The Antiplanner
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Should Seattle Aspire to Grow to 2 Million People?

An article in *The Urbanist* last month breathlessly reveals that the city of Seattle can be built up into a city of 2 million people without a lot of high-rise development. All that is necessary to achieve that growth, the article claims, is to rezone single-family neighborhoods to allow midrise apartment buildings.

Seattle can house 165 percent more people so long as neighborhoods like this . . . (Photo by Joe Mabel)

As of 2019, Seattle had slightly more than 750,000 people living at about 9,000 people per square mile, making it the sixth-densest of the nation's 50 largest cities. *The Urbanist* proposal represents a 165 percent increase in population resulting in densities close to 24,000 people per square mile, denser than any city in America other than New York City and a few of its suburbs.

The article's writer, Ryan DiRaimo, describes himself as an architect who "advocates for density, pedestrian safety and world class mass transit." Yet his article never bothers to say why Seattle would want to grow to 2 million people, apparently taking it for granted that readers of *The Urbanist* will already know the answer. Nor does he consider whether 2 million Pacific Northwestern residents would actually want to live in such a dense place considering that the recent pandemic is leading more people than ever to move to lower-density areas.

Density supporters such as DiRaimo don't want density because people want to live that way. DiRaimo observes that one five-story apartment building in Seattle has units that average "over 1,000 square feet. Big enough for a family." But families with children don't want to live in cramped apartments. The developer of subsidized five-story apartment buildings in Minneapolis once told me that the only child who ever lived in one of his apartments lived there because the couple found out they were pregnant only after they signed the lease, and they moved out as soon as the lease was up.

. . . are either willing or forced to accept developments like this. But do 2 million Northwesterners want to live in such developments? (Photo by Joe Mabel.)

No problem, say urban planners. Most American households don't have children, and if families with children don't want to live in cramped apartments, that still leaves a lot of other people. But just because people don't have children doesn't mean they want to live in a small apartment when for the same money they could buy a single-family home in the suburbs (at least, they could if their urban area doesn't have an urban-growth boundary or practice some other form of growth management).

Densimaniacs, particularly those who favor four- and five-story mixed-use developments, take their inspiration from Greenwich Village as featured in Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs was defending her neighborhood from planners who thought it was a slum and should be torn down. Maybe it wasn't a slum

in 1960, when she was writing, but much of it was originally built as tenement housing in the 1880s and 1890s, with densities as great as one large family per room. While Greenwich Village was Jacobs' lifestyle choice in 1960, New Urbanist planners have twisted her words to argue that all cities should look like Greenwich Village today.

The inspiration for the New Urbanism. Photo by Jacob Riis.

Such planners say they want density because they think it will save energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. They're wrong: as reported in a previous policy brief, people who live in cities as dense as DiRaimo wants do drive less than suburbanites, but because they drive in more congested traffic, they end up using more fuel and emitting more greenhouse gases than their auto-liberated cousins in low-density suburbs.

Accessibility vs. Mobility

The other argument for high-density living is that it gives people access to more resources without having to drive. People living in dense cities can walk to shops, take light rail (which is far from world-class transit) to work, and have more daily face-to-face contacts than their benighted suburban or small-town counterparts.

One problem with this is that the pandemic has dramatically reduced people's interest in having frequent face-to-face contacts. Maybe DiRaimo has somehow escaped hearing about the pandemic, but even Richard Florida now admits that the pandemic has made pre-existing decentralization trends irreversible.

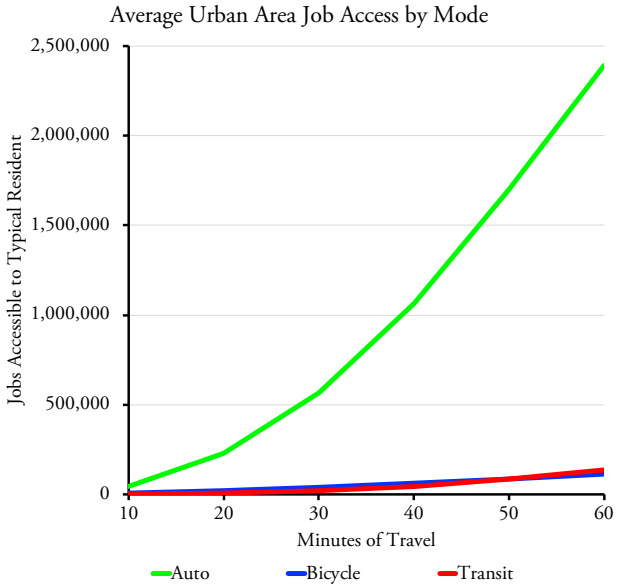
Aside from that, new data from the University of Minnesota Accessibility Observatory confirms that even world-class transit can't give people as much access to economic opportunities as an automobile. In fact, people dependent on transit don't even have as much access as bicycle riders.

