

## A conversation with Stephen Smith on March 13, 2014

### Participants

- Stephen Smith – Infrastructure reporter, Next City; Contributor, Market Urbanism
- Alexander Berger – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

**Note:** This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Mr. Smith.

### Summary

GiveWell spoke with Stephen Smith as part of its investigation of zoning policy. The discussion focused on organizations that advocate around zoning rules, as well as the politics of land use and transit.

### Zoning and land use

#### *Advocacy and research organizations*

Mr. Smith believes that public interest in effective zoning, land use, city planning, and transit is growing, but that it is very difficult to pinpoint organizations that have done effective advocacy work on these issues. This is due both to a lack of concerted advocacy on the topic and to the difficulty of ascertaining which organizations effectively influence policy.

San Francisco and New York are two of the most productive cities in the U.S. yet have some of the worst housing crises. In San Francisco, the research and advocacy organization SPUR appears to conduct effective communication campaigns and to have the ear of Supervisor Scott Weiner. Its main constituency seems to be young creative and tech professionals. Its work has provoked some backlash from anti-gentrification protesters. In New York, the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University produces high-quality research primarily focused on land use issues, though it does not do advocacy *per se*.

Mr. Smith also pointed to several blogs that seem to have a significant audience and draw attention to the importance of effective zoning and transportation policies:

- Greater Greater Washington (D.C.): An advocacy and opinion site primarily focused on growth and transit issues.
- PubliCola (Seattle): A news site that raises awareness of zoning and housing issues.
- Streetsblog (New York): A news blog about transportation policy.

In general, people who believe in "market urbanism" do not seem to be highly organized. There are relatively few local groups that fit that description, and no national coalition or regular conference.

### *Political process*

City planners generally initiate zoning proposals, which then must be approved by city council members. Although some land use regulations are made at the state level in the U.S., most such issues are handled locally. In Canada, there is more provincial involvement, especially in Ontario.

On many issues, states tend to make better decisions than local governments because they do not have as many parochial concerns. For example, the state of California tried to restrict cities from implementing onerous parking minimums near public transit, but local mayors killed the proposal.

### *Advocacy for midrise density*

Midrise (i.e. 3-8 story) buildings are the source of most density in growing cities. Advocacy for midrise buildings in both commercial/industrial areas and residential neighborhoods is important for growth.

It can be difficult for advocates to gain the necessary political support for zoning for midrise buildings. For example, in Los Angeles, politicians tend to push for high-rise towers downtown but single-family residences on, e.g., the west side, and smaller developers, who would want to put up midrise buildings, often lack the lobbying power that they would need to affect zoning. New York City has a similar problem.

### *Minimum Parking Requirements*

Reform of inefficient minimum parking requirements is one of the most promising areas for effective change, as these are ubiquitous in nearly every U.S. city; San Francisco and Manhattan are exceptions.

### *Building codes*

Building codes may be overly restrictive in some places, but in general they are not currently a major issue because the market generally demands buildings that exceed building code requirements anyway.

## **Transit**

Effective transit is important for city density, so it shares many of the same advocates as zoning issues. Transit funding is most effective when used to promote urban growth.

The Transit Coalition in Southern California and the San Francisco Transit Riders Union are examples of transit advocacy groups that seem to have been successful.

### *Funding and effectiveness*

The transit agencies of many cities are underfunded, though San Francisco and New York are again notable exceptions. At the same time, they often use funds ineffectually.

Transit construction costs in the U.S. are much higher than in other wealthy nations. For example, Mr. Smith estimates that costs in San Francisco are 2-3x as expensive as for similar projects in other nations; in New York, they are up to 4-6x as expensive. The reasons for this are poorly understood. A study illuminating the causes of high U.S. transit construction costs would be very helpful.

The most expensive aspect of transit is labor costs. U.S. commuter rail systems tend to employ many more conductors than commuter rail systems in other countries. Labor issues exist in other transit modes as well, but they are less severe.

In D.C., some advocates have been working on support for mixed-traffic streetcars, which are unlikely to be a cost-effective use of transit funds. Streetcars are only helpful if they have dedicated lanes.

#### *Bikes and driverless cars*

Bike transit advocates have probably been effective, but bikers represent a very small mode-share relative to walking and public transit.

Mr. Smith is skeptical that driverless cars will have a very significant impact on cities, for several reasons:

- Safety systems in driverless cars (e.g. automatic stopping for pedestrians) may be impractical in cities, as pedestrians would have less incentive to stay out of traffic.
- Driverless trains, a much simpler technology, have failed to take off for regulatory reasons.
- Transformative technologies tend to be unanticipated (e.g. smart phones, the social media revolution). Rarely do big ideas pushed by futurists, such as driverless cars, actually come to fruition in the predicted way.

#### **Other people to discuss zoning and land use issues with**

- **Vicki Been**, Commissioner of New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development; former Faculty Director of the Furman Center
- **Scott Wiener**, San Francisco Board of Supervisors
- **Vishaan Chakrabarti**, Professor at Columbia University
- **Harriet Tregoning**, former Director of Planning for Washington D.C.

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