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Wall to Wall Sprawl

Density arrives out there in the 'burbs

by [Matt Edens](#)



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After years of resisting the notion that Cedar Bluff is Knoxville's "new downtown," lately I've come to the conclusion that advocates of the area as "the center of Knoxville's population" might be onto something (even if that's, technically, not true). With overcrowded schools, backed-up traffic and houses being crammed into the last bits of available land, it seems like many of the problems that first drove folks from the city in the '50s and '60s have come home to roost.

And it seems bound to get worse. First the state seems intent on railroading, so to speak, a new interstate bypass through Hardin Valley that'll open up more land to development. That's a project which, coincidentally, also supports the "new downtown" thesis, since the traffic jams it aims to skirt aren't downtown at all; they're on the 10 or so miles of interstate between I-640 and the 40/75 split. For practical purposes the "Knoxville Bypass" is really the "West Knoxville Bypass." And not only are West Knox Countians being shoved out of their homes to make way for the new road, the First Utility District is also shoving some people out of their homes (or home, sort of) to build a new sewer plant at Calloway's Landing.

Now that last bit—the sewer plant—apparently has quite a few people out Farragut way pretty ticked. And it's led to my acquaintance with what may be a unique species of activist: the pro sprawl anti-sprawl advocate. It goes something like this: If they build that sewer plant, then next thing you know they'll be building houses everywhere. Maybe even townhomes! Why, it perverts the natural order of things—a septic tank and a half-acre slice of heaven, or something like that. I don't quite follow the logic beyond the broad strokes: Sprawl isn't really sprawl as long as it's really, well, sprawling.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not in any hurry to see townhouses take over the tiny amount of farmland left around Farragut. But if that same land is carved up into "estate" lots that are too big to mow and too little to plow, is it really any better?

Perhaps if Farragut and its environs had been a little more densely developed in the first place, West Knox County wouldn't be in the dilemma it's in: running out of room to build and struggling to accommodate the traffic that knits its far-flung fabric together.

Worse, beset by the prevailing mentality that density is the root of all evil, our solutions to runaway suburban development have been, largely, to run farther away. The setbacks get deeper, the landscape "buffers" get bigger, the uses more separated; separation of use is the golden rule of suburban development, a planning concept meaning that you live here, work there, shop over there and drive everywhere. And yet the same people who demand all this crap are mystified as to why we're running out of undeveloped rural land?

"We are never," writes critic and curmudgeon Jim Kunstler, "going to save the rural places or the agricultural places or the wild and scenic places (or the wild species that dwell there) unless we identify the human habitat and then strive to

make it so good that humans will voluntarily inhabit it.”

Unfortunately we’ve allowed most of those habitats—our traditional towns and cities—to become so rundown that, as Kunstler observes: “Anyone with the means to do so has fled, shrieking, to dwell instead in either a rural setting or the mock-rural setting represented by suburbia.”

The irony is that as every square inch of West Knox County is being paved over and developed to the point that even the sprawl-dwellers have become anti-sprawl, and large amounts of Knoxville’s center-city have more or less returned to nature. I got an email yesterday from someone working on a project to tackle the large number of abandoned houses and vacant lots in the inner city. Step one was compiling a neighborhood-by-neighborhood list of such properties, which was what the email was about. I sent him back a list of 24 addresses, more or less off the top of my head. That’s 24 abandoned, boarded-up houses in just one neighborhood. And that’s not even a complete list, or one that even counts vacant lots. Hell, it wasn’t too long ago that some people actually moved into downtown for the peace and tranquility (Boy, were they mad when the music started...).

So fight to stop townhomes from taking over Farragut if you want. Me, I’m hoping someone starts building townhomes in town.

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