The observatory recently published its 2019 automobile access report, which joins the 2019 transit and 2019 bicycle reports. Each of the reports estimates how many jobs the typical resident of each of the nation's 50 largest urban areas could reach in 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, and 60 minutes by auto, transit, or bicycle. For bicycles, the observatory offered two sets of numbers: one for "low-stress" cyclists who will only ride on separate bike paths and one for "medium-stress" cyclists willing to bicycle in streets provided those streets have designated bike lanes.

To save you time transcribing the data, I've posted the numbers in a single spreadsheet that allows you to make charts for any of the 50 urban areas similar to the ones in this policy brief. For bicycles, I used the medium-stress numbers as I assume that anyone who regularly cycles to work will soon develop the skills needed to ride in such conditions.

Accessibility in the Average Urban Area

Starting with the average of the fifty large urban areas measured by the observatory, Americans can reach 67 times as many jobs in a ten-minute auto drive as a 10-minute transit ride. The automobile's advantage decreases with longer trips, but even at 60 minutes auto users can reach 12 times



as many jobs as transit riders.

In fact, auto users can reach more jobs in 10 minutes than transit riders can reach in 40 minutes, and more jobs in 20 minutes than transit riders can reach in 60 minutes. Worse (for transit), bicycle riders can reach more jobs than transit riders for all trip lengths up to 50 minutes. Only with 60-minute trips does transit have a small advantage over cycling.

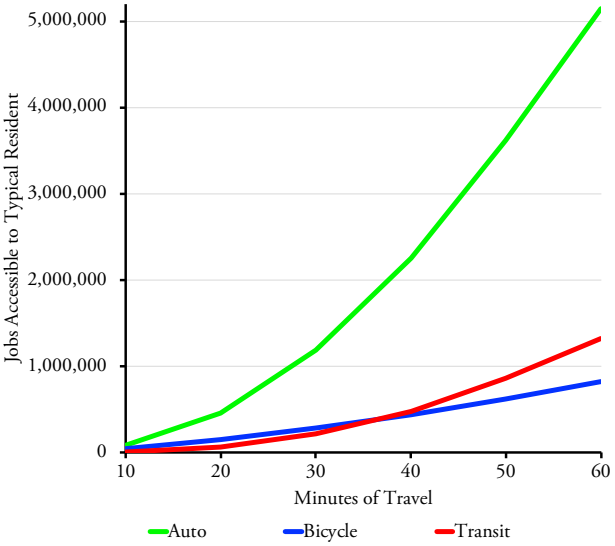
Accessibility in New York and Seattle

New York is America's densest major city and one of the densest urban areas. It also has what is unarguably a world-class transit system. If transit and density can't provide accessibility in New York, it can't do it anywhere in America, even in a Seattle grown to 2 million people.

The numbers show that transit in New York does a little better than elsewhere, but not a lot. In 10 minutes of travel, a typical urban-area resident can reach 14 times as

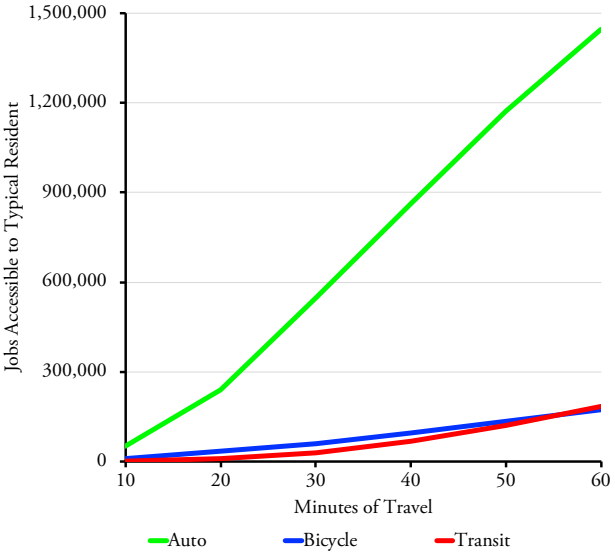
many jobs as a 10-minute transit ride. Even in 60 minutes, auto users can reach four times as many jobs as transit riders. Transit riders need more than 20 minutes to reach as many jobs as auto users can reach in 10; they need almost 60 minutes to reach as many jobs as auto users can reach in 30. Bicycle riders can also reach more jobs than transit riders in trips of 30 minutes or less.

