

# **Urban Sprawl:** How did end up creating these low-density, automobile-dependent sprawling settlements?

How can we live in an environment of Urban Sprawl in an age of rising fuel costs, when the automobile is no longer a viable means of transportation?

*Notes on a discussion with Karen Melby, Manager of Current Planning for the City of Sparks, NV.*

Karen Melby has been with the City of Sparks as an urban and regional planner for seven years and now is the Manager of Current Planning.

She holds a Masters of Urban and Regional Planning degree from the University of Pittsburgh, has been a city planner for over 27 years and has also worked for the Cities of Reno, Carson City and Douglas County Nevada and was a consultant for 15 years.

I sat down with Karen at the CityWorks office to ask her to discuss the current state of our built environment on both a national and local level, and to investigate how we as a nation might be able to change the way planning decisions are made as well as our attitudes as a whole society can be changed in order to move us towards more sustainable and less auto-dependent development.

In order to answer these questions, it is important first to understand the reasons why we live in a country of sprawling settlements. Melby outlined the main factors that have contributed to the creation of urban sprawl in America.

-One of the most defining events in Melby's estimation was The Interstate Highway Act of 1958. This ushered in an era of high-speed, easy automobile-based transportation travel across the US. Melby also notes that this is a prime example of many of the the decisions and policies made by the Federal Government that have encouraged private automobile use, which in turn has directly contributed to the development of our low-density suburban environments.

Another Federal Government decision that has had long reaching effects on our cities and on the creation of suburbia was The GI housing bill, passed in 1944 which made low-interest housing loans available to thousands and thousands of GI's returning from WWII. This flooded the housing market with unprecedented numbers of home buyers, which in turned created an enormous demand for single family housing. (The infamous mass-produced planned community of Levittown, in Nassau county New York was a direct result of the GI Housing Bill.)

-The Federal Government has also been responsible for the creation of zoning plans which have emphasized and favored more auto-friendly projects-street widening, road expansions, to name a few, at the expense of the older, existing mass-transit systems that were in place in many cities in America until the 1950's. Many of the older cities that had viable rail and trolley systems did away with them in the '50's and '60's due to extensive lobbying at the federal level from oil and auto companies that gave municipalities incentives to do so.

Other Federal Government incentives included the issuance of block grants in 1955 to local municipalities to encourage the creation of zoning regulations that emphasized separation of uses. Before this time, many urban industrial areas were plagued with squalid conditions of industrial and residential areas existing in close proximity to one another, often times creating unhealthy and undesirable living conditions for urban dwellers. The encouragement

of separate zones for separate uses was perhaps done with good intentions: the belief that if residential areas were separated from manufacturing and commercial uses, that conditions would be better for all. This may be true but what it has also meant is that people have to travel larger distances to go about their daily activities (work, shopping, etc.) Newer zoning regulations encouraging separation of uses has ultimately pushed housing areas further and further out from the city core, thus contributing to the creation of a commuter society.

Along with Federal Government policies, another increasingly major influence on City Planning departments are the corporate policies of many retail chain stores when negotiating minimum parking spaces for proposed developments. Obviously, a big-box retail chain wants as much parking as possible, because this will make it as convenient as possible for consumers to patronize their stores. The current mandated minimum parking requirements in most areas of Sparks require that a proposed retail development must provide at least 4 parking spaces per 1000 square feet of retail space. Some corporate chains however want to build 5 spaces per 1,000. This has been at the center of many planner-developer conflicts over the years. The parking debate does figure into the fueling of an automobile-centered society, for easy parking encourages people to drive, whereas in areas where there is less or no mandated parking requirements, people might seek alternatives. As Melby states, “when you go downtown or to a congested urban area to go shopping or do anything, you know that parking will be difficult so you are more likely to take the bus.”

Wider streets are another element, along with easy parking, that encourages people to drive more. As more low-density suburbs and exurbs grow, streets are made to be wider and, as Melby points out, discourage pedestrian traffic by the way that they’re designed. She cites a prime example of this in northwest Reno on Mae Ann, where the pedestrian is forced to walk right next to the multi-lane street, where vehicle traffic travels at speeds of 35-40 mph. The pedestrian is uncomfortably sandwiched between the noise attenuating walls and the cars; this is psychologically an uncomfortable passage way for anyone who is on foot, and thus discourages foot traffic and by extension, public transportation use, since this involves requires that the user walk and wait for the bus in these spaces.

