

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Advice to President Obama (#7): Main Street is the Answer to Oil Dependency

Posted by [Glenn](#) on February 4, 2009 - 10:13am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Demand/Consumption](#)

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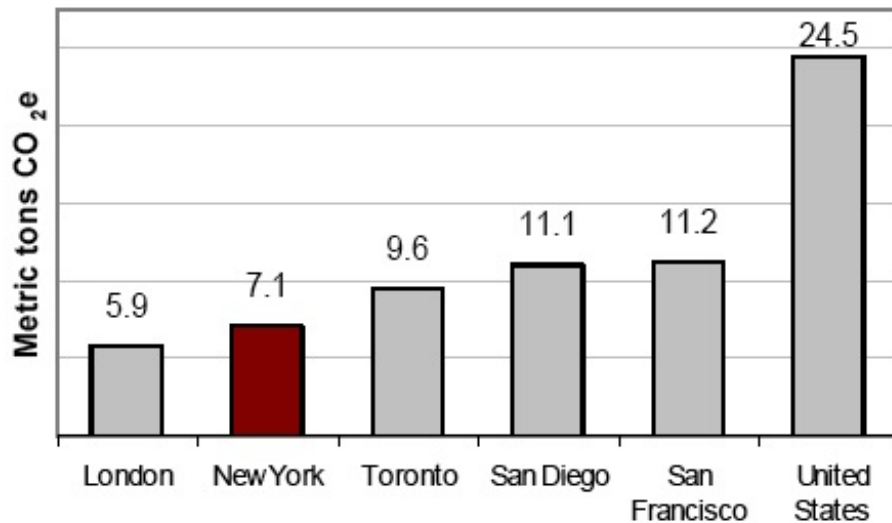
This article is one of a [series of articles](#) offering energy advice to President Obama and his administration.

Dear President Obama,

In many ways, you are the first modern urban president, and I would like you to embrace this throughout your Presidency in your policies and your public image. Instead of living on a ranch or an unattached suburban house, you chose to live in a townhouse in a dense, diverse and mixed use area of a thriving metropolis. You've also lived in Cambridge Mass., New York and now Washington DC, three walkable cities with good mass transit and mixed use development.

You've also visited countless small towns in southern Illinois in your run for the Senate and later throughout the country in your run for the Presidency. These cities and small towns helped shape your world views. You have seen the mix of the impoverished with the working and middle class as well as the wealthy elites all within a few square miles. You've seen cities and small towns at their best and at their worst. You've walked down thriving main streets and dead ones.

Your electoral victory in many ways was based on your ability to rack-up large majorities in our nation's more urban areas, even Omaha where you snagged an unprecedented extra electoral vote from Nebraska. And your success as a President, in reviving the nation's economy, making our society more environmentally sustainable and reducing our nation's dependence on fossil fuels, will largely rest on the success or failure of your urban and small town agenda.



