

The Road to Right-Size Cities

What post-industrial cities can learn from rural America about smart shrinking.

By Frank and Deborah Popper

posted Nov 16, 2010

Cities have always gained or lost population because of economic shifts, immigration, war, and environmental blessings or disasters. Settlements can dwindle and even disappear, as American western (and eastern) ghost towns and archaeological sites the world over show. Yet the United States has typically considered long-term urban population decline unusual—an anomaly that, should it occur in one place, has less significance than growth there and elsewhere.

However, many American cities, mostly in the Midwest and Northeast, have seen serious continuing shrinkage in recent decades and are now beginning to face up to it. A few have tentatively tried to craft measures that accept the persistence, even permanence, of their smaller size. As these cities search for answers, one of the few models they can turn to comes from, of all places, [the buffalo country of the Great Plains states](#).

There, communities that fought population decline for decades are now preparing for the realities of a smaller, but not necessarily worse, future. Through our work with these communities over many years, we believe that they have experience that can help guide shrinking cities in what we have called “smart decline.”

A history of growth

Large American cities first appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time of high industrialization and rapid external and internal immigration. Chicago had 30,000 people in 1850 and grew to nearly 300,000 in 1870. It endured the 1871 Great Chicago Fire and kept ballooning anyway, rising to more than 500,000 by 1880 and doubling again by 1900 as it became a center for railroads, meat processing, timber brokering, and finance. Midsized cities, too, like Bethlehem, Scranton, and Wilkes-Barre in northeast Pennsylvania, flourished as coal and steel processors. Their overall boundaries expanded, with affluent neighborhoods for the local elites and ethnic enclaves for the working classes. Their downtowns and main streets prospered. Many cities and neighborhoods in this high industrial era grew at least as rapidly as their present-day, less industrial Sun Belt counterparts.

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American city planning emerged to deal with the consequences. Sir Peter Hall’s canonical history of planning shows the field forming to deal with the large new urban slums of late-nineteenth-century industrializing America (and Europe): unhealthy, congested, dangerous, ugly, vice ridden, and aggrieved, but growing fast—what he calls “The City of Dreadful Night.”

As the twentieth century unfolded, American city and regional planning tried to manage the pressures of rising urban and later suburban populations, as well as the effects of industrial growth. Local zoning ordinances, state land-use regulations, federal antipollution laws, and environmental reviews appeared, whose proponents expected them to uphold property values. Population and economic growth provided both the norm and the ideal—the standard template—to guide development. Thus in the 1950s and 1960s American planning devices focused on “growth control,” in the 1970s and 1980s on “growth management,” and in the 1990s and 2000s on “smart growth.”

No zoning ordinance, still the most frequent tool of American local land-use planning, explicitly anticipates that the locality or its neighborhoods will lose population.

Confronting declining populations

By the late twentieth century vast shifts undid the American fable of all-but-permanent urban and economic growth. Cheaper manufacturing centers arose outside the old Northeast and Midwest, first elsewhere in the United States and then abroad. White- and blue-collar workers had already used their postwar rising wages and the new federal home loans (essentially a mortgage subsidy) to flee the cities for the suburbs in huge numbers, leaving behind the poor and many minorities. Large public sewer and road-building programs further subsidized American suburbanization. Most older cities, [especially in the Rust Belt](#), found themselves increasingly left behind: No large cohort of upwardly mobile urban newcomers moved in to replace the former residents. “The City of Dreadful Night” became “The City of the Permanent Underclass.”

The Big Three American carmakers, once national symbols and the country’s most visible group of corporations, began their initially shallow, then steep descent into two-thirds complete bankruptcy and federal bailout by 2009. Their suppliers in the steel, coal, tire, glass, machinery, and utility industries suffered with them. The same pattern

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recurred in the electronics and aircraft sectors, among many others. American manufacturing could often no longer compete with its new rivals around the world.

The urban effects were predictable, though few wanted to admit to them. Long-established cities like St. Louis, which in 1900 had been the fourth-largest American city, and Buffalo, the eighth largest, dropped out of the nation's top twenty by 1980. By the 1990s many new immigrants—for instance, Russians and South Asians in the Northeast—moved directly to the suburbs rather than undergoing the previous typical newcomer rites of passage in big cities.

Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania cities, in particular, dwindled significantly. Frequently even their suburbs shrank. In 2000–2009 “the failed state of Ohio” contributed four of the ten metro areas that lost the largest absolute numbers of people. Behind New Orleans and Pittsburgh, Cleveland was in third place, Youngstown-Warren fifth, Dayton eighth, and Toledo tenth. About half of Detroit's surrounding cities and towns lost population in the decade.

