CHAPTER 4

The History of Planning: Part II

This chapter covers the eight-decade period from the beginning of the Great Depression to the present time. The Depression years stand as an isolated decade sandwiched between the prosperous 1920s and the beginning of World War II. The period from the end of the war to the present is very different. Although marked by enormous social, political, and technological changes, it is a more or less continuous period. The 1930s was a period in which capitalism functioned very poorly and in which the enemy abroad, fascism, was on the political right. In the postwar period, capitalism in the United States, by and large, functioned well, and the enemy abroad, communism, was on the political left. Our former enemies had been defeated and were now our allies. Our former ally was now our mortal enemy. Then, in a series of remarkable events beginning in 1989, the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and then the Soviet Union itself broke up, and the Cold War appeared to be over. These events will affect the background against which planning issues are decided well into the twenty-first century.

One theme of this book is that one cannot understand the history of planning by itself. One must see planning in a historic and an ideological context. This brief contrast between the 1930s and the postwar era is included to remind the reader to view the last eight decades of planning history against a changing ideological background.

PLANNING AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The 1930s was a peculiar time in the history of planning. It awakened great optimism about planning, and indeed, several new areas of planning were opened up. Yet on balance, for those who had great hopes for
planning, this time was something of a disappointment. To those planners who would wish to see the scope of planning greatly enlarged—and this does not include all planners—the Depression years still have the bittersweet taste of a tantalizing opportunity nearly grasped. What happened?

The country began to slide into depression with the stock market crash of 1929, and economic conditions gradually worsened for the next several years. By the time President Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated in March 1933, the unemployment rate was in the 25 percent range, and the cash value of goods and services produced had fallen by almost half since 1929. The fact that the free enterprise system was clearly malfunctioning and was unable to connect idle workers with idle machinery created an intellectual climate that favored planning in a way that the prosperous 1920s had not.

Planning is an ambiguous term. It may include everything from the most minor control over land use in a small town to Soviet-style centralized economic planning. But political moods and movements can be intellectually fuzzy. In general, the economic distress and disillusion of the Great Depression tended to favor more planning, whatever that word might mean.

Relatively little consensus existed about what ought to be planned or by what principles. Within the Roosevelt administration there was a wide ideological spectrum. Roosevelt himself was not a radical. He was a pragmatist who would adjust and tune the system as required but who had no agenda for large-scale restructuring. Some in his administration, such as the secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, were relatively conservative. Others, like Rexford Tugwell and Henry Wallace, who were well to Roosevelt’s left, favored major change and a major shift of economic power from private to public hands.

Apart from the administration there was a Congress that, although much more willing to experiment than it had been in better times, was hardly radical. Finally, there was the Supreme Court, then a relatively conservative body that in modern terms might be described as “strict constructionist.”¹ The Court turned out to be a major limitation on the amount of social and economic experimentation in which the national government might engage.

A number of planning initiatives began during the Great Depression.² Some persist to the present, whereas others have sunk without leaving much trace.³ One initiative that lasted was the federal funding of local and state planning efforts. Federal funding was provided for planning staffs, both as a job-creation measure and as a commitment to planning. Numerous communities used federal funds to build and staff planning departments, to develop maps and databases, and to formulate plans, including many community master plans. In the slow-growing, fiscally strained environment of the 1930s, many plans simply sat on the shelf. But the federal funding did help build the size and technical competence of the profession.

Federal funding and increased state interest in planning accelerated a trend that had begun in the late 1920s, namely, the creation of state planning agencies. By 1936 every state except one had a state planning board.
The focus of these boards varied greatly. In many, particularly those in which agriculture was a dominant part of the economy, the focus was on conservation and farmland preservation. In others the primary focus was on urban issues, including housing quality, sewage treatment, water pollution, the provision of adequate recreational facilities, public finance, and urban governance. Much of the work of state planning agencies focused simply on finding the facts, whether that meant mapping areas of soil erosion in a rural area or studying public finance and the structure of government in a metropolitan area.

The federal government moved into the provision of low-cost housing, an area in which it has remained in one way or another ever since. The motivation was twofold. First was the obvious goal of improving the housing of the poor. The second goal was expansion of construction as a way of stimulating the economy. At first the federal government built public housing directly. Then a Supreme Court decision forced a change in the program, and the federal government switched to providing financial support, both capital and operating, for local public housing authorities. There are today somewhat over 1 million units of public housing in the United States and several million units of privately owned but publicly subsidized units. That public presence in the housing market had its origins in the Great Depression.