New York Urban Area Job Access by Mode



Seattle is more typical. Autos can reach 32 times as many jobs as transit in 10 minutes, decreasing to 8 times as many in 60 minutes. Autos can also reach more jobs in 10 minutes than 30 minutes by transit and more jobs in 20 minutes than 60 minutes by transit. Bicycles can reach more jobs than transit for all trips under 55 minutes.

Seattle Urban Area Job Access by Mode



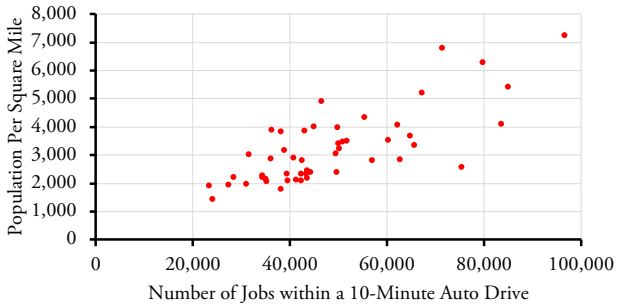
Accessibility Among Urban Areas

What about between urban areas? Are density-advocates correct that denser urban areas give people access to more jobs? The answer appears to be yes, but disappointingly for transit advocates, the strongest correlation between job access and density is for auto users.

To calculate this, I used the land areas for urban areas that were identified in the 2010 census. The Census Bureau estimates urban area boundaries based on population densities and development for every decennial census. It then estimates the populations within those boundaries every year after the census, so I divided the 2019 population estimates by the 2010 land areas. People living in new developments outside of those boundaries aren't counted, so this method may overestimate the actual densities of fast-growing urban areas such as Austin and Houston. Still, it's a good approximation.

In a 10-minute auto drive, the typical resident Los Angeles, the densest urban area in America, can reach more than 96,000 jobs. In the same time, residents of Birmingham, the lowest-density urban area of the 50 in the observatory reports, can reach only 24,000 jobs. For 10-minute auto drives, the correlation between density and jobs is 0.76, where 1.0 is perfect and 0.0 is no correlation.

Job Accessibility by Urban Area Density



There is a correlation between urban area density and the number of jobs that can be reached in a 10-minute auto drive, but the correlation is weaker for longer trips as well as for transit or cycling.

The correlation declines with longer trips. For 60-minute auto trips, the correlation is only 0.58. The correlations are much lower for transit, ranging from 0.47 for 10-minute trips to 0.53 for 60-minute trips. For bicyclists, the correlations range between 0.56 and 0.59.

While the densifiers are right about this, going to work isn't the only reason we travel. According to the 2017 National Household Travel Survey, only about 18 percent of passenger-miles of personal travel was for commuting before the pandemic, while 27 percent was for social and recreation purposes, 14 percent was for family errands, 13 percent was for shopping, 7 percent for school or church, 4 percent was work-related, and the remaining 18 percent was for "other" purposes.

This dramatically changed during the pandemic, as commuting fell by about half while total travel fell by only about 10 percent. If, as many predict, 20 to 30 percent of all workers continue to telecommute after the pandemic, commuting's share of personal travel is likely to drop to about 14 percent or less. For at least a quarter to as much as a third of all workers, job access will be irrelevant. For most of the rest, access to recreation, relatives, friends, and

shopping will continue to be more important than job locations.

As noted in a recent policy brief, driving in areas whose densities DiRaimo aspires to averages about 10 miles per hour slower than driving in low-density suburbs. This isn't because people in New York and San Francisco are more laid back than people living in the suburbs; it's because congestion in dense areas is much worse than in low-density areas. That means that driving in those areas is also more stressful. People who want to go to recreation areas, supermarkets, and other family errands will prefer to do so under the less-stressful conditions.

Conclusions

Density advocates are correct that people living in higher-density areas have access to more jobs than people in lower-density areas, but they are wrong about almost everything else. Higher-density areas are more congested, so people driving to jobs, or anywhere else, in those areas will be under more stress. Driving in congestion uses more fuel, so people living in those areas actually use more energy and emit more greenhouse gases for transport than people living in low-density areas. With more people working at home, job access is increasingly irrelevant, while access to recreation and shopping areas was more important even before the pandemic.

Officials of cities like Seattle might prefer to grow in order to capture tax revenues that might otherwise go to their suburbs. From a regional viewpoint, however, this is a zero-sum game, and urban planners should not advocate density increases to support such cross-urban-area rivalries. In the end, the legitimate reasons for density are continuing to disappear. What is most important is allowing people to live the way they want to live.

Randal O'Toole, the Antiplanner, is a land-use and transportation policy analyst and author of American Nightmare: How Government Undermines the Dream of Homeownership. *Masthead photo by Thom Milkovic.*