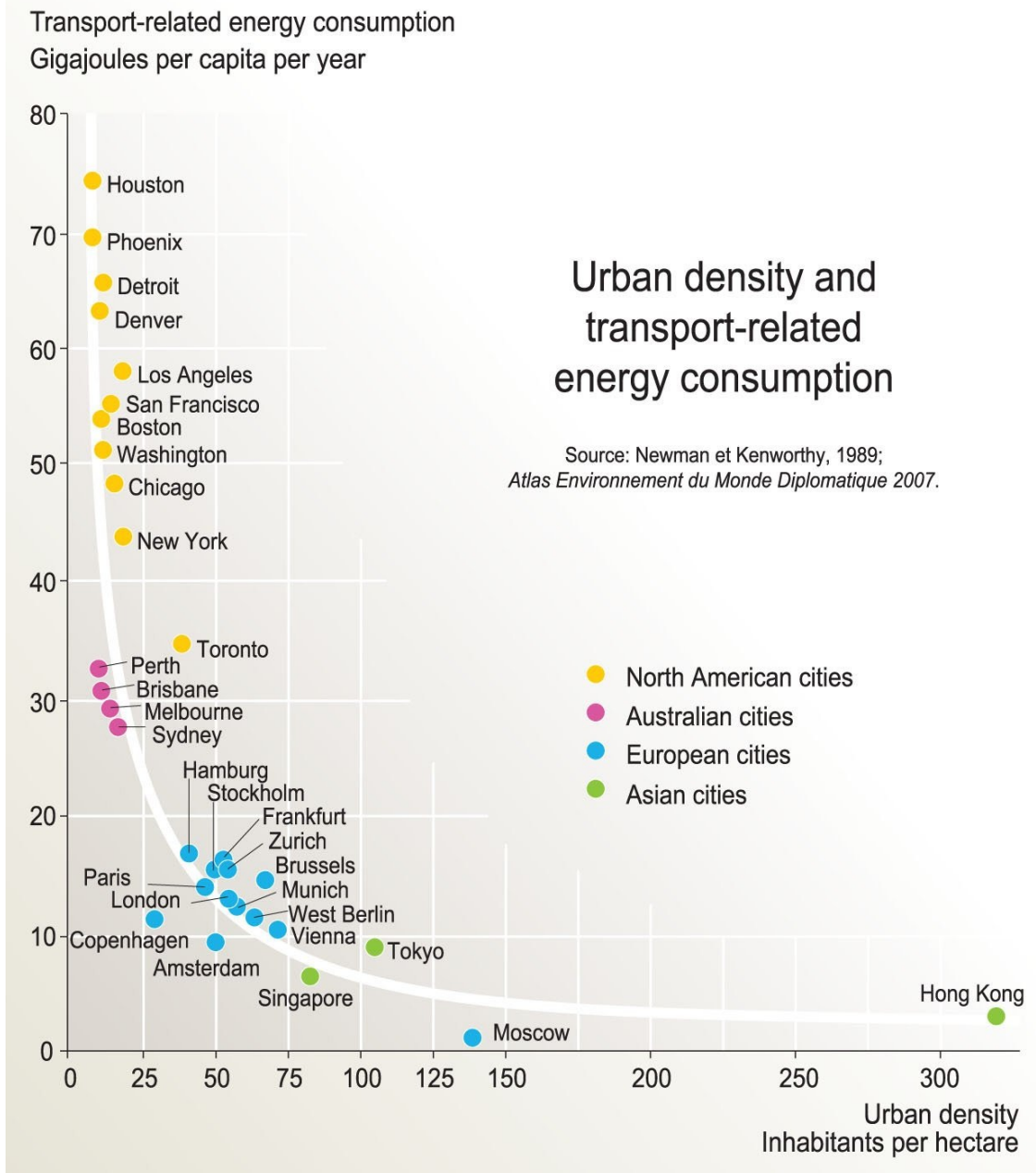
Per capita CO₂e emissions of select cities and the United States - [Source is NYC Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory](#)

Why is the Urban and Small Town Agenda so Important?

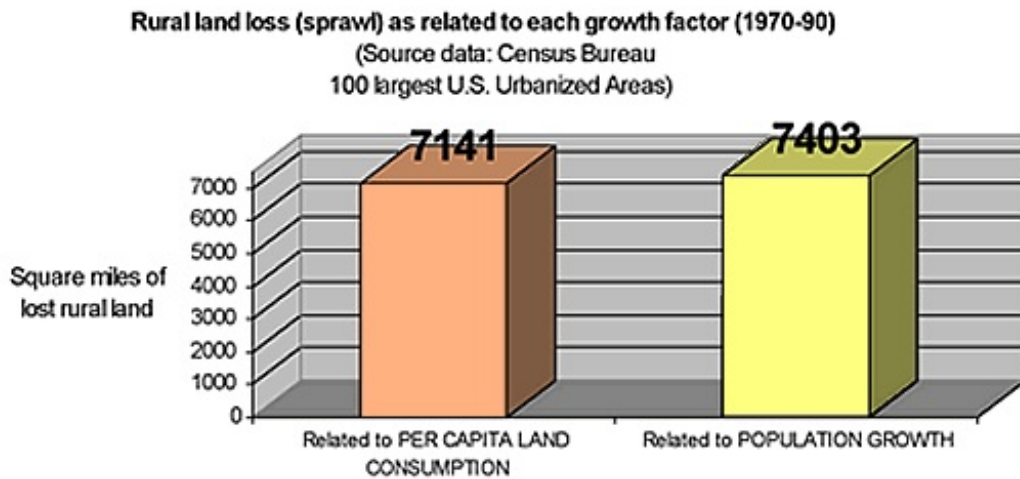
America's history has largely been driven by a primary urge to expand into new frontiers and put them to "productive" use. However, this type of single use growth away from cities and small towns into the hinterland has now reached its limits. The run-up in demand for oil over the last few decades has largely been driven by the outward expansion of people into the hinterland into larger houses while our industrial demand has fallen. This precipitated the explosion in energy costs that led to the current financial crisis. Many of the families forced into foreclosure lived in new residential-only developments that force people to drive long distances to everything--their jobs, their children's schools or even to buy a quart of milk. This type of development cannot be sustained; in fact, the answer to our economic troubles rests in reversing this process.