In the mid-1930s, the Resettlement Administration embarked on a program of new town-building. The program lost favor with Congress after a time and was discontinued in 1938. However, three new communities, Greenbelt, Maryland; Green Hills, Ohio; and Greendale, Wisconsin, were constructed.

The housing initiative of the federal government that had the most far-reaching effects was not one that fell in the realm of planning but rather in the realm of finance. That was the provision of mortgage insurance by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) noted briefly in Chapter 2 and discussed in more detail in Chapter 17. Few, if any, acts of the federal government have had more effect on the pattern of settlement than FHA mortgage insurance.

The conceptual basis for Urban Renewal was also a Depression-era development. Economists and others within the federal government foresaw the difficulty that central cities would have in competing with suburban areas for development capital, largely because of differences in site-acquisition costs (see Chapter 11). The solution proposed was the City Realty Corporation, an organization that would use federal subsidy monies plus the power of eminent domain to produce marketable development sites at below cost. World War II swept the City Realty Corporation off the national agenda, but the idea, under a different name, became one of the bases of the Housing Act of 1949, which established Urban Renewal.

Still another Depression-era initiative was the first planning for what was to become the interstate highway system. World War II shelved the
idea for a time, but it reappeared as the National Defense Highway Act of 1956. This initiated the building of the interstate highway system, the largest single construction project in U.S. history.

The Depression also saw the creation of the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB) under the leadership of Rexford Tugwell, a member of FDR’s so-called brain trust. Though the board never fulfilled the dreams of those who favored the major move to the left, it did do a certain amount of useful work. One contribution was the support of local and state planning efforts. Another was the making of an inventory of natural resources on a national scale. In the conflicting political currents of the time, noted earlier, the board did not make much of a mark on the nation and in 1943 was dissolved by Congress. The war and national preoccupation with war-related matters was one cause of its demise. Another cause was that any organization that seeks to plan on a broad canvas will naturally step on toes and make enemies.

Whether the NRPB’s dissolution is a cause for sorrow or rejoicing is largely a matter of ideology. From the left its dissolution looks like a major missed opportunity. From the right its dissolution looks like a slaying of the socialist monster in its crib before it could grow to maturity and do any damage.

Finally, the Depression era saw the start of a number of regional planning efforts, the best known of which was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Established in 1933 to provide a combined approach to flood control, power generation, and natural resource conservation, the TVA was planned on a major scale. Dams that served for flood control also produced power, which facilitated rural electrification and brought industry into the valley. The creation of lakes behind dams naturally led the agency into recreation planning. Among those who favored a much larger role for government, the TVA occasioned much enthusiasm as a prototype for what large-scale regional planning could accomplish.

Other regional initiatives included the New England Regional Commission, the Colorado River Basin Compact, and the Pacific Northwest Regional Planning Commission. The latter two ultimately resulted in the construction of the Boulder, Bonneville, and Grand Coulee dams.

THE POSTWAR PERIOD

World War II provided a sharp break with the Depression and Depression-era issues. The conversion to a war economy quickly ended the unemployment of the 1930s, and political and military events abroad shifted the nation’s political focus from internal to external. From the end of the war to this writing, the country has followed a generally successful economic course. It is true that there have been several recessions, the most severe of
which is the one that began in 2008, and several brief inflationary episodes, but on the whole, the U.S. economy has flourished. There was thus much less willingness, at least until the present, to contemplate radical changes than there had been during the Depression. Perhaps this unwillingness was just a matter of heeding that bit of folk wisdom, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Then, too, the success of capitalist economies in Western Europe, Japan, and North America contrasted with the poor performance of centrally planned economies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and militated against major moves toward national planning.

Postwar planning initiatives thus took place in a relatively conservative framework. Where possible, they involved a heavy reliance on private initiative and private capital. Typically, the major planning initiatives also involved a combination of federal, state, and local effort. A share of the funding and some legislative guidelines were provided by the federal government, but much of the initiative, detailed planning, and implementation came from state and local governments. As discussed in Chapter 18, planning in many European nations in the 1980s and 1990s came to resemble the American model much more than it had in the early postwar period, partly for some of the same ideological reasons and partly for economic reasons.

