Intersections: Land Use Initiatives and Policy Makers

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Howard Maier and Joe White will discuss the political and policy contexts for land-use initiatives in the Western Reserve area. Mr. Maier will consider the relationship between land-use planning and transportation and environmental policies already in place; what government resources exist that might be used as part of initiatives; the politics of zoning; and the challenges of working across political jurisdictional barriers. Dr. White will comment on the relationship between land-use goals and other political and development goals, and the general politics of development.

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I’m here to speak as a policy analyst and a political scientist. As a policy analyst, I am disposed to see all of the things that will go wrong with policy proposals, all the flaws. That’s because there are plenty of other people to sell proposals, and usually something goes wrong. As a political scientist, well, I’m disposed to think in terms of constituencies and interests and how people influence or manipulate other people. Again, that biases me towards giving a somewhat more negative view than others might offer.

So I say that as a warning and excuse, because I may say some things that are not quite so popular. But I should add that it’s good to go after so many fine presentations. I almost felt like I was in the university as I listened to Mayor Lyons of Richfield give a seminar on what I’d call geographic deconstructionism.
My perspective means I tend to think in terms of conflicts. So, for example, we can talk about creating a sense of “place” as a good thing, a goal. But it’s not always positive to everybody. Restrictive zoning exists to preserve some peoples’ sense of place by keeping other people out; place is defined in part through exclusion. The notion of the “Olive Tree” in Tom Friedman’s book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, is also about competition over a place, jealousy over a place, competing visions of place that lead to war.

Thinking about conflicts I also am sensitive to the potential conflict between development, as a goal, and the goal of conservation. Now, of course part of the argument of this conference is that conservation can serve development. That conserving the ecological advantages of the Western Reserve can make this a more attractive area. This enterprise is part of a political effort to get rid of the sense that there is a contradiction. But there are some obstacles to that effort.

One problem is, if you’re concerned about economic development, it’s not clear how much difference any local effort can make. One of the speakers referred to “destructive innovation.” Unfortunately, you can have a great company and the labor costs would still be far lower in China. At least for those businesses that are subject to that competition, I’m not sure what economic development measures, ecologically sound or not, would help much.

But lets try to be a bit more optimistic and think about the relationship between economic development and conservation at the local level. I think of this in terms of the stakes for different participants in policy-making. What do city officials most care about, what’s the attraction of development? Well, they tend to focus on enhancing their tax base, and so giving people reasons to want to live in their localities. They tend to want to have jobs nearby. What causes entrepreneurs, then, to locate somewhere? Well, local amenities may matter some, the local ecology may matter, but other factors, more closely related to their ability to sell their product, are likely to matter a lot more. Why do people move somewhere? Well, they do like open space nearby, but, judging from trends in the housing market as described in places like the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* recently, they LOVE large houses, new houses, with big family rooms, an open plan, and more bathrooms than bedrooms. I’m exaggerating a bit on the last, but not so much. I don’t know where those preferences came from, but the point is that the housing stock in the old inner suburbs doesn’t match current tastes. So there is a drive to exurban housing development that reflects current consumer preferences, and that’s going to be very hard to fight against.

I make these points to suggest that the hope that conservation can be seen as a basis for development is pushing against some tough countervailing forces. City officials may be tempted to take the quick fixes to their tax bases; entrepreneurs care more about cost of production; and citizens are looking for a certain kind of house above all.

There’s another tension in terms of the goals of this enterprise. It’s a tension in regard to geography and normative concerns. Today’s discussion emphasized two very different problems from “urban sprawl.”
The first concern is the effect of sprawl upon the central city and its institutions. For example, if people live further and further out, how many will go to Severance Hall? If industry is spread further away, how will poor people in the inner city, who depend on public transportation, get to jobs? The second concern is how development will affect the land and ecology, and possibly the attractiveness of life, out in the areas where the development occurs.

Measures that address one concern might not address another. For instance, "compact development," with good planning to protect water resources, could be a very useful response to the second problem. Yet it does nothing for the central city. If anything, making development in the exurbs more ecologically conscious and attractive could, by the logic of its proponents, only make it more attractive, draining the central city further.

Hence it’s not clear to me how improving land use as understood here really helps the central city. Even if it makes northeast Ohio as a whole more attractive, the attractions will still be “out there.” Businesses will move to Twinsburg or Hudson, not to the Euclid corridor.

There are a lot of good reasons to work on land use issues, combining both ecological and economic development perspectives. I just think we need to be realistic about what our goals may be, and think hard about these two geographic concerns, the central city and the developing regions. We need to remember that the various political interests are not all shared; that measures that serve one concern may not serve another.

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In reflecting on what I recall saying, I’d like to go a bit beyond, being both a bit more encouraging but also perhaps about going forward.

On the encouraging side, I should have said that, while I was reminding everyone of obstacles, any policy initiative worth fighting for is worth fighting for for a couple of decades – and it often takes that long.

Yet I also want to pursue the distinction I made a bit more.

It seems to me that preserving farms or woodlands, or maintaining the integrity of watersheds, in the areas that currently have relatively unspoiled amenities, is a good thing. But it has very little to do with, say, development of the Euclid Corridor.

As an economic development issue, the preservation agenda has a lot more to do with the I-271 Corridor. I can imagine that the attractiveness of the communities to the east of I-271 could be part of the attraction of locating a business on that corridor, so long as the base economics (costs of doing business) are favorable. I can also imagine that the attractiveness of communities might be a concern for managers of some of the businesses along the corridor, and for current residents who may have clout and resources.
If advocates of more ecologically sound land use in the Western Reserve seek to ally with advocates of development, there likely needs to be some focus, some sense of where the agendas most clearly support each other. I think that, in general, this would work better on the “edge cities” than for the central city. One reason is just that doing anything about the ecology of the central city has to be much more expensive: restoration is much harder than protection. Another is that the political constituencies in the central city have many and severe competing concerns.

If the focus is more on preservation than restoration, then we’re out in North Olmsted and Independence and the I-271 corridor from 422 to perhaps Wilson Mills. The latter in particular seems to me to be an area where one could focus on bringing institutions and constituencies together around land-use concerns. It begins with some physical attractiveness, both natural and built (such as the North Chagrin reservation and the town of Chagrin Falls). We can add excellent road networks, attractive shopping areas, and some very good school systems. Beginning from those advantages, I can imagine that development could proceed in a way that would be sensitive to both the physical and human ecologies. If that kind of development were purposeful, it could be marketed as the Western Reserve Difference (or something like that), so be an approach that the developers and local governments themselves could use as branding for their attempts to attract businesses to the area. The idea would be to convince outsiders that the Western Reserve is Portland, Oregon – only with snow instead of rain, and a heck of a lot closer to the rest of the country.

Any attempt to craft such an approach would require, to be credible, a combination of ecological/scientific expertise with some expertise in real estate economics, transportation planning, and intergovernmental relations. Perhaps bringing those skills together could be a subject for next year’s symposium.

In making this suggestion I do not mean to say that the ecology of the I-77 corridor is unimportant, or that the attractiveness of the Cuyahoga River Valley is unimportant, or that we should not care about the Euclid Corridor. I do think we need to be attentive to where linkages between the ecological and economic development agendas are most likely to be relevant and successful. If the analysis here provokes people to make cases for other areas, all the better.