

# Regionwide Planning Will Make the Problem Worse

## *Population growth is ignored by the planners*

by Albert A. Bartlett

What a shock it was to read the editorial of my hometown newspaper, the *Boulder Daily Camera*, and to find there that the paper is advocating a course of action in regard to planning which will make problems worse and which will result in the dilution and destruction of democracy in Boulder County and in the Front Range area of Colorado.

The editorial that conveyed this terrible message carried the title, "Regionwide Planning Needed." The editorial noted that:

*When you realize that Boulder County is one of the fastest-growing areas in the nation, when you regularly encounter traffic-clogged streets, when you see exploding housing prices driving out even the middle class, when you see the shortsighted results of hit-and-run zoning changes, when you watch helplessly as huge land grabs are made through bitter municipal annexation wars, then you know it's time for sensible planning and action at the regional level.*

This compact quotation neatly identifies the cause of the problems (Boulder County is "one of the fastest-growing areas in the nation"), the problems ("traffic-clogged streets," etc.), and the *Camera's* "solution" ("planning and action at the regional level").

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Population growth is causing all the enumerated problems but, as I will demonstrate, *regional planning is not a "solution" because it will enlarge the problems and make them all worse.*

### Regional Planning

Consider the following two facts:

1) Regional planning does not address the cause of the problems that was correctly identified in the editorial, i.e. population growth. A fundamental law of nature is, "You can't solve a problem if you ignore its cause." So no matter how much planning is done, none of the problems will be solved if the population growth is allowed to continue in the County. Aspirin is not a solution for cancer, although it may make the patient more comfortable.

2) At a more fundamental level we must recognize that the main point of planning is to "solve" problems that arise from crowding. Thus, planning is designed to help accommodate larger populations. To see how this works let's imagine that the problem is traffic congestion and that regional planning calls for, and ultimately produces, a large expansion of the regional highway system. This will encourage and facilitate further population growth so that soon the added new population will overwhelm and clog the expanded regional highway system. (Bartlett, 1969, 1973) The taxpayers will have paid for the planning, they will have paid for the expanded highways, and in return they will get traffic congestion on an enlarged regional scale.

Thus, population growth forces us to go to regional planning instead of local planning. This enlarges the problem so that local congestion becomes transformed into regional congestion, and nothing is solved: indeed, the problems of congestion are made worse.

The feedback is positive. Efforts that are made to use regional planning to "solve" local problems cause the local problems to grow to be regional problems.

Here's how it works.

1) Things that impede population growth are regarded as problems that must be solved.

2) It follows then that solving these problems aids and facilitates population growth.

One needs to remember Eric Sevareid's Law: *The chief cause of problems is solutions.* (Sevareid, 1970) Indeed, one can recognize a fundamental Law of Planning:

*Planning in a community or region can provide long-term solutions to community or regional problems only if the planning causes, or is accompanied by, a complete cessation of population growth in the community or region.*

### Regional Planning Dilutes and Ultimately Defeats Democracy

What does regional planning do to democracy? In 1950 the population of the City of Boulder was 20,000. So when speaking to a member of the City Council in 1950, a citizen of Boulder was one voice in 20,000. In 1999 the population of Boulder is approximately five times larger, so one citizen of Boulder now is one voice in 100,000. Population growth in Boulder since 1950 has diluted democracy in Boulder by a factor of five! This is bad enough. But look what will happen if we turn to regional planning as we seek democratic "solutions" to the problems. If there are 300,000 people in the "region," then, as seen by the individual citizen, regional planning will further dilute democracy by another factor of three. If the "region" includes the metropolitan Denver counties with perhaps 2.5 million population, one citizen of Boulder will be reduced to being only one voice in 2.5 million! Then, to make things even worse, if regional planning is "successful" it will hasten the population growth in the region to 3, 4, or even 5 million, with the corresponding further destruction of democracy.