The Expansion of Municipal Planning

The postwar period saw a large expansion of planning activity at the city, town, and country levels. The causes of this expansion were numerous. The prosperity of the postwar period gave municipal governments more funds to spend on planning. The satisfaction of private wants with the growth of the postwar economy naturally turned people’s attention to public needs. It is easier to be concerned about the quality of one’s community when one is well fed, well housed, and financially secure than when one is not. Postwar suburbanization, as it had after World War I, stimulated planning activity in thousands of suburban cities and towns by thrusting on them the problems of growth. The difference was that this time there was no Depression to cut short the suburbanization process. The growth of local planning activity was also powerfully stimulated by the federal government. Federal grants, Urban Renewal, and other programs discussed in this chapter stimulated the expansion of planning agencies. Beyond that, federal funds were made available to local agencies for general planning purposes under section 701 of the Housing Act of 1954 and subsequent legislation.

Urban Renewal

The first major initiative to appear after the war was Urban Renewal or, as it was called in its early days, Urban Redevelopment. The difficulties that cities faced in competing with suburban areas for investment capital had been
perceived during the later years of the Depression. In the Housing Act of 1949, Congress set up the mechanism by which cities might be enabled to compete more effectively with outlying areas. At the time, the biggest need of the cities appeared to be for investment in housing, both to clear away many acres of slum housing and also to alleviate severe housing shortages resulting from low rates of construction during the Great Depression and World War II. Thus Urban Renewal started as a slum clearance and housing program. It soon added a major commercial thrust as well. By the time the program was ended in 1973, some $13 billion of federal funds had been expended. Several billions more were spent on projects that were in the pipeline at that time and were subsequently completed. Adjusted for inflation, expenditures on Urban Renewal probably totaled in the range of $100 billion in today’s dollars. A great deal had been accomplished, but there were also very high human costs in the form of neighborhood disruption and the forced relocation of hundreds of thousands of households. The program is discussed in detail in Chapter 11.

The Age of Highway Planning

Another major theme of the postwar period was highway planning and highway building. The period after the war witnessed an enormous amount of suburbanization accompanied by massive increases in automobile ownership, as noted in Chapter 2. Coincident with the suburbanization of population was the suburbanization of economic activity. As a consequence of the changing distribution of economic activity, there was also a significant increase in the importance of truck transportation relative to rail transportation in the carriage of both intra- and intermetropolitan freight. Because of these pressures, one metropolitan region after another moved into large-scale highway planning. The first and possibly best known of these was the Chicago Area Transportation Study (CATS).

The postwar period also saw the building of the interstate highway system, which, measured in physical terms, is the largest engineering project in the history of the nation. The idea, as noted, is of Depression-era vintage, but work did not begin until after the passage of the National Defense Highway Act of 1956. Most of the system was constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. By the end of the 1980s, only a few links remained to be completed. The system, about 40,000 miles in length, has been a major force in reshaping the nation, largely, one suspects, in ways unanticipated by its planners. The transportation planning process is described in Chapter 12, and the interstate highway system is discussed in more detail in Chapter 17.

Environmental Planning

*Environmental planning*, a term that would have been virtually unrecognizable 50 years ago, emerged as a field at the end of the 1960s. Its emergence can be traced to two separate background forces. First, with the growth
of population and prosperity, humanity had acquired more ability to damage the environment. More people, more kilowatt-hours of electricity generated, more vehicle miles driven, more acres covered with paving and structures—all meant that the natural environment was at greater risk. Second, and more important according to some, were changes in what we produced and the way we produced it. Around 1940 there began a revolution in the types of materials we produced and used. Up to that time most of our materials were naturally occurring substances, though often processed and modified in some way. Since then we have increasingly relied on substances that have never before existed, that often have some degree of toxicity, and for which natural pathways of degradation do not exist. For example, in a very influential book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson argued that DDT (a compound that had been known for some decades but came into use only about the time of World War II) was entering the food chain, with all sorts of dire consequences both to the ecosystem in general and to humans—who eat fairly high up on the food chain—in particular. Barry Commoner in *The Closing Circle* (a title whose ominous ring fits the tone of the book well) cited a long list of changes in products and processes with adverse environmental consequences; for example, pesticides, chemical rather than natural fertilizers, and the increasing use of plastics like polyethylene for which natural degradative pathways do not exist.