Smart decline: A new approach

Youngstown, Ohio is a classic example of a shrinking city trying hard to adapt. In 1950 the city was a vibrant steel town with 170,000 people, the fifty-seventh-largest U.S. city. Then suburbanization hit, the steel mills began to close in 1977, and by 2000 Youngstown had 82,000 inhabitants, less than half its size two generations earlier. Its decrepit neighborhoods had typical signs of shrinkage: abandoned or underused buildings, empty overgrown lots, high crime, and aging and heavily minority populations.

In 2002, after decades of trying to restart economic development like most other Rust Belt cities, Youngstown made a radical change in approach. The city began devising a transformative plan to encourage some neighborhoods to keep emptying and their vegetation to return. The plan, still early in its implementation, would raze under-occupied structures, streets, and alleys to form larger land parcels and home lots, more green space, and new parks. At the heart of the plan is Youngstown's acceptance of decline and attempt to use it to improve the remaining buildings, infrastructure, and services by strategically concentrating them.

A perverse measure of the nation's (and the environmental professions') neglect of shrinkage possibilities showed up in the media reception of Youngstown's 2005 plan. Accepting shrinkage seemed so unusual that within two years the city's approach appeared on the front pages of USA Today and the Wall Street Journal, on National Public Radio's Morning Edition, on the Voice of America, and on the New York Times Magazine list of 2006's most interesting ideas.

The shrinkage policies of Braddock, Pennsylvania, a small town near Pittsburgh, won its mayor, John Fetterman, the cover of the November 2009 Atlantic's “100 Brave Thinkers” issue. The town's population losses—90 percent, according to the Atlantic—call for extreme approaches, and Fetterman has emphasized art, turning eyesores into murals and bidding for artists to relocate there.

Buffalo's decline has left it with the threadbare assets of a much larger place, a size-40 city in a size-60 suit. It retains the architectural treasures, theaters, hospitals, schools, and government buildings (including an always-outsized City Hall) to anchor a major region, but now, at less than half its population at its height, it has too few people to fully occupy them. The city's “5 in 5” plan calls for razing five thousand buildings in five years by evaluating vacant buildings and putting them up for bids. Razing occurs if there are no takers. The city promotes historical preservation, trying to weed out the excess but keeping the design gems. As elsewhere, **vacant land is used for community gardens**. Flint, too, draws on these strategies and emphasizes greening vacant land in its master plan.

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Detroit, with more than a third of its residential lots already vacant or derelict, has seen smart-decline efforts by nonprofits like the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign, which advocates land banking and **improving foreclosure procedures** and works with neighborhoods to devise approaches to vacancies.

The Detroit City Council approved the Detroit Land Bank in July 2008. **Urban agriculture is growing**. In March 2010, in his first State of the City address, Mayor Dave Bing announced his plan to demolish 3,000 buildings in 2010 and 10,000 overall by 2014. The program draws on considerable federal support and is described as a way to strengthen neighborhoods and improve land use. The poster child of urban shrinkage, Detroit has become the site of some of the nation's liveliest discussions about where to go next in smart decline.

All of these places—still a minority among shrinking cities—are struggling to grasp their next steps: how to respond to lost revenue and political power, and how to salvage their obsolete land uses and unexpectedly open spaces. They seem to lack useful models to help them adapt to their new size. But models of decline do exist—in rural America.

A Great Plains approach

While the Detroit and Youngstown grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rural regions and communities shrank. By the late twentieth century, rural growth had become unusual unless based on exurbia, amenities, or (typically short-term) resource strikes. In fact, generations-long population declines in the Corn Belt, upper Midwest, and lower Mississippi Delta fit a clearly standard pattern of the early phases of the Industrial Revolution globally. American rural regions, like shrinking cities later, at first sought new sources of growth or thought (quite understandably) that their old

sources would return. Mostly fruitless decades passed before some came to creative solutions to their problems of shrinking populations.

Our own experience points to the rural Great Plains as a useful source of smart-decline strategies. The region has seen three cycles of short booms and long busts since the arrival of white settlers. The first boom began with homesteading after the Civil War and ended with many of the settlers headed back east in the late 1880s and early 1890s—driven out by blizzard, drought, and economic crises. The two later cycles ended first with the 1930s Dust Bowl and then the modern decades-long, slow-leak shrinkage.

