

Organizing Against Urban Sprawl: A New Model

By Gregory A. Galluzzo

I have been a community organizer in the tradition of Saul Alinsky since 1972. I must confess that I regard my first 15 years of organizing as “cleaning the engine room of the Titanic.” Working within the most unglamorous part of the ship—the slums, the ghettos, and the barrios of America—we focused on cleaning the grease, polishing the knobs, and adjusting the nozzles. In other words, we worked on getting rid of drug houses, improving a park, and opening a health clinic, while the ship itself was being steered “right” and towards certain disaster, rendering irrelevant all of our efforts in turning communities around. To illustrate the point, I like to tell a story.

The Parable of the Inner City

There once lived a people in a mountain valley with a beautiful lake at its center. The lake supported a diversity of wild plant and animal life and was a source of recreation for the valley’s inhabitants. Water from the lake was used to create beautiful fountains and to irrigate farms and gardens, as well as to raise livestock. The well being of the valley and its inhabitants was totally dependent on the lake.

However, some people living in a valley below were very jealous of the lifestyle enjoyed by the inhabitants of the upper valley. So, they secretly dug a tunnel below the lake and proceeded to drain its water for their own purposes.

The people in the upper valley soon began to suffer. Their plant and animal life diminished and died, as did their crops and livestock. The fountains were shut off and the gardens abandoned. The people attempted to adapt to their new reality but without their life-sustaining lake, the deterioration was inexorable and soon the upper valley turned into a desolate place.

This is exactly what has happened to our inner cities. Once, they were like the place by the lake—vibrant and prosperous—until the suburbs came along and drained them of their capital. In a capitalist society, the garden always grows wherever the capital flows. Now those of us who inhabit the urban cores of our society are fighting for some of that diminishing capital.

Urban sprawl and a systematic disinvestment from our cities underlie the seemingly endemic social problems of America. It’s a peculiar phenomenon that has led to economic and racial isolation, disparities in political power, the disappearance of an urban agenda in national policy, the weakening of unions, and a massive destruction of the environment.

St. Louis and Buffalo, once cities of populations over 600,000, now have around 300,000 residents. Likewise Cleveland and Detroit, once with populations of 800,000 and 1.8 million respectively, have halved their populations. The consequent effect on city services, property values, commercial enterprises, job opportunities, schools, and congregations has been catastrophic. Only the poor are left behind.

Playing Robin Hood in Reverse

Thirty-five years ago Gary, Indiana was a city full of promise with its prosperous steel mills and the nation’s first black mayor of a major city. If you were to drive through Gary today you would think that it had been systematically fire bombed. The city has lost tens of thousands of homes and the downtown area is a boarded up ghost town with its abandoned Holiday Inn and convention center. There is not enough money to support good schools and other city services.

However, if you were to take a helicopter ride and survey the region around Gary, you would see that some 40,000 new homes, new churches, and a mall—

one of the largest in the country—have sprung up in the suburbs of Gary. It is a prime example of what urban sprawl does to a metropolitan region where there is little actual population growth. For every home built in the suburbs, a home will be abandoned in the city; for every mall created, whole urban commercial districts will be devastated; for every suburban church built, a city church will wither.

The irony of this tragedy is that the city of Gary actually subsidized its own demise when it subsidized the water, sewer, and utility lines for its suburbs. Money that could have been used to fix its streets was used to build expressways and roads in the suburbs.

We have in America a Robin Hood in reverse syndrome—we take from the poor and give to the rich. People in our inner cities need to go to the suburbs to shop. There is not a single Sears store in the city of Detroit and every time a city resident needs a Diehard battery, he or she is subsidizing education and services for wealthier people in the suburbs.

Minnetonka, a suburban development just outside the Twin Cities area in Minnesota, is another example of such a transfer of wealth. Of the \$360 million in public monies spent on creating it, only about \$30 million came from the people in the new suburb. The people in the cities and older suburbs provided the balance, which would have been better spent on repairing streets and yes, some important bridges.

Real property, which for most Americans provides a hedge against retirement or the capital to start a business or send children to college, has been stagnant or declining in value in many urban areas. John a. powell, founder and president of Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute, says that economic well being should be measured not by income but by equity. He tells the sad story of his father and his friend, both war veterans who obtained Veteran Administration (VA) loans to buy homes.

Owing to a law restricting the use of VA loan monies to integrate communities, John Powell Sr., an African American, could not buy a home in the newly created suburbs, while his white friend could not buy in the Detroit inner city. Both homes cost the same, but 30 years later, the white veteran's suburban home was worth over \$350,000, whereas the black veteran's

home was still worth only \$15,000. The situation is tantamount to stealing over \$300,000 from an African American family. Multiply this by 10 million and you get some idea of how institutional racism plays itself out in the United States.

The Peculiar Phenomenon of Urban Sprawl

Professor powell makes the startling statement that the net capital worth of the entire black community in America is zero. As much is owed as is owned. But the net worth of the white community is \$9.0 trillion. This disparity is largely a result of the creation of urban sprawl.

Currently, congressional districts from the suburbs outnumber urban and rural districts combined. So, the majority of those who make our laws in congress are uninterested in the issues facing city dwellers. And unions tend to lose their power the farther they go from the city.