By the end of the 1960s, mounting concern with the effect of our impact on the environment resulted in the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The act also required the filing of an environmental impact statement (EIS) for a project involving substantial amounts of federal funding, a stipulation that more than any other single event brought the field of environmental planning into being. Simply complying with the requirement that an EIS accompany a request for federal funding created employment for large numbers of environmental planners. In the following years many states passed laws analogous to NEPA, often referred to as “little NEPA” acts. Congress passed numerous other pieces of environmental legislation such as the Clean Air Act and the Toxic Substances Control Act. In each case, the studies and planning required to comply with the requirements of the law expanded the field of environmental planning. Increasing consciousness of environmental issues has also prompted agencies doing traditional land-use planning to consider environmental aspects that a few years ago were often ignored in the planning process. The subject is pursued further in Chapter 15.

A subfield of environmental planning, energy planning, abruptly came into being in 1973 following the Arab–Israeli War. The oil embargo that followed the war very quickly caused a quadrupling of crude oil prices and a 50 percent increase in the cost of gasoline. In the next two decades, interest in energy planning waxed and waned with the rise and fall of oil...
prices. At this writing, interest in the field is very strong. For reasons discussed in Chapter 15, a great many people are convinced that the long-term price trend is upward. To concern about future energy prices have been added growing concerns about the role of fossil fuel burning in climate change as the scientific consensus on that question has strengthened. As a result, concern about restraining fossil fuel consumption is widespread throughout the planning profession, and energy planning is one of the field’s big growth areas.

**Growth Control and Growth Management**

In the 1960s growth control and growth management emerged as a distinct area of planning and also as an area of legal and moral controversy. Two separate trends in the postwar period combined to create this field. The first was the growth of population and the movement of population from central cities into suburban and exurban areas. Many communities felt themselves threatened by growth and thus saw a need to develop a means to prevent growth entirely or to limit and control it. The second factor was the growing environmental consciousness of the 1960s. Concern with the natural environment in general easily translated into concern with the natural environment of a particular city or town or county and furnished motivation and rationale for local growth-control efforts. One movement of the 1960s, spawned by global environmental concerns, was zero population growth (ZPG), whose slogan for would-be parents was “stop at two.” Concern with population control at the global or national level spilled over into concern with growth control at the local level even though the logical connection between them is minimal at best.

The growth-control movement raised legal and moral issues that have not been easy to resolve. In fact, there is now a substantial record of litigation pertaining to the subject. One question at issue is exactly what rights communities have to exclude potential residents. The subject is pursued in Chapter 5.

**The Growth of Statewide Planning**

Beginning in the late 1960s, the nation began to witness an increase in statewide planning efforts. This development was closely related to growing concern over environmental issues. In general, state planning efforts do not supersede local planning efforts but rather add another layer of control. State planning may address a variety of environmental or growth management goals that, because they transcend municipal boundary lines, cannot be adequately handled at the local level. A number of state planning processes are described in Chapter 14.
Economic Development Planning

In the period immediately after World War II, it was generally thought that the economic function of government was simply to ensure that the national economy functioned well. Specifically, the main problem was to employ suitable fiscal and monetary policies to maintain a high level of employment and a reasonable degree of cyclical stability. To the extent that there was poverty stemming from unemployment, the way out was thought to be economic growth in order to bring more people into the workforce and exert upward pressure on wages.

After a time, however, it became apparent that prosperous as the nation was, there were parts of the country in which poverty and unemployment were rampant. The first geographic area so recognized was the Appalachian region, sandwiched between the much more prosperous East Coast and the then thriving Midwest. The terms pockets of poverty and structural unemployment came into use.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the federal government began to fund local economic development programs through a series of agencies and programs discussed in Chapter 14. Briefly, its intention was to promote by means of planning and subsidies the flow of capital into distressed areas. Initially, most of the federal effort regarding structural unemployment had a rural and small-town focus, for in the early 1960s that was where the problem was most acute. Gradually, with the urbanization of poverty discussed in Chapter 2, the focus of these efforts became more urban.

