

The Price We Pay for Stagnant Growth

By Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.

For The Sunday Gazette

Educated by several years of editorials in this and other local newspapers, Capital District residents are quite opposed to “sprawl.” Locally, folks to the north are trying their best to thwart construction of yet another Wal-Mart, which seems to have taken on the epitome of sprawl even when one is proposed for a reasonably urbanized area. Good for them.

Yet, I cannot get out of my head that a certain degree of sprawl is intimately related to growth—growth both in fruitful employment and in raw population. It just might be that upstate New York is seriously under populated. But the problem in holding that thought is coping with the virtually unanswerable question of exactly what constitutes an ideal size population, be it for our county, the Capital District, our state, or even for the world. Let’s start with the big picture.

Mother Earth is currently home to about six billion souls (and, unfortunately, a few persons who do not seem to have one). That number is growing by a staggering 200,000 per day, a rate that will bring us to 8.5 GS in 2040. (One GS, or Gigasoul, is a billion people.) That number divided by the land area of the habitable continents yields a pretty low density of people per square mile, but they tend to concentrate in particular places, mostly the warmest ones.

In 1960, only 22% of the world’s people lived in cities. By 1990, that percentage had risen to 34%, and by 2015—a mere ten years from now—half will live in urban areas. By 2050, soothsayers believe that the world’s population, by then at least two-thirds living in cities, will stabilize. An area can be considered overpopulated if it does not have the resources to provide a reasonable standard of living to its residents. Of course, if this reaches crisis proportions, the population in question will plunge, as it is doing in sections of Africa.

In 1930, Schenectady had a population of 96,000, a density of 8,727 per square mile. Even though its population is now down to about 62,000, its density is still about 5,700 per square mile. The only other unit of Schenectady County that has more than a thousand people per square mile is Niskayuna at 1,400 per square mile.

So has the loss of 34,000 people hurt the financial well-being of the City? Certainly yes, for two reasons. The City still has the same number of miles of road to plow and repave, and the median household income of those who left those relatively high-paying GE jobs was, in constant dollars, far more than that of those who live there now. That median household income is now about \$29,000, compared to \$73,000 in Niskayuna. The City could certainly accommodate a return of 30,000 or so people, but only if the area can generate some relatively high paying jobs for them. The site of those jobs needn’t necessarily be within city limits, although an increased city tax base would be very welcome. But development in the County outside those limits is considered sprawl.

I have seen sprawl, and I don’t particularly like it. Each year Jean and I go to visit our daughter and her family in a very nice but rapidly growing suburb of Dallas. The residential parts of her city (what would be called a “town” up here) are very nice, but once one leaves the (ungated) compound and its park-like setting, all roads seem to be six lanes wide. Endless miles of Wolf Road with every mile lined with a CVS, a Kohl’s department store, several banks, and a multitude of restaurants.

Everywhere we’re taken there (I wouldn’t dare drive myself), one sees huge cranes building something new, old roads being widened, and new intersecting roads under construction. One point,

only partly finished, is called the “High Five” because it consists of five crisscrossed layers of freeway. In a few more years I expect two more layers to be added, so that as we approach on one of the lower levels we’ll come to a sign that directs us to Seven Up.

For a while, all this is exciting. Instead of having to choose from a dozen or so restaurants for lunch or dinner, there are hundreds available, and most have long waits to get in. The recreation centers in the area are sights to behold.

But why is my daughter down there in the first place? Well, 20 some years ago when she graduated with accreditation to teach, there just were no openings for new teachers up here. So, very reluctantly, we gave her our blessing to head south. I much prefer the more placid lifestyle around here, but one of the prices many of us pay is seeing our grandchildren infrequently because our sons and daughters flee to where the good-paying jobs are. Can we blame them?

Another price we pay as New Yorkers is our continual loss of national political clout. Decade by recent decade, New York state grows, but grows more slowly than the national average, and slower yet than the increasingly air-conditioned South. In 1952, our Empire State had 45 electoral votes and Texas only 24. By 2004, our share had sunk to 31, and ten of the lost 14 had gone to Texas, now at 34. Our state motto, Excelsior, means “ever upward.” Perhaps we need a new one.

If all this bothers you as much as it does me, then perhaps we should tolerate a bit more sprawl and start importing people throughout the state. It’s either that or finding a way to civilize Texas.

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