

THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF SEATTLE: A VISION OF 2040 FOR PUGETOPOLIS

by [Richard Morrill](#) 08/06/2008



I have been attacked as a defender of ‘sprawl’ although I consider myself a man of the left, with a political-economy philosophy that is ‘social democratic – far to the left of the contemporary Democratic party. I view global warming as very serious, but consider continuing global warfare over resources, land and religion, and increasing national and global economic and political inequality as even more critical.

As a realist/naturalist/skeptic, rather than idealist, I believe a scientist’s goal is to understand and explain the rich variety of actual needs, motivations and behavior of individuals, groups and institutions. I chose geography instead of planning, because I am uncomfortable with a normative approach of telling people how they ought to behave (in the absence of adequate theory and evidence).

In my long career in planning I have become skeptical about many things that are widely considered “progressive.” This includes disbelief in two icons of a normative New Urbanist planning: urban growth boundaries and rail transit. In my original testimony to the Growth Strategies Commission 20 years ago, I warned that use of a crude geographic tool (growth boundaries) would lead to land and housing price inflation, leapfrog development and would benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. Sadly, this proved to be the case. Rather than use zoning to create open space, I believe fairness dictates it be acquired through public purchase for public use.

On rail, my skepticism grew out of considerations of class fairness, since it squanders limited public resources for limited results, and again benefits the rich at the expense of the poor. The real transit problem is not capacity but accessibility to people and jobs. I like trains and have been on dozens of rail or subway systems around the world, many successful, others relative failures. Unfortunately, the geography of Seattle militates against rail’s success here.

Before we try to guess what greater Seattle might or could (not “should” or “will”) look like in 2040, we must be clear about the nature of the geographic setting, and needs and preferences of its people.

For example, there are distinct populations who prefer denser urban living (structures and neighborhoods), and those who prefer less dense living (single-family homes and neighborhoods). Some economic activities require dense agglomerative settings; others need greater horizontal space or external connections.

In the immediate Seattle region currently about 40 percent of people and jobs are at the denser more agglomerative and 60 percent at the less dense, more dispersed end. Unfortunately for New Urbanist idealism, far more than half of people do not live within walking or biking distance to work or school. By 2040 the share of people preferring or accepting denser urban living in the close in areas could rise to 50 percent (for demographic and land cost reasons) but that will still leave 50 percent or 2.5 of 5 million people preferring a lower density environment. Planners should have learned that many people need private space (yards) as well as public (parks and playgrounds). And it is truly difficult to envision a higher share of more agglomerative jobs; costs of transportation will likely bring residences and workplaces closer to the peripheral communities.

Another inescapable reality is that trucks will remain the dominant mode for goods transport and that the car, personal transport, will still, yes, be the dominant mode of person movement. Transit (and walking and bicycling) could rise to 25 percent and carpooling could become a lot higher, but cars, far more efficient and greener, will still be the rule. It is absurd to imagine otherwise – this is precisely the kind of innovation that at which American technology excels.

Most political leaders and senior planners know these “realities” perfectly well but seem to have trouble reining in the their often overly idealistic staff. Yet an intelligent view of what will be in 2040 rests on facts and people’s demonstrated preferences, not on New Urbanist theorizing.

So what does 2040 look like? The population will likely grow but the forecast of a 50 percent increase is far from sure. The odds are better than even that growth will be moderately less, because of demography (aging population, lowering fertility of past immigrants), and the high cost of Seattle for residence and for business. Instead we likely will see growth spill over to less costly and restrictive cities like Spokane, Bellingham, Yakima and the Tri-Cities.

We don’t know the likely degree of housing affordability and of the relative severity of constraints on the land supply. Again based on history and demography/education, I’d say the odds are in favor of continuing constraints, over-regulation and housing unaffordability.

Personal transport will still prevail in 2040, but much of transport technology and policy is uncertain. There will probably be new trains, because people seem to want them, although their contribution to mobility will be modest.

Smaller communities around Seattle would be well-advised not to allow themselves to be pulled too closely into a downtown-centric transit network since, as Nobel economist Paul Samuelson showed in 1956, this almost guarantees that the outlying centers will lose high level functions and income to

the central node. Tacoma, Everett and Bellevue would each be better off developing themselves than subordinating their destiny to downtown Seattle. Bellevue's success as a competitive edge city is because of the barrier effect of Lake Washington!

So given these considerations, what will Seattle and its region look like in 2040? Look around you because the future city will look and feel amazingly like the present city, just as the city today is much like the city of 1975. It will be somewhat denser, especially in the core region but overall the urban footprint will grow only slightly and begrudgingly. Instead, most substantial growth in Pugetopolis will occur in satellite towns and adjacent counties and beyond, which is not necessarily a bad thing but may offend many planners.

In this new configuration, the central city of Seattle will do fine – due to its popularity, site and situation benefits (and the high land prices). There will be continued gentrification, dominated by the childless affluent, and displacement of the less well off to some of the older, less amenity rich suburbs. Inequality will remain high and segregation by class will probably increase. Transportation congestion and substantial long distance commuting will not have lessened, despite trains or the implementation of demand management, because of likely over-investment in large glamour projects, and the continued separation of residences and jobs.

Experience suggests to me that the future Pugetopolis will continue to be the uneasy compromise between the idealist visionaries of the golden city and the dictates of the human condition and the economy. This is not a pessimistic forecast, rather a realistic one. The metropolis of 2040 may well be a somewhat better place than it is now, but just not very!

Richard Morrill came to Seattle 53 years ago for graduate school, and after stints in Illinois and Sweden, returned to the University of Washington Geography department in 1961, where he has taught for 44 years.