhood and region. The economic rationale is increasingly clear: industrial clusters are rooted in, and define, regional production systems, and regional policies will be increasingly important to encouraging the growth of employment and income, as well as to protecting the quality of life in city and suburb alike.

But the rationale for reconnecting across our regions goes beyond a simple political calculus. Behind suburban gates and within the hearts of our country ghettos and barrios, social fragmentation by space and race has caused not just economic pain but also a profound and painful sense of isolation. Those who recognize and marry the three pillars of the new regionalism—efficiency, environment, and equity—may be happily surprised. Americans have become frustrated with "zero-sum" solutions and "wedge issue" politics. They are tired of being driven apart; they may be ready to try growing together.

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