

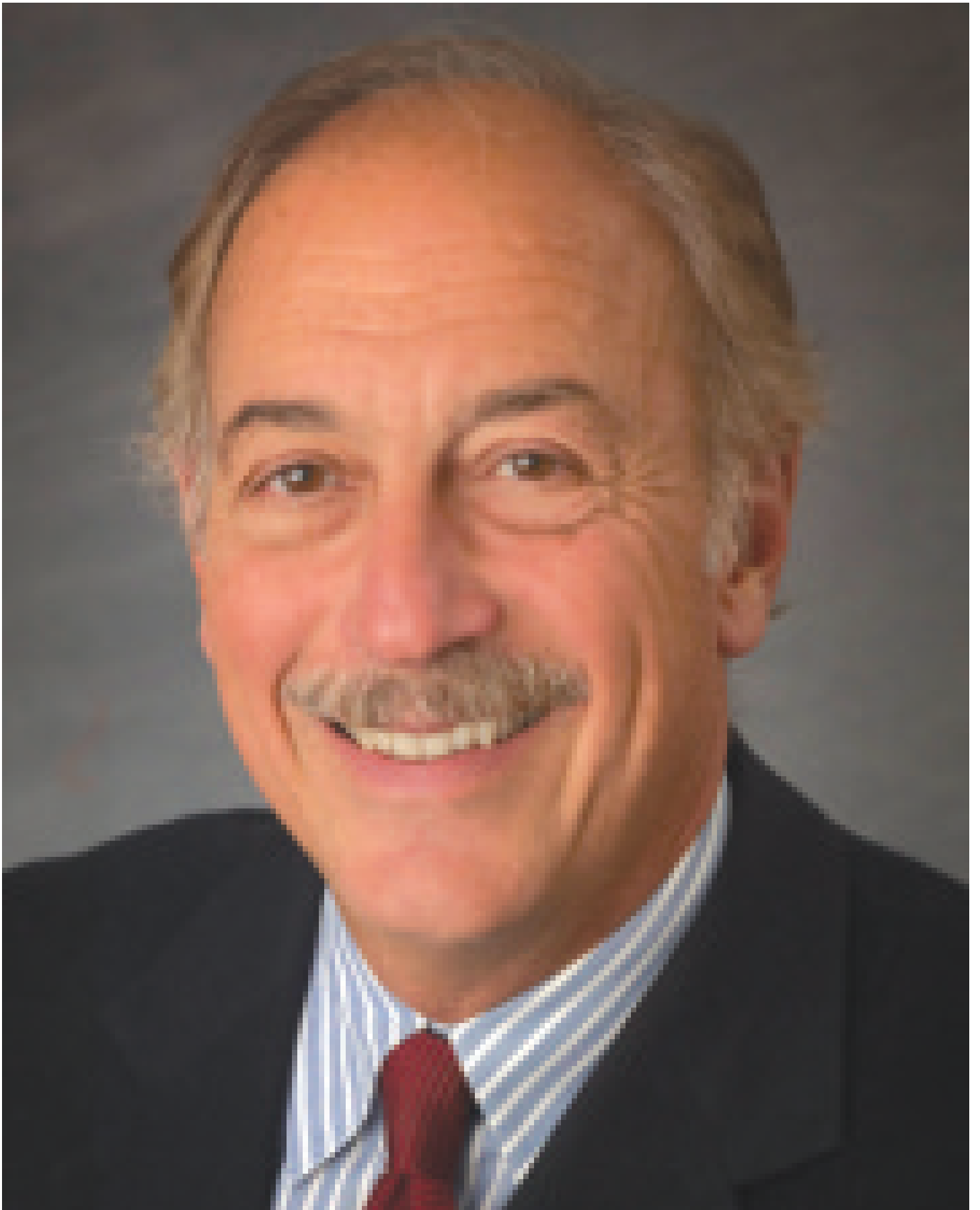


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High density housing - good... unintended consequences - not so good - by Daniel Calano

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Many authors, including myself, have been writing about the need for more, and more affordable housing. The amount needed varies significantly by different reports. Fannie May says 4.5mm; Realtor.com figures 6.5mm; National Low Income Housing Coalition reports the highest of 7.3mm. I think we can safely agree that somewhere between five and eight million units are needed across the country. The question is how and where? And, with the least unintended consequences.

As I'm sure you have read recently, there are good reasons to build higher density housing around good transportation nodes. In fact, the MBTA now incentivizes/requires the construction of higher density and more affordable units near their transportation facilities. Beyond that, cities and towns are exploring their own solutions to more housing. As recent lime-lighted examples, Newton and Cambridge are poster children for wanting affordable housing, but not fully clear on unintended impacts of density.

In the battle of providing higher density housing, land planners such as myself see the logic; naysayers see negative visions of traffic congestion, degraded air quality, destruction of culture, villages, and other key neighborhood issues. If you want all the sides to the argument, read about Newton's 13 village centers discussions, pros and cons. If you want information on Cambridge, visit Rte. 2 during rush hour, with traffic jams at Alewife station, starting much further west as far out as Concord. While Fresh Pond/Alewife has historically been congested during key times of the day, in the recent past there have been thousands of new units built in the formerly industrial areas nearby, and more recently almost complete transformation of relatively new office buildings into high density housing. Several thousand new units are on the drawing board. While the T station is excellent in helping get people to where they need be, the parking garage for such travelers is often full, as are the platforms of waiting people requiring many cycles to board people-packed trains. Is more of this really a solution?

It is an urban planner's nightmare. Housing is clearly required, most likely with high heights and high densities, built in "village" neighborhoods that probably ought not to be destroyed. Not to focus on Cambridge or Newton, this particular conundrum is playing out in many cities across the country. Most are trying to resolve the issues by simply rezoning. Creative planners, architects, politicians, are struggling for better solutions. Bike lanes are being built where possible in hopes of reducing automobile traffic. Varying of work times reduce commuting focus in rush hours will also be helpful. Remote work has already minimized some issues. Perhaps in the further future, driverless cars will be a solution. They might not reduce traffic, but will certainly reduce driver stress, and road rage. Even further into the future, perhaps elevated city nodes with monorail access. But I digress into fantasy solutions.

Yes, negative consequences from growth are always possible, certainly not intended, and often unforeseen. Most of us would agree with the concept of building needed housing, but also would agree with the downside of congestion. One outspoken writer actually suggested that perhaps "capping" growth rather than fostering growth should be considered. Clearly, that comment has not been favored, nor seen as tenable, but it does make one think. Perhaps we should be focusing

more regionally. There are cities in Massachusetts for example that would welcome it and need growth to survive. Not all activities need to be in existing, already dense urban areas. In some more organic responses, workplace and housing has always found solutions through changing locations. Think areas of growth following Rtes. 128, 495, more recently Rte. 24. Nodes of office, housing, retail, and even specialties like biotech continue to make bold changes in location, not through negative pressures, but with clear realization of benefits. Sometimes, solutions evolve out of necessity, perhaps more slowly, without extreme measures. Sometimes, solutions find themselves. Just sayin'.

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