The last cause of urban sprawl on Melby’s list is cheap fuel. The fact that gasoline has been so relatively inexpensive is at the base of our automobile-centered building and regional planning. Now that this keystone element is slipping away, most likely forever, we are left with our sprawling suburbia and consequently faced with large expanses of land that need to be traversed daily with dwindling means for doing so.

But we can’t start over-Melby says that it would be impossible monetarily to simply tear everything up and rebuild higher-density communities. Instead, we will have to make changes in our existing environment and in how we make planning decisions for future development projects. This led me to post the question:

“How can we get out of this mess? and how is your office of planners changing your criteria for new development and review?”

The most plausible and possible way to make our communities more sustainable is to expand and improve mass transit. Though this seems obvious, the local Regional Transit Commission has but its emphasis on the wrong path; Melby says that she and her department are constantly frustrated at the RTC’s continued proposals to combat traffic congestion by widening roads and building more lanes in our streets instead of emphasizing expanding bus system expansion. Melby says that ideally, we need to move in the direction of Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT, which

would move the buses out of general traffic, create a separate lane, (in essence, a“track” of sorts, ) and move the stops off of street corners, and onto platforms, such as those which exist for light rail systems.

But another obstacle that needs to be overcome in order to bring a viable mass transit system to the Truckee Meadows is the public’s misconception that public transportation is only for those who are of the lower economic classes, i.e. those who cannot afford an automobile. Melby cites a commercial for a local employment agency that depicts a woman getting onto an RTC bus to bid the driver farewell, the premise being that since she had found a better job she could thus afford a car. Melby said that she called the agency and logged an official complaint against this ad, and has not seen it aired since then. Her main objection is that recreating and re-emphasizing the stigma of economic underclass rider-ship of Reno’s public transportation system is part of what keeps potential riders in their cars, and thus jeopardizes further development of mass transit in the region.

Melby states that not only do mass transit systems need to be emphasized on a municipal level, but on a national level, there needs to be a re-investment in our national rail system. Transporting freight via rail is much more energy efficient, more economically viable in the long run and now, market forces are creating a resurgence in the freight rail industry, as shipping via truck costs skyrocket. She cites a current proposal for industrial development in Lockwood, NV. (just east of the City of Sparks, NV.) where permits will be issued only to those whose properties have rail access, with the aim of promoting rail use.

The City of Sparks Current Development department is implementing standards for new development that are intended to help curb the proliferation of sprawl. Among the measures that Melby’s department is working to change minimum density requirements for new developments, meaning that in order to obtain a permit, there has to be a higher level of proposed density than there was in the past. Part of this includes the encouragement of more multiple-story construction and changing zoning requirements to allow for more mixed use-which would put more commercial development within walking distance of residential developments.

They are also changing minimum requirements for parking spaces per square foot, and now requiring only one parking space per living unit, whereas in the past, developers had to provide one parking space per bedroom. In downtown Reno, new developments are no longer required to provide any parking space for new spaces-(which Melby thinks is too stringent, because most people want to have an automobile to at least be able to access the many outdoor activities here in the Truckee Meadows.)

What can we, as the public do to encourage sustainable development in our communities and combat sprawl?

First and foremost, Melby says, is that all of us need to pay attention to what our local and federal government officials and politicians are doing and planning. We as citizens should attend public hearings and put in suggestions in the beginning stages of planning. This happens far too infrequently, as most people only show up in the latter stages to protest the decisions that have already been made! (by then, it is often too late for any public input to be considered.)

Melby recently attended the American Planning Association National Planning Conference in Las Vegas last April. the consensus at this conference was that finally, people will begin to listen to planners, what planners have

been telling everyone, city officials, developers and the public for decades-that our current, low-density horizontal development is not sustainable, too expensive and ultimately, undesirable. Planners have also been warning us about our nation's disinvestment in our aging public infrastructure (a concern that was tragically highlighted last summer in Minneapolis with the collapse of the I-35 bridge on August 1st, 2007, killing 12 people.)

In the face of global warming, high fuel prices, America is, in Melby's estimation, on the cusp of a revolution of sorts. Public records are already showing a large increase in public transit use across the nation, and public opinion is shifting towards development that encourages the changes that Melby is advocating-less driving, more mass transit, and more efficient city planning. We can only hope that it isn't too little, too late.