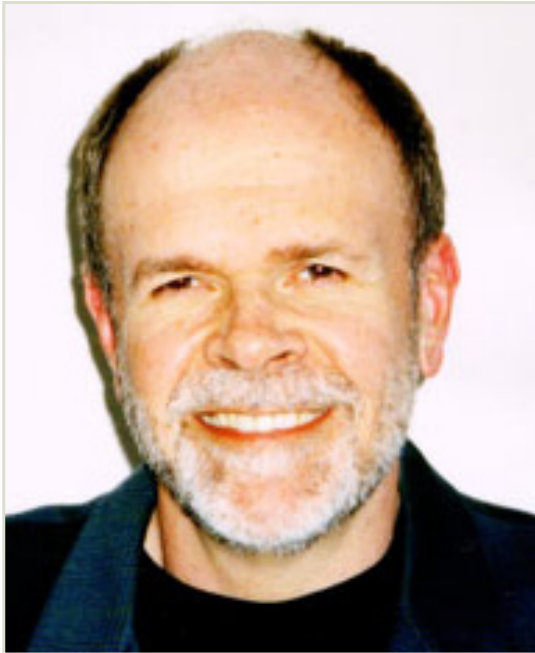


Cities in Transition - Interview

Vacant Property Research Initiative



Kaid Benfield
Washington, D.C.

Profile

Kaid Benfield directs the Sustainable Communities program for the National Resources Defense Council. He is the co-founder of the LEED for Neighborhood Development rating system and of the Smart Growth America coalition. His books include *Once There Were Greenfields* (NRDC 1999), *Solving Sprawl* (Island Press 2001), *Smart Growth In a Changing World* (APA Planners Press 2007), and *Green Community* (APA Planners Press 2009). Voted one of the “top urban thinkers” in a Planetizen poll, Benfield was also named one of “the most influential people in sustainable planning and development” by the Partnership for Sustainable Communities.

When Shrinking Isn't Smart

By David Morley, AICP

Kaid Benfield worries that some “right-sizing” proposals for chronically distressed cities lack perspective about regional population trends. “What I would prefer to right-sizing,” he suggests, “are regional controls on growth with a more optimistic view toward the future of the central city. If you look ahead for a period of decades, all the market trends seem to favor central cities.”

Benfield believes the drive toward demolishing city neighborhoods for use as farms or other non-urban purposes is a legacy of the environmental movement of the 1970s, which idealized rural areas without recognizing the environmental benefits of cities. “There is probably a happy medium,” he admits, “where some additional greenspace would be a benefit to distressed urban neighborhoods.” Nonetheless, he remains skeptical of proposals to let entire neighborhoods revert to greenspace without also addressing regional growth patterns.



Photo courtesy of www.dailyyonder.com

“Hollowed Out” Regions

According to Benfield, few regions are actually losing much if any population, and when there is regional population loss, central city shrinkage is not the whole story. Since 1950, suburban populations in most industrial metropolitan areas have dramatically increased in population. Regions are actually hollowing out more than shrinking.

Benfield cautions that if central cities bulldoze entire neighborhoods, increase lot sizes, and reduce infrastructure capacity as a response to population loss in older portions of cities, regional sprawl will continue unabated. Beyond the environmental argument

that dense central cities are far more transportation-efficient than lower-density suburbs, he also points to an economic justification for preserving city districts. Because long-term market trends favor walkable urban neighborhoods, an additional risk of overzealous land reclamation is that new growth will continue to skip these older, post-industrial cities in favor of Sun Belt cities or suburban locations with urban amenities.

“If cities do have to consolidate infrastructure, they need to do it in a way that’s clearly designed to be temporary, so they can participate in the renewed interest in urbanism that the country as a whole is seeing,” says Benfield. “The last thing we want to do is make abandonment of urban land more permanent than it is now.”

Regional Answers

In Benfield’s view, fragmented metropolitan



Mainz, Germany (Photo courtesy of Natalie Borecki, Virginia Tech)

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