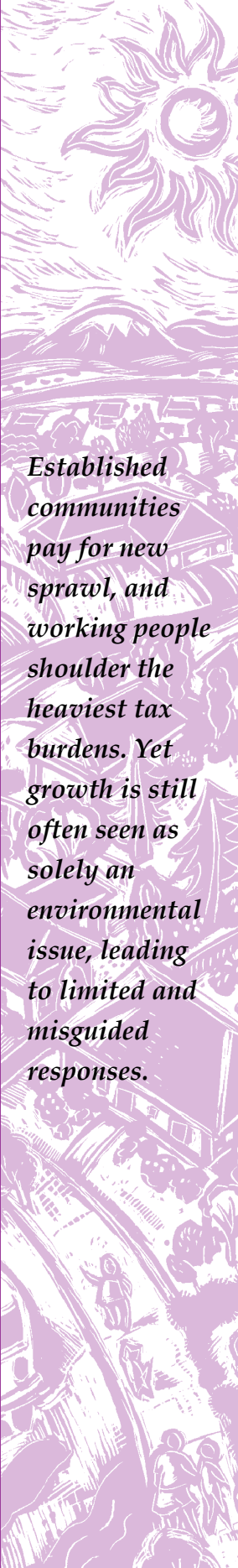


The answer to urban sprawl may be restructuring our tax code

Urban sprawl and social justice

by Don Hopps



Established communities pay for new sprawl, and working people shoulder the heaviest tax burdens. Yet growth is still often seen as solely an environmental issue, leading to limited and misguided responses.

Population growth and urban sprawl are facts throughout our region, but their profound implications for public policy are not well understood. In Washington state, the area around central Puget Sound is experiencing particularly rapid growth, presenting many challenges.

In 1995, the Institute for Washington's Future commissioned Myron Orfield to conduct a comprehensive regional analysis of the situation. Orfield is a professor of law and a state legislator from Minneapolis /St. Paul who, in conjunction with the research organization the Metropolitan Area Program, has developed a powerful way of analyzing population changes and their implications. Orfield, through his position in the Minnesota legislature, has also been able to effect many of the changes he recommends.

The Metropolitan Area Program analysis of Seattle demonstrates that growth in the area follows the patterns common to older American cities around the country. The impact of growth is revealed along three major fault lines:

- Our natural environment is being progressively degraded — salmon runs in steep decline, open space consumed by urban sprawl, etc.
- Basic fairness in our social and economic systems is disappearing — income gaps higher than they have ever been; Black, Latino and Native males more likely in jail than in college; potholes in some communities while others get tax breaks and shiny new facilities.
- Community and civility is being strained — “road rage” in the suburbs and trust in civic institutions at a low point.

Taxes & urban sprawl

Our unfair tax system distributes the costs of our collective actions and responsibilities unevenly, so that established communities pay for new sprawl, and working people shoulder the heaviest tax burdens. For example, in one low / moderate income Seattle suburb, the tax rate is twice that in a neighboring, affluent suburb, although the quality of services

provided by those tax dollars for schools, roads, etc., is considerably lower.

In general, the poor live in communities with low tax capacity, high tax rate, decaying infrastructure, and growing social need. As federal and state support disappear, they must make desperate choices, such as choosing between improving deteriorating roads or inadequate schools. Meanwhile, affluent suburbs attract more well-off residents and high-end businesses with low tax rates. In the long run, the widening financial gap between individuals is reinforced by the communities they live in.

At the same time, this tax system cannot produce the money we need where we need it to address our collective problems. We sit in city-wide traffic jams because we cannot find enough money to develop a complete transportation system. The fractured nature of governmental jurisdictions is partly to blame. Lacking a regional framework, governmental bodies often compete with each other or waste precious resources on partial local responses to broader problems.

Yet despite these facts, growth is still often characterized solely as an environmental issue, leading to limited and misguided responses. For example, money invested to preserve farmland or build parks, two common demands by those who see growth solely as an environmental crisis, do nothing to change the inequities that drive sprawl. Indeed, those two measures tend to increase the inequity, as neither farmland nor new parks benefit inner city residents directly.

As problems grow, so too does the opportunity for manipulation. Conservative activists use anger stirred up by these problems to further build anti-government and anti-tax sentiment. One of their favorite tactics is to finger scapegoats, particularly the increasing population of recent immigrants. Thus real issues are obscured, while groups that should be leaders in developing sound solutions are distracted by conflict.