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The third long bust was well under way by the mid-1980s, when we began writing about the region. We suggested that Manifest Destiny-style growth visions for the region had proved self-defeating, largely because of excessive resource exploitation. We argued that the rural Plains, especially its most depopulating parts, should pursue **paths of ecological restoration**, with large land preserves: federal, tribal, state, nonprofit, and private holdings that would emphasize ecological restoration and research and mesh well with ecotourism. Traditional farming, ranching, and energy extraction could also profit by **adopting lighter approaches to land** that minimized inputs and disruptive landscape changes. We had no wish to displace existing secure owners or communities, or their land uses, but rather to shift the region's way of thinking about its future. We called our approach the Buffalo Commons, an open-ended metaphor that evokes native species and shared land and futures.

Most plainspeople at first dismissed the Buffalo Commons as near lunatic: a foolish and unnecessary acceptance of shrinkage. Or perhaps it was predatory—we, big eastern or West Coast interests, or the federal government, had designs on their land. But over the next two decades, the old approaches continued to fail. By 2005 two more censuses had documented the continuing outmigration and the economic stress it brought. Gradually plainspeople undertook more and more Buffalo Commons approaches.

Farmers and ranchers started shifting from cattle to buffalo. Plains banks began lending for buffalo. Plains states' agricultural extension offices offered advice on how to raise buffalo. Encouraged by the newly formed InterTribal Bison Cooperative, Sioux and other Plains tribes took steps to recover buffalo herds and restore their buffalo culture. The Nature Conservancy, the country's largest land-conservation group, began to buy and preserve Plains land, along with the Montana-based American Prairie Foundation, the Nebraska-based Grassland Foundation, and the Texas-based Great Plains Restoration Council.

In late 2009 Kansas's two largest newspapers ran editorials endorsing the Buffalo Commons, suggesting that it become a national park in the western part of the state and proposing two counties as its core. The two papers quoted the state's former governor and sitting secretary of wildlife and parks—a Republican and in the 1980s a critic of the Buffalo Commons—who said that it “makes more sense every year.”

The Buffalo Commons experience suggests specific tasks for cities that embrace rather than deny shrinkage: Reorganize space; remove unneeded infrastructure; rethink transportation, energy, and food options; encourage industrial and other heritage tourism; and, above all, rightsize themselves in authentic, resilient ways.

The term “Buffalo Commons” itself generated a wealth of possibilities. It stimulated creative assessments of the Plains' long-term assets, ecologically sensible land uses, and community-building strengths. The region's still-unfolding adaptation suggests that large stretches of it are successfully moving toward the Buffalo Commons, which situates it better for the realities of the climate-changing, post-fossil-fuel era.

Embracing smallness

The Great Plains and the Buffalo Commons offer useful lessons for shrinking cities in the Rust Belt and elsewhere. As in the Plains, many shrinking cities' politicians and people recoil from measures that accept the ongoing decline. The initiatives feel un-American, suggest that past approaches (or one's ancestors) were inadequate, force admission that much of local destiny lies beyond local control, present political risks, and provoke other discomforts. So the cities' first responses to shrinkage continue previous “Hail Mary” approaches, hoping that only a new employer, industry, or tax policy is needed to return to growth. For most cities, this approach is misguided and ultimately useless. It misses the window these cities have **to redefine themselves**, basing their future on tapping the creativity of their citizens and ecosystems.

In such tasks, shrinking cities have some advantages over the Plains and other shrinking rural regions. Old cities first built for compactness, high population density, and **neighborhood walkability** have suddenly useful post-carbon assets such as centralized amenities and short-distance transportation. Their unintended open space offers **sites for food production**. They can experiment with renewable energy options that do not rely on long-distance transmission.

New groups such as the National Vacant Properties Campaign (“Creating Opportunity from Abandonment”) are emerging to deal with the issues urban shrinkage raises. The Obama administration may yet redeem its urban promises, especially since big states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, whose urban counties often have larger populations than entire Plains states, remain crucial in national elections. The cities' governments, however ragged or corrupt, have precise boundaries and duties that many rural regions lack. For all their problems, Buffalo and Cleveland run their own governments in a way western Kansas, much less the Plains as a whole, does not.

The experiences of Youngstown, Flint, Braddock, Detroit, and Buffalo amount to early attempts to act on the new reality. These cities stand about where the Plains states stood in the mid-1990s and show that the search for adaptive urban shrinkage has only begun. The Buffalo Commons experience suggests specific tasks for cities that embrace rather than deny shrinkage: Reorganize space; remove unneeded infrastructure; rethink transportation, energy, and food options; encourage industrial and other heritage tourism; and, above all, rightsize themselves in authentic, resilient ways that shun past magical thinking and face the realities of the post-carbon world.

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