For reasons of political ideology, the Reagan administration was opposed to such programs. The federal government largely withdrew from the field during the 1980s and has never returned to it in a major way. However, the states and thousands of local governments still pour much effort and billions of dollars into economic development. The structural unemployment issue is one of the prime motivations for such efforts. The other major motivation is property tax relief. This motive was greatly strengthened in 1978 by the passage of Proposition 13 in California, which greatly limited the ability of local governments to increase property taxes and which was followed by similar actions in a number of other states. For municipal governments trapped between citizen resistance to taxation on the one hand and rising costs of providing services on the other, expansion of the tax base through economic development often seems like the best way out. If anything, interplace economic competition has grown more intense since the 1980s, and economic development planning is a major area of planning.

Planning for Smart Growth

In the mid-1990s, Maryland invented the term smart growth to describe its antisprawl state development plan. Within a few years, the term became
one of the most, if not the most, commonly used planning terms in the United States. Closely allied with older ideas about growth management, smart growth was touted as the latest and most important answer to the problem of sprawl. With the U.S. population growing at somewhat more than 3 million people per year, and with most of that growth going into suburban areas, traffic congestion and other problems associated with sprawl were becoming daily more important to the public and to the planners who serve that public. Sprawl and smart growth are discussed in Chapter 14.

Planning and Public Safety

The need for safety was an important force behind the evolution of cities, for the city was a more defensible place than an isolated settlement in the countryside. Several centuries ago, technology began to change that picture. When the cannon first appeared in Europe in the late fifteenth century, city walls began to lose their protective value. In the twentieth century, the invention of the airplane converted cities from places of safety into huge targets, as World War II made unmistakably clear. In the early years after World War II, the existence of the Soviet Union armed with nuclear weapons made U.S. cities look like a major military liability. Many thought that the more densely urbanized we were, the more we invited nuclear attack and also the less able we would be to survive such an attack.

Urban planners and federal officials began to discuss the question of whether promoting a more scattered pattern of development would be in the national interest. However, this line of thought never gathered enough adherents to have a major effect on the U.S. pattern of development, though it may have affected the location of some defense facilities and the commercial and residential development associated with them. One reason that the United States did not adopt a policy of intentional dispersion was that very large numbers of people in this country believed that nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union simply would not occur. The key acronym was MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction), and the key assumption was that the leadership of the Soviet Union, though reprehensible in many ways, was cautious and sane. As the Cold War waned and détente grew, concern with the security implications of the pattern of development gradually evaporated. In looking back, it is clear that those who placed their faith in MAD were correct.

The events of September 11, 2001, placed the relationship between the pattern of settlement and safety back on the planners’ agenda. No terrorist attack could approach the destructiveness of a nuclear exchange, but on the other hand, such an attack had happened, and the destruction it caused was still massive. Unlike the leadership of the Soviet Union, the leadership of al Qaeda was not cautious, and to most Americans, it also did not seem to be entirely sane. It was instantly clear to Americans that
terrorism was not something that happened just in the Middle East or Sri Lanka or Kashmir. From 9/11 forward, Americans would have to contend with the possibility of terrorism at home.

Security concerns showed up in a variety of small ways in building design, site design, and the way that buildings and public spaces operated. Shatterproof glass and stronger construction appeared in some new, larger structures. Barriers that make it impossible to bring a motor vehicle close to a building have become commonplace in some urban areas. The new landscaping for the Washington Monument left the basic appearance of the monument site unaltered but surrounded the monument at some distance with walkways that have low walls sufficient to stop a truck from getting close to the monument.

How much effect the threat of terrorism will have on urban form in the long term will largely depend on whether there are further terrorist acts in the United States. If Americans feel relatively safe from terrorism, the long-term effects of 9/11 on U.S. cities will be small. If fear of terrorism does measurably affect urban form, the overall effect is likely to be a dispersing one. Measures to keep traffic and parked vehicles away from buildings and, generally, to achieve safety through distance will necessarily be easier to implement and less costly in low-density environs. Such measures will be hardest to implement in densely built-up areas like lower Manhattan or downtown Chicago.