Taxes & social justice

If we believe in social justice, we must change these underlying dynamics that stifle low- and

moderate-income communities. If we succeed, we will serve the environment better, as well. Wealthy people build enclaves on the fringes of our cities (consuming land and degrading the environment in the process) to escape the deterioration of the central areas.

This situation requires that we change our politics, as Orfield suggests, by turning the tax issue on its head. In recent years, the conservative Right has made "No new taxes" it's rallying cry. Orfield suggests we make ours "A fair shake in taxes." This orientation allows us

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Where the votes are

by Ed Zuckerman

Before the advent of Reagan Democrats, New Democrats and rightist movements like "wise use" and the Christian Coalition, the political lay of the land used to be pretty straightforward. Democrats and progressives won in urban and blue collar areas, Republicans won in rural communities and wealthy suburbs, and in a few jurisdictions the voters swung between the two parties. Since most people lived in urban districts and/or blue collar suburbs, Democrats controlled most political jurisdictions.

In the past few decades the political map has been turned on its head and the dominant political power in this country, particularly in the West are the sprawling suburbs ringing such cities as Seattle, Portland, Boise, Las Vegas.

Taking the Seattle metropolitan area as an example, in the past 30 years the inner city population of Seattle has remained fairly constant while the suburbs ringing Seattle have nearly doubled in population. Since 1960 the city's population has hovered around 500,000 inhabitants (480,000 in 1960 compared to 516,000 today) while the non-Seattle King County population has grown from 800,000 in 1960 to 1.9 million. With a projected doubling of King County's population within the next 20 years, an additional 2 million people will crowd into Seattle's suburbs.

Thus, in a generation Seattle's portion of total King County population will have dropped from near 40% to 13 or even 12%.

The political ramifications of these trends are staggering. The erosion of urban progressives' power in their respective state legislatures will continue unabated, leaving progressive communities fighting over an ever-smaller slice of the pie.

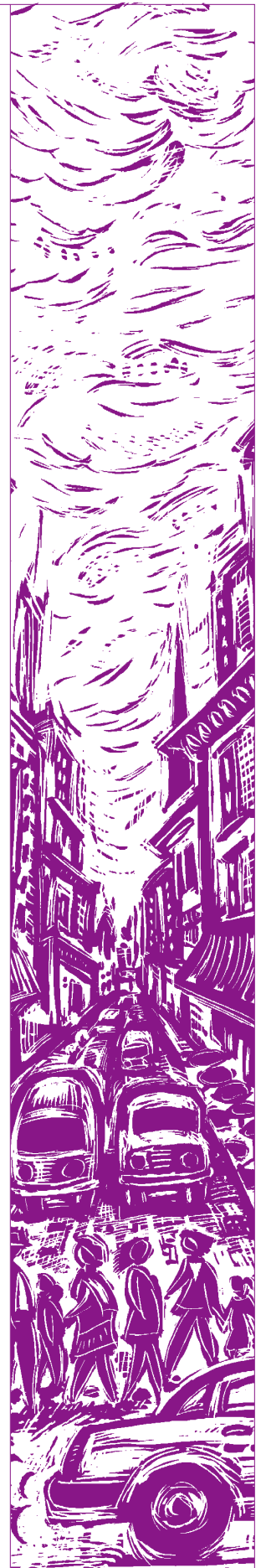
The answer of course is to stop jealously defending our crumbs and learn to win the hearts and minds of the majority suburban voters. Issues such as growth, traffic, protection of open spaces, and a strong commitment of local government funds for infrastructure and social services are becoming the dominant issues in suburban areas. In fact, quality of life issues are often the magnets that attract our region's suburban newcomers in the first place.

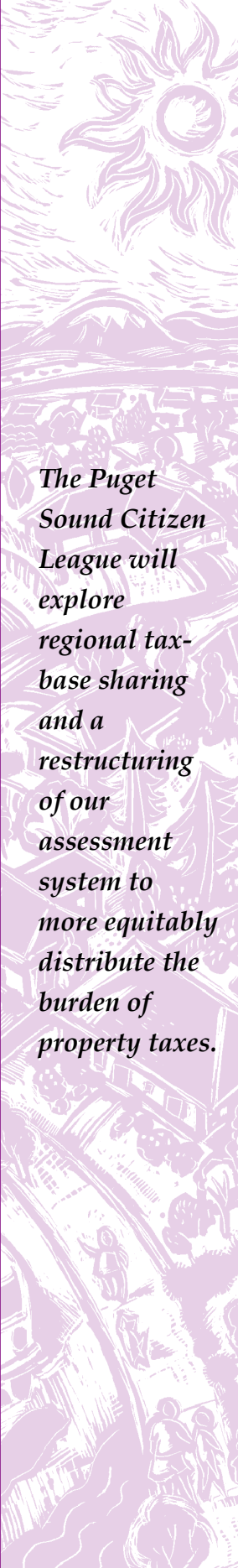
However, research by Myron Orfield, a Minnesota state representative reveals that not all suburbs are created equal. The notion of a homogeneous 1950s-style "Leave it to Beaver" suburban community is debunked by Mr. Orfield's research.

For example, in the older Seattle suburbs of Kent, Renton and Burien (all developed right after World War II) there are currently higher concentrations of poverty and unemployment than in the inner city of Seattle. Meanwhile, the newer suburban cities such as Redmond (in the shadow of Microsoft) attract all the wealthy newcomers and all the government services and infrastructure spending.

Those fighting for a strong growth management agenda and a social safety net would do well to win over voters of all political stripes who live in these bedroom communities. Developing an agenda that speaks to them might just help progressive regain control our state legislatures going into the year 2000 and beyond.

Ed Zuckerman has extensive experience running candidate campaigns at the state and federal levels. He currently serves as executive director of Washington Conservation Voters/Washington Environmental Alliance for Voter Education.





The Puget Sound Citizen League will explore regional tax-base sharing and a restructuring of our assessment system to more equitably distribute the burden of property taxes.

Urban sprawl and social justice

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to talk about economic gaps between communities in a way that cynical voters may hear.

Orfield demonstrates how this can be done. When he entered the Minnesota legislature representing a Minneapolis district, he ran right into the “city versus suburbs” split that has become the norm in American politics. In Minnesota progressive proposals were constantly going down before a coalition of suburban and rural legislators. The key element in this coalition was the monolithic suburban delegation composed of representatives from very conservative, affluent suburbs and blue-collar suburbs, both Republican and Democrat voting against “tax and spend” measures that benefited the “Big City” constituencies. This coalition broadcast an anti-city message that won elections in volatile, swing districts.

Orfield split the suburban monolith with a tax-sharing proposal that shifted from greed to need. The proposal pooled a substantial portion of tax revenue from the entire metropolitan Minneapolis/St. Paul-region. The funds were distributed back to participating jurisdictions according to a need-based formula. This progressive tax shift benefited the communities in which more than half of the suburban population lived and reduced tax inequalities from 50 to 1 down to 12 to 1. Because half of the pooled funds were to be used for tax relief, individuals within those communities gained directly.

The proposal won votes because it immediately benefited a large majority of voters. The suburban monolith split down the economic fault line, as elected representatives of declining suburbs — Democrats and Republicans alike — voted the real interests rather than the myth-based identity of their constituencies. The measure passed and more policies based on the same principles have followed.

The affect of this approach is to expose both the gaps in our society, and the real and common interests of the vast majority of American voters. Such policies provide an effective way for people to respond to the growing economic and social polarization in our society. For once, we can really get even and not just mad.

Taking action

For the past two years, the Institute for Washington’s Future has worked towards this change by establishing a Metropolitan Reform effort based on the Orfield analysis. The Institute has brought together the Puget Sound Citizen’s League, a strong coalition of community groups, environmental organizations, labor unions, and social service providers to develop effective and equitable mechanisms to address the region’s pressing problems and restore our ability to govern ourselves in the region. First priority is to build leadership and participation in the low- and moderate-income communities adversely affected by growth.

The League’s mission has three dimensions:

- Form a broad coalition of representative groups concerned with regional issues.
 - Inform ourselves, elected officials, and the public, of the problems we face and the solutions available to us as a region.
 - Adopt an action agenda to address our regional problems as a region.
- The Puget Sound Citizen League will act on solutions to these problems, such as:
- Regional tax-base sharing and restructuring our assessment system to more fairly distribute the burden of property taxes.
 - A system of fees for development and service that imposes the cost of growth on those who benefit from it.
 - New forms of cooperation among governmental entities such as the creation of a metropolitan district to organize state service to and regulation of our area.

Through this comprehensive program, we hope to address the complex and wide-ranging effects of urban sprawl at their roots, and in doing so transform its dynamics, while making Puget Sound a more just and neighborly place to live and work.

