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## Myths To Live By: The Jobs-Housing Balance

**Is it rational to try to improve the jobs-housing balance in urban areas or should people, not plans, decide where people live and work?**

By Wendell Cox  
Feb 03, 2003




Few articles of faith are more fundamental to the curriculum of urban planning seminars than the jobs-housing balance. It is based on the view that development patterns in the 20th century created an artificial separation between jobs and residences that has unnecessarily

lengthened commute distances, travel times, while intensifying traffic congestion and air pollution. The seemingly rational response is to plan urban areas so that jobs are closer to employment. But seemingly rational isn't enough.

A simple review of the numbers tells the story. In the United States, the average commuter travels 12 miles (19 kilometers) to work each day. Within such a radius is nearly 425 square miles or 1,100 square kilometers --- a sprawling area almost as large as Portland, Oregon. Obviously, there are jobs closer than 12 miles away.

In Atlanta, perhaps the world's most sprawling urban area, more than 300,000 outside-downtown jobs are within the 12 mile radius. Or, in Los Angeles, wrongly thought by many to be the world's most sprawling urban area (as the most dense city in the US, it isn't even close), more than 1,100,000 jobs are within the average 12 mile radius. The situation is no different in Western Europe or Japan. Tokyo-Yokohama commuters travel nearly the same distance to work as in Los Angeles (nearly 11 miles), though it takes nearly twice as long. Outside the Yamanote Loop CBD (the

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By *Wally Siembab*

Aug 31, 2005

How do we retrofit America's sprawl to prepare for a post-oil world? In this week's Op-Ed Wally Siembab proposes a strategy of "smart sprawl" -- retrofitting suburbs of any density so that residents can shop, obtain services and work all within a mile or two of their home.

#### [The Sky Is Not Falling On Cities](#)

By *Carol Coletta*

world's largest), there are, on average, more than 2,000,000 jobs within the commuting radius (not counting the CBD jobs). Paris exhibits a more modest 700,000 figure, Even Zurich, small enough for transit to be automobile competitive, there are hundreds of thousands of jobs within the commuting radius.

Why does the physician living in the new urbanist development not take a job at the town centre beauty shop? Why does the urban planning firm not offer the next open position to the high-school dropout in the nearby mobile home park? Why does the resident of Tokyo suburb Honjo travel all the way to Omiya? What is it that impels the resident of Milton Keynes to travel to London's Liverpool Street, ignoring the meticulous designs of planners intended to establish a self-contained new town in which jobs and housing are balanced?

It is obvious enough --- the job that meets the particular requirements and preferences of the employer and the employee is not next door. For the jobs-housing balance to work, other balances have to be present as well, such as the jobs-interest balance, the jobs-education balance, the jobs-skills balance and the jobs-household structure balance. In the US, more than 50 percent of households have more than one worker, and it is not unusual for them to set off in entirely different geographical directions in the morning.

This is not to suggest that a jobs-housing balance is impossible. There were the company towns where virtually everyone worked for one employer which also served as landlord. These included stand-alone mill towns, such as Johnsondale, California and urban communities, like Pullman in south Chicago. For decades the People's Republic of China provided housing as a part of the employment package. There were, and still are small and medium sized towns far from large cities, but they are, for the most part, experiencing little growth or even withering away.

These models simply cannot compete with the labor market dynamo that has become the modern metropolitan region. These are larger labor markets that draw a diversity of jobs and people to fill them. All things being equal, larger markets tend to be more efficient than smaller ones, especially where there are few impediments to mobility. In them, more wealth is produced for more

Aug 25, 2005

Cities aren't in decline. The way population change is "measured" by the Census Bureau leaves much to be desired, writes Carol Coletta in this week's Op-Ed. But even if cities were in decline, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success. What is ironic about these estimates and the misleading story of decline that has been spun around them is the fact that cities no longer have to grow big to grow wealthy. For the first time, according to research from CEOs for Cities, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success.

### [From NIMBYs To DUDEs: The Wacky World Of Plannerese](#)

By *Ric Stephens*

Jul 26, 2005

Ric Stephens has compiled a list of some of the wackiest -- yet at times quite realistic -- urban planning words, in a vocabulary he has dubbed 'Plannerese.' This week's Planetizen Op-Ed includes a selected glossary of the terms, in addition to 'A Modern Fairy Tale in Plannerese,' which looks at a typical planning issue through the humorous lens of planning jargon.

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people, and there are greater opportunities for a better quality of life. Indeed, in a free society (and there will be more of these, not less in the future), there is little that planners can do to develop the sub-regional enclaves that would be necessary to achieve the textbook jobs-housing balance.

And what about "walkability?" Some "walkable," places, such as Tokyo's Chiyoda-ku, central London, central Paris, Manhattan and downtown San Francisco have drastic imbalances, with jobs far exceeding resident workers. Indeed, part of what makes them walkable is that imbalance.

This is not to suggest that there are not difficulties with the present spatial arrangements. For example, in US urban areas, the less than 10 percent of households without access to cars are disproportionately concentrated in urban cores while most new job creation is far away in the suburbs. The transit system that could provide mobility to these highly dispersed opportunities has not been invented nor will it soon be. We must work to bring everyone into the mainstream of economic life, and that can be accomplished only by expanding the availability of automobiles.

Finally, data from the latest US Census Bureau American Housing Survey leads to a conclusion that herding cats might be simpler than achieving a jobs-housing balance. Among households that have recently moved, the Survey found that convenience to employment was the most important reason for neighborhood choice only 22 percent of the time. If the data is weighted to reflect the actual distribution of all owner-occupied and rental housing, the number falls to 18 percent. There is little hope for planners to achieve a jobs-housing balance if more than 80 percent of households aren't even playing by their rules. What all of this makes clear is that people do not regard optimal geographical jobs-housing balance as very important.

The jobs-housing balance should be relegated to history, along with other discredited notions that seemed useful at the time, like high-rise public housing and alchemy. It is people not urban planning that determines where people live and work.

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