Focusing efforts at building economic growth on mixed use development in walkable small towns and urban areas is the better alternative to trying to prop-up the exurban single-use residential model of development. Every person that chooses to live in an urban city or small town reduces our nation's dependence on oil because they tend to drive less miles per year, and they tend to live in smaller residences. These gains get magnified considerably if there is good mass transit available.

Any other improvement in efficiency--in vehicle miles per gallon, in percentage of electricity from renewables, in greener building practices, etc--might be more than washed away by the voracious energy inputs necessary to support growth in the exurban lifestyle.



Similarly, any gains in environmental protection of wildlife habitat and more sustainable agricultural practices might be washed away by the extensive land use requirements necessary in any new waves of exurban development.



How can Small Towns and Urban Areas be Helped by the Federal Government?

In many ways, the best way to help cities and small towns is to stop subsidizing development on their margins that sap them of their vitality.

First, the Federal government needs to outline a new philosophy of investment in infrastructure that emphasizes a “Fix/replace it first” policy. For instance, instead of using federal dollars to build any new roads to new areas for development, the emphasis should be on keeping the current road network merely in a state of good repair based on the amount of current traffic on those roads. By severely limiting the paving of new roads, we can protect more natural habitats and good farmland from development.

While politicians love to make monuments by doing something “new”, we can’t afford to keep spreading out. While fixing something that already exists is not very sexy from a political standpoint, these are the infrastructure investments that pay bigger dividends later and prevent further degrading of quality and even disasters like bridge collapses. This policy should apply to every type of investment in infrastructure and public services. If folks want to live spread out in the hinterland and not produce agriculture goods, they should not be subsidized by the national government by building them new roads and other infrastructure.

Second, the federal government can redirect transportation funding formulas from highways and airports into a new effort to build an intercity passenger rail network and urban mass transit networks to connect as many cities and small towns as possible. In the same way that the Eisenhower administration built the interstate highways system, your administration has an opportunity to create a national passenger rail network. Passenger rail service to a town or city is the foundation of building a local mass transit hub and mixed use downtown area with shops, residents, cultural attractions and offices. The best way to help Main Street economically is to place a rail station and a mass transit hub within walking distance. Electrifying the rail system would magnify the impact in reducing oil dependency.

Lastly, the federal government should use its influence over mortgage lending practices with Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to put extra restrictions (higher downpayments, greater income/asset requirements) on lending for any new residential developments that are not in a mixed use setting. This would be a more accurate reflection of the unaccounted costs of having to

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maintain two cars and drive 20-30k miles a year. This would help steer land use policies back to the more efficient urban and small town context and away from the McMansions in the exurbs. Agricultural policy is also a major factor in land use issues, but I'll leave it to others to write to you about that topic.

If you can get Main Street urban and small town policies (particularly around transportation and land use) headed in the right direction, reducing oil consumption and carbon emissions will not seem like much of a trade-off to most Americans.



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