Perhaps the most tragic victims of this peculiar phenomenon are the children in our cities. The most predictive factor of success for schools is the economic status of the population they serve—the greater the concentration of poverty, the more likely that the children will do poorly. Poor children living in a middle income neighborhood will have a much greater chance of success than children living in areas of concentrated poverty where they have few role models, live in crime infested communities, and have no opportunities for summer and after school jobs. Urban sprawl, because it concentrates poverty, puts tens of thousands of America's children on the economic conveyor built to the junk heap of history.

Urban sprawl also destroys green space. The building of houses on natural flood basins and the ever growing network of expressways with their polluting traffic pose the number one threat to the environment.

But it does not have to be this way.

Portland's Solution to Urban Sprawl

In Portland, Oregon they have created an urban growth boundary around the already developed metropolitan region. Thirty years ago, the metropolitan planning council created a policy that no government funds would be expended outside this boundary. As a result, property within the boundary is now worth a

million dollars per acre; whereas, outside the boundary an acre fetches about \$1,000. People can build outside the boundary but they will not have a road, sewer system, or water main built to their house. And in the event of a house fire, there is no guarantee that a fire truck will be made available, causing home insurance rates to go up.

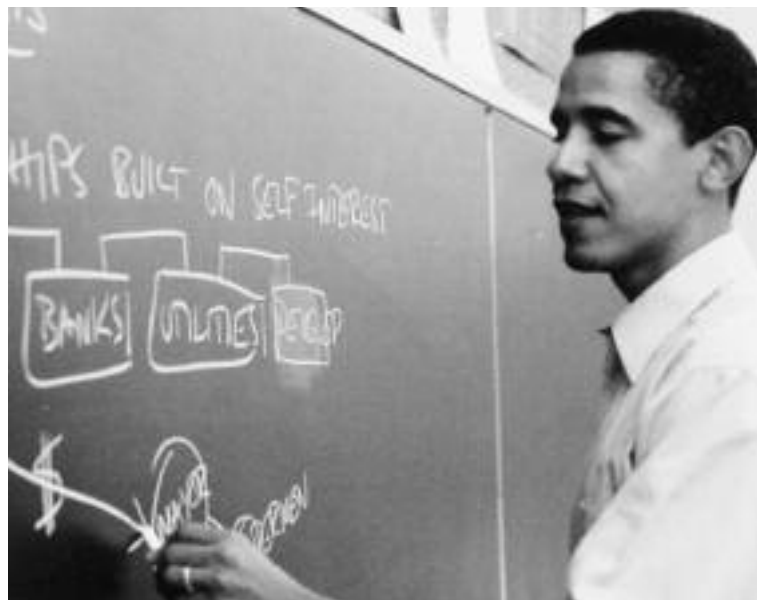
Julius Caesar is quoted as saying: “The margin of profit for most enterprises is government subsidy.” An observation that is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. By restricting subsidies outside the metropolitan area Portland created a level playing field for African Americans. Now property values in Portland’s traditional black community have increased by 10 billion dollars.

Organizing for the Sprawl

The type of issues at the heart of the urban problem are: how taxes are raised and spent, the allocation of federal and state transportation dollars, school funding formulas, land use policy, water rights, and opportunity housing. We need to stop subsidizing urban sprawl and the concentration of poverty and create a tax policy that spreads the wealth equitably across a region. We also need to mandate mixed income housing in every suburb. But the traditional model of organizing neighborhoods in urban areas to solve problems is no longer relevant because decisions affecting the urban core are not made by city hall—they are made at a regional level and governed by state law.

Those who make policy realize that the population in the urban core is now a small minority. Milwaukee, Cleveland, Detroit, Gary, Buffalo, Atlanta, St. Louis, and Oakland do not have that much clout in state politics. These cities are a minority even in their metropolitan region. To move political power we must build a much broader base and organize at the metropolitan and state wide levels.

In his book, *Who Rules America: Power Politics and Social Change*, William Domhoff asserts that the forces of sprawl combine into a cabal that wields enormous power at the state and local levels and real change can occur only when all progressive forces align.



Unions, civil rights organizations, progressive politicians, transportation activists, environmentalists, and urban neighborhoods are all negatively impacted by sprawl. And increasingly, the first and second rings of suburbs are also being affected, giving many suburban politicians an interest in curbing this ever expanding circle of destruction.

It is time for community organizing to recognize that its targeted base should expand beyond the minority and working class white communities in cities to include some middle-income suburbs as well. Combating urban sprawl offers an opportunity to create the type of coalition that Domhoff describes as necessary for change.

The Way Out of the Sprawl

Our next president comes out of the community organizing tradition. A former director of a Gamaliel affiliate on the South Side of Chicago, Barack Obama understands the pernicious problems created by urban sprawl for the people in the cities. He has also constructed a powerful coalition of progressive forces in this country, which crosses race, class, and geographic boundaries. This is an optimum time for the new organizing model to take root by tapping into this emerging coalition with a fresh outlook on solving problems. By examining the racial implications of urban sprawl and committing ourselves to addressing them effectively we can begin to heal many of the seemingly incurable social problems confronting our country. ■

Photo:

Barack Obama teaching at the University of Chicago Law School in the 1990s.

Courtesy of Obama for America

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