Planning for Natural Disasters

The possibility of natural disaster has figured in planning for a very long time, but interest in the subject has grown considerably in recent years. The real (inflation adjusted) costs of natural disasters have been at least doubling per decade, in large part because increasing numbers of people live and work in areas prone to natural disaster, particularly coastal areas and, most notably in California, areas prone to forest fire. Attention was especially focused on planning for natural disaster by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, both because of the size of the disaster and the realization of how unprepared we were to deal with it. The earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan in 2011 did the United States no direct harm but emphasized again that even a country as economically and technologically advanced as we are can still suffer huge losses of life and property from natural disaster.

Planning for natural disaster is difficult. Though the possibility of the event can be anticipated—the Japanese were no strangers to earthquake and tsunami—the exact timing, place, and scope of the event cannot be anticipated. Adequate planning and response more often than not must be multijurisdictional, so coordination between municipalities, states, regional agencies, and the federal government may be required. And, as we have seen with Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters, the
costs for both preparation and repair may be huge. Deciding what to do in preparation for the possibility, dealing with the event when it happens, and then deciding how, and in some cases whether, to rebuild afterward all can pose big problems. One writer on the subject, Robert Verchick, suggests three basic rules for doing adequate planning for natural disasters:

- Go green.
- Be fair.
- Be safe.

The first point, go green, means working with nature, rather than against it, to minimize the extent of possible disasters. For example, in the case of a low-lying coastal area—like the Gulf Coast—that is prone to storm surge, one step would be to preserve or rebuild the wetlands that absorb wave energy and reduce the force of the surge. In an area prone to forest fires, it might mean using forestry practices that preserve stands of old-growth trees since such areas are relatively less likely to burn or tend to burn more slowly.

The second item, be fair, refers to the fact that, in the aggregate, some groups of people suffer much more from natural disasters, both during and for a long time afterward, than others and that good planning must take this into account. This point is discussed further in Chapter 7.

The third point, be safe, expresses Verchick’s view that safety considerations in disaster planning sometimes get pushed aside by other matters like financial interest. For example, preventing development in flood plains contributes to safety but may be opposed by property owners and others for financial reasons. He suggests that the emphasis be on safety.

The complexity of planning for natural disaster can be enormous. Consider some of the questions that might have been or still might be considered for New Orleans and vicinity after Katrina.

A comprehensive planning approach for New Orleans might start with some very basic hydrologic considerations. What, if anything, is to be done about the Mississippi Delta? If nothing is done, a combination of subsidence and the washing away of soil in the Delta will render the city more and more flood prone and raise very serious questions about its long-term prospects. Multibillion-dollar engineering projects to change the hydrodynamics of the Delta are one option. Improving the system of levees, but not attempting to change the overall hydrodynamics of the Delta, is another option. The choice of whether to write off part of the city and let it revert to a more natural state or to try to reconstruct the entire city are both options, in part depending on the previous choices. The economic effect on the entire region around New Orleans of major changes in the size of the city need to be considered. Much of the agricultural output of the American Midwest passes through the Mississippi on its way to other parts of America and the rest of the world. So what happens to the Port of New Orleans has ramifications far beyond New Orleans or the state of Louisiana.
Those are just a few basic physical questions about the New Orleans area. A still larger effort would integrate planning for the New Orleans area with that for the larger Gulf Coast region. Beyond physical design there are a host of social planning questions, particularly for the populations displaced by Katrina. Some of these are discussed in Chapter 7.

Not that much of the grand-scale comprehensive planning suggested earlier has been done post-Katrina. To reinforce a point made at various places in this book, planning and politics cannot be separated and, politically, such an effort was just not in the cards. Whether it will be someday remains to be seen. Chapter 17 might give the reader a few thoughts on what such planning might look like.

Planning for an Age of Reurbanization

Among many planners there is a strong feeling that an age of reurbanization, whatever form it might take, is or will soon be upon us. As one speaker at the 2011 American Planning Association (APA) convention said, “We tried sprawl and it didn’t work”; this seemed to express the feeling of many of the participants.

