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PROVIDENCE: LEAST SPRAWLING METROPOLITAN AREA: COLORADO SPRINGS SPRAWLS LESS THAN PORTLAND

By Wendell Cox

In recent years, there have been a number of attempts to develop systems for rating sprawl. The most attention has been received by the Smart Growth America initiative. This system develops an index in which less sprawl receives a higher score, with it all being based upon an index of 100.

The results are very simple. Or are they? Smart Growth America cites New York as the nation's least sprawling metropolitan area, with a sprawl index of 177.8. But what is New York? To someone flying from Boston to Washington at night it is clear. The urbanization stretches from well into Connecticut to Trenton, New Jersey, one-half of the way to Philadelphia from the city of New York.

But what is Smart Growth America's metropolitan area? Well, it includes just the city of New York, Westchester, Rockland and Putnam Counties. Perhaps a good start, but 20 counties are missing.

A commuter driving across the Queens boundary into Nassau County would notice that the development just goes on. The farmland or open space one might be expected to see leaving the metropolitan area is still many miles further, and well into the next county (Suffolk).

Similarly, it would probably surprise residents of Jersey City and Elizabeth, New Jersey, who can see the Empire State Building on a clear day, to learn that they live in different metropolitan areas --- different metropolitan areas from New York *and* different metropolitan areas from each other.

Obviously this is a definitional problem. And it's not Smart Growth America's fault. But Smart Growth America could have avoided it by more careful attention to research design.

The metropolitan areas *used* by Smart Growth America *were, at that time* really "sub-metropolitan" areas (the technical term was "primary metropolitan statistical areas"). The Census Bureau *combined* these "sub-metropolitan" areas into larger "consolidated metropolitan statistical areas," which really *represented* the labor markets that denote genuine metropolitan areas. So the New York sub-metropolitan area used by Smart Growth America accounted for only nine million of the residents of the more than 21 million in the New York consolidated metropolitan area. It is also possible that Smart Growth America, like so many in urban planning, see New York and other urban areas as little more than the core (like the Oregon official who explained to me that Hillsboro or Gresham were not Portland, in a discussion of metropolitan affairs. They may not have been in 1960, but they are now.)

The past tense has been used on purpose with respect to these census designations. Because, under its new classification system, unveiled after Smart Growth America's ranking was completed, the New York sub-metropolitan area has nearly 17 million of the consolidated metropolitan area's 21 million. By regulatory fiat, the New York sub-metropolitan area has nearly doubled in size and now, while still insufficient for metropolitan analysis, is much closer.

A sprawl index that uses sub-metropolitan areas reveals virtually nothing about genuine metropolitan sprawl comparisons.¹ It would make nearly as much sense to compare develop a sprawl index within a one mile radius of Wall Street & Broadway (rivers excluded) and compare it to, say, genuine metropolitan Phoenix. But the New York and Wall Street & Broadway sub-metropolitan approaches are consistent with the all too myopic view of too many urban planners who seem to believe that the urban area extends only as far as they can see from their skyscraper offices on a foggy day. Yes. Like Gresham or Hillsboro are Portland, so also New Brunswick, Perth Amboy, Stamford and East Patchogue are New York.

So, New York's has won its "least-sprawling" crown on false pretences, and needs to give it up, like a discredited Miss America. But New York should be allowed to keep its Miss New York equivalent designation at the sub-metropolitan level (whether New York or Wall Street & Broadway).

But it is possible from the Smart Growth America to estimate revised sprawl indexes to better understand where the genuine New York metropolitan area really ranks. Two methods are used, and each confirms forfeiture of the crown.

- By population weighting the Smart Growth America sub-metropolitan sprawl indexes by population; it is possible to estimate a more genuine New York metropolitan area sprawl index. The problem is that, perhaps exhibiting the urban planning myopia, Smart Growth America's ratings miss 8 million of the 21 million people in metropolitan New York. The Nassau-Suffolk sub-metropolitan area, with nearly 1,000,000 residents more than Nirvana (Portland, Oregon) was left out. So also were the Bergen-Passaic (from which one can walk to New York), Monmouth-Ocean and Middlesex-Somerset-Hunterdon sub-metropolitan areas. It is only to be hoped that, in the long run, urban planners will find such missing suburbs and include them in their plans.

But, even so, population weighting of Smart Growth America's unrepresentative sample produces a sprawl rating of 153.5. Looking down the Smart Growth America national list, this places New York below Jersey City. But wait a minute. Jersey City is a sub-metropolitan area within the New York genuine metropolitan area, so it too is ineligible. The next highest metropolitan area is Providence, at 153.7, slightly above the New York genuine metropolitan area estimate. Congratulations to Providence, now indisputably the least sprawling metropolitan area in the nation.

- But what if the unranked 8 million people are included? There's no way to quickly tell what the rating would be in New York's *nine* forgotten sub-metropolitan areas with a combined population larger than all metropolitan areas in the US, Canada and Western Europe except for Los Angeles, Chicago, Paris and London. But, to be liberal, let's

¹ None of this is intended to endorse Smart Growth America's general approach to measuring urban sprawl.

