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OUR AFFILIATES



OPINION

Monday, June 26, 2006

## Sprawl: Planning for health

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER EDITORIAL BOARD

Seattle, King County and Washington state have made progress in combating suburban sprawl. But there is a lot more to do.

The struggle is more urgent than most of us tend to think. As a new report shows, containing sprawl, creating densely populated urban centers and ending our excessive reliance on cars are matters of life, death and good health for people as much as for the environment.

The latest Cascadia Scorecard, from the Northwest environmental group Sightline, shines an intense light on the ways public policies affect everything from gasoline use to our chances of dying in car crashes. By a range of measures, living in compact urban areas is better for us.

The Sightline study looks at life in Cascadia, a region the organization defines as including parts of northern California, Montana and Alaska as well as all or most of Washington, Oregon, Idaho and British Columbia. The conclusions mirror those of other experts. And the density movement, which the state's Growth Management Act promoted largely to protect the environment, now has become a way to help people.

As Christopher Leinberger of the Brookings Institution told the Downtown Seattle Association recently, the public's preferences increasingly favor compact, walkable neighborhoods. An active, urban lifestyle is good for them, and for the fight against global warming.

Like downtown Bellevue, many suburbs are changing, too. As Leinberger noted, the Washington, D.C., area's Metro train system has spawned more than a dozen walkable housing and commercial centers. If that is to happen here, it is critical to expand Sound Transit as soon as it begins light rail service in 2009.

Some politicians have taken a strong interest in transit, walkability and health issues. Especially when it compares U.S. portions of Cascadia with Canadian cities, the Sightline report helps explain why. Residents of British Columbia live an average of two years longer than Washingtonians, in substantial part because B.C. development patterns reduce traffic fatalities and encourage walking with its helpful effects on weight, blood pressure and the chances of various kinds of cancer.

Americans deserve healthy lives as much as their Canadian neighbors. Better planning of cities (not to mention a more rational system of health care) would help walk us in that direction.

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 40.8%

An urban area

 35.9%

The country

 3.5%

Anywhere it rains less

Total Votes: 287

 13.9%

A suburb

 5.9%

A suburban town center

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