Is an age of reurbanization soon to be upon us? A bit of history follows. Looking back, it is clear that in the years following World War II a great many forces favored suburbanization and sprawl. The two terms are not synonymous but there is some overlap. Growing prosperity made widespread automobile ownership possible and new highways, largely funded with federal money, made it relatively easy to get to work from dispersed locations. Provisions in the federal tax code and changes in mortgage financing facilitated mass homeownership (see Chapter 17). The birthrate was considerably higher than it is today so that young children made up a much larger percentage of the population. In 1957, the peak year of the baby boom, there were 4.3 million births in the United States for a population of 172 million. In 2010 there were 4.1 million births for a population of 308 million. The age at which both men and women first married was about half a decade younger than it is today. Men’s labor force participation rates were not much different from what they are at present, but women’s rates were very much lower. That favored the lifestyle of dad goes to work and mom stays home in the tract house in the suburbs with the kids. Personal income was much more evenly distributed than it is today, and large numbers of blue-collar workers in manufacturing, construction, and transportation among other fields earned enough, very often in unionized jobs, to manage a suburban house. No one worried that the big V8 under the hood of the family car was contributing mightily to the greenhouse effect because no one—except a few scientists who understood the basic physics of it and thought it might be of theoretical interest—had ever
heard of it. There wasn’t much anxiety about fuel costs, either. For a number of years after World War II the United States was a net exporter of crude oil.

Take that basic picture, admittedly simplified and idealized, turn it around 180 degrees, and the forces behind suburbanization and sprawl look much weaker. For example, large numbers of single people in their twenties should mean less demand for a Leave It to Beaver life setting and more demand for something more urban and sophisticated. Exactly what form reurbanization might take—perhaps a rebirth of central cities, or intensified development in suburban centers, or small nodes of development with many urban characteristics—remains to be seen. In any case, it is not hard to see why many planners think we may be on the cusp of a major turn in the pattern of development and why, at a convention of planners, terms like walkability, nodes, density, and transit are frequently heard. This subject will come up repeatedly in the chapters that follow.

SUMMARY

This chapter noted the increased interest in planning during the Great Depression, in part as a result of the poor performance of American capitalism during this period. Though the hopes of those such as Rexford Tugwell, who favored a major swing toward national planning, were disappointed, some planning initiatives that lasted well into the postwar period did have their origins in the 1930s.

Urban Renewal and the interstate highway system were conceived during the Great Depression, though not enacted into law and funded until after the war. Federal subsidization of housing and federal financial support of local planning efforts began during the Great Depression. Statewide planning, seen to a limited extent in the 1920s, became widespread during the Great Depression. World War II quickly ended the unemployment of the Depression years and shifted the nation’s political focus from internal to international affairs.

The political climate of the postwar period was very different from that of the Great Depression, and there was little support for national planning. In fact, the National Resources Planning Board was abolished during World War II and was never reconstituted. Nonetheless, there was a major expansion of planning activity, in large measure fueled by federal grants and pushed forward by national legislation. Among new or expanded activities were Urban Renewal, highway planning (including planning for the interstate highway system), environmental planning, community development, planning for growth management, and local economic development planning. In recent years, the question of smart growth has come to the fore as increasing numbers of people become concerned about the issue of sprawl driven by continuing population growth.
Among the forces behind the increase in planning activity were the growth in population and wealth, the rapid suburbanization and increased automobile ownership that followed World War II, the weakened competitive position of many central cities vis-à-vis the suburbs, and increasing concern with the effects of human activity on the natural environment.

NOTES

1. Meaning a relatively literal interpretation of the Constitution based on the “original intent” of its authors and relatively little willingness to define new individual rights or new obligations of government that are not clearly implied by the wording of the Constitution. The reader who wants to pursue the debate over whether the Constitution should be interpreted strictly or flexibly might see Robert Bork, The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law, Free Press, New York, 1990.


3. For a general account of Depression-era planning initiatives, see Mel Scott, American City Planning Since 1890, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1965, Chap. 5.

4. Guy Geer and Alvin Hansen, “Urban Redevelopment and Housing,” a pamphlet published by the National Planning Association, 1941. For additional references to Urban Renewal, see Chapter 11.

5. Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1962. (Note: DDT was subsequently banned in the United States but is in use in parts of the Third World.)


7. For a statement of the ZPG view, which was widely read and quoted at the time, see Paul Ehrlich, The Population Bomb, Ballantine Books, New York, 1971.


SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Note: For references to particular fields of planning mentioned in this chapter, see the Selected Bibliography for the chapter that treats that field in detail.