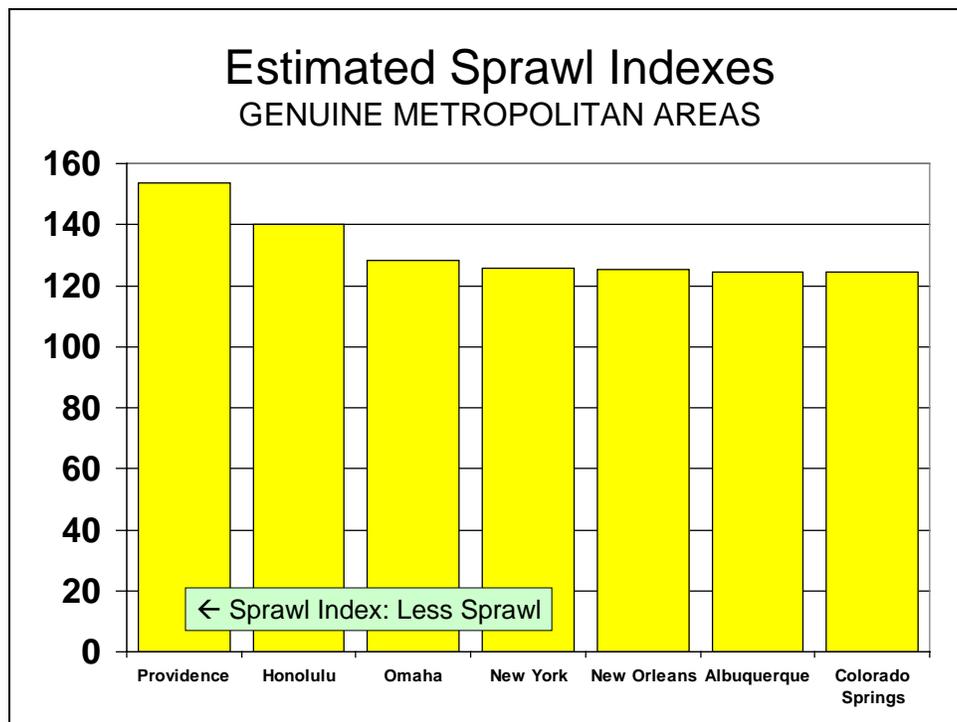
assume that each would score the same as the Newark sub-metropolitan area (it is hard to believe that any of these more suburban sub-metropolitan areas would score higher than Newark). The New York genuine metropolitan area sprawl index drops to an estimated 125.8, falling further behind Providence and dropping also below Honolulu and Omaha.

New York also falls below the Boston and Nirvana sub-metropolitan areas, but these are, again, sub-metropolitan areas, whose rating is artificially high as a result of forgetting major segments of their genuine metropolitan population. Indeed, Boston and Nirvana would doubtless fall below the Colorado Springs genuine metropolitan area, a place not often thought of in terms of sprawl-less urbanization (Boston and Portland would also fall below New Orleans and Albuquerque in their race to become more like Colorado Springs).

These findings are significant. One of the apparent purposes of Smart Growth America's index (at least according to its more ardent supporters) is to take the inconvenient issue of population density off the table. The Smart Growth America index includes other factors, such as street connectivity, "centeredness," and mixed use. We hear talk about "fine grained design," jobs housing balance and other arrogant blather, demonstrating that many urban planning minds are filled with phantoms of not only what never has been, but also what never can be. The implication is that, eventually, sprawl indexes in places like Atlanta and Greenville will be competitive with Copenhagen and Geneva if only planners can move things around (like houses and businesses)

But density counts, and indeed when the opponents of growth (which they are, because "controlling" growth usually drives it away) decry urban expansion they routinely cite examples of urban areas that have added land area faster than population --- urban areas that have seen density losses.

So, let's look at the new non-sprawl leaders (Figure). What stands out is their low density. The 2000 Census indicated that the urbanized area density of Providence was 2,300 residents per square mile, while Colorado Springs weighs in at 2,400. Calcutta-like Omaha crams 2,800 people in per square mile, though is closely challenged by Manila-on-the-Rio-Grande, Albuquerque.



Least sprawling Providence has less than one-half the density of New York. But that's all right by the revisionist urban planning America way of thinking. Density is only one issue. So long as there is a corner grocery store close-by, a park suitable for Chablis, speed bumps and empty bike lanes on every street, low density can be forgiven.

As would be expected in a metropolitan area that is the very antithesis of sprawl, everyone rides transit in Providence. As much as 0.4 percent of all travel in the Providence area is on transit. Doubtless, American Public Transit Association data show that if all transit were cancelled in Providence, the 99.6 percent of people in cars would find traffic congestion so badly impacted that it would take another half-hour daily to get to work. We were tempted to suggest a consulting firm that could have prepared the technical study, but, but that would be going too far. Those who know the industry know.

Perhaps the day will come that Portland's (oops, Nirvana) near two percent transit market share will be ground down to 0.4 percent, and it can too not sprawl like Providence. Perhaps Los Angeles should emulate the new champion by expanding to cover three times as much area, stretching to the Colorado River (or why not even the Mississippi).

We could go on and on. But the big news is the new champion. An aerial photograph of Providence's compact urbanization should be prominently placed on the Smart Growth America website (it will have to be taken from rather high to get it all in).

And, it is high time that any urban planner who has not yet visited Providence, Omaha or Colorado Springs, should join a pilgrimage to worship at these newly revealed shrines. Our related website, *Urban Tours By Rental Car* may well begin offering package tours for the "sprawl-busting" itinerary (www.rentalcartours.net). It is to be expected that the usual urban columnists (again who shall remain nameless because those who know know) will soon be fawning over the sprawl controlling strategies of Providence, Omaha and Colorado Springs just

as they have tried to sell the success (?) of Cleveland in their expensive studies for other cities whose leaders' spend more time than others on turnip trucks.

As for Honolulu and Omaha, we hope they will be satisfied, at least for the present, with the gold and silver ribbons. And what about Portland? There is still hope. Perhaps after decades of the interventionist urban planning that have made Colorado Springs the non-sprawl paradise it is --- the urban growth boundary, green belt and fine grained design, among other things --- Portland could aspire to become Colorado Springs.



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