For the individual, democracy is inversely proportional to the size of the participating population.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Isaac Asimov made a very profound observation:

*Democracy cannot survive overpopulation.  
Human dignity cannot survive overpopulation.  
Convenience and decency cannot survive overpopulation. As you put more and more people onto the world, the value of life not only declines, it disappears. It does not matter*

*if someone dies. The more people there are, the less one person matters.* (Moyers, 1980)

### The Remote High Priests of Regional Planning

When regional planning is done, the regional planners are almost impossibly remote from the average citizen. The planners can become a priesthood which has access to the "truth" as it is determined by pliable computer models and by the planners' trusted advisers, who generally are the rich and influential promoters. In their centrally isolated office suites, the regional planners are so remote, and the democratic processes are so dilute, that the regional planners can largely ignore individual citizens and citizens' groups. With all their "expertise," they can override the objections of citizens and recommend the destruction of neighborhoods by putting in mega-malls, industrial centers, beltways, and giant tourist attractions wherever their regional computer models or their influential advisors indicate would be "best for the region." Planners almost never question the need for these large intrusive facilities: if promoters want to put them in. Planning seems to consist solely in finding

***"For the individual, democracy is inversely proportional to the size of the participating population."***

the location that is "best for the region," independent of the wishes of the people of the region. In most cases, "best" means "least bad."

To facilitate these developments the regional planners can always be counted on to produce environmental impact statements that assert with great authority that the impact of each proposed new development on traffic, air and water quality, and on the quality of life, will be "minimal."

It is difficult for the average citizen to counter arguments that are produced by distant and intimidating high priests who are emboldened by their advanced degrees and are masters of their obedient computer models. Through the use of regional planning, democracy is thus replaced by an oligarchy.

### An Example

In 1995 I heard a talk by one of these regional planners for a major metropolitan region in a western state. He had the best professional credentials. His central professional interactions were apparently not with people, but with promoters, planners, statistics and computer models. He was thoroughly insulated from any constituency of ordinary citizens, and when he had to appear before citizens, he made an attempt to sound elevated, erudite, and learned. He showed computer-generated graphs of the projected population growth of the region. With regard to these graphs, he used the term

***"A central ingredient in 'smart growth' is regional planning; but, regional planning encourages more population growth, and population growth is unsustainable."***

"optimistic" to describe the steeply rising curve of the "rapid-growth scenario" and the term "pessimistic" to describe the less rapidly rising curve of the "slow-growth scenario." The growth lines on his graphs went steadily upward all the way to the right edge of the graphs. Though planners are supposed to think about the future, he gave no sign of having thought about what would happen in the years to the right of the right end of his graphs. Would the growth continue forever, or would it sometime stop? (Bartlett, 1978) What might cause the growth to stop? Will the growth produce better lives for the people of the community whose "commons" are being so eagerly destroyed by the influential few who do thereby benefit?

I am sure that if this planner felt that the greater good of the region was served by bisecting a neighborhood with a new concrete freeway, he would have no qualms about destroying the neighborhood by installing the planners' equivalent of the Berlin Wall.

Unfortunately, the planner did not stay to hear the talks that followed his. These talks told of the severe regional problems with the underfunded school systems, the environmental deterioration, the congestion, the air pollution, and the predictable problems with water supply and waste disposal, which are all the direct result of past

growth and which were not currently being adequately addressed even though continued population growth in the area was constantly being stimulated.

### Smart Growth

We hear a lot today about "smart growth," as though "smart growth" was the magic key to the achievement of sustainability. A central ingredient in "smart growth" is regional planning; but, regional planning encourages more population growth, and population growth is unsustainable. (Bartlett 1994, 1998) It is thus clear that "smart growth" can't solve the problems.

"Smart growth" destroys the environment. "Dumb growth" destroys the environment. The only difference is that "smart growth" destroys the environment with good taste. That in itself is a worthwhile goal, but one is still destroying the environment. It's like booking passage on the *Titanic*. If you are dumb, you go steerage. If you are "smart" you go first class. But either way, the result is the same.

It was reported that Ted Turner recently said:

*I maintain there is no such thing as smart growth. We are the one species that is out of control in its growth.* (Turner, 1998)

Smart growth is a means of making unsustainability as pleasant as possible.

### Conclusion

One can guess that regional planning made Los Angeles what it is today. Regional planning in the Front Range area will do for Colorado what it did for southern California. Apparently this is what the *Camera* really wants, for in supporting the population growth that destroys the commons, the *Camera* will increase its circulation numbers. Or does the *Camera* really believe we in Colorado will do things differently from the way they have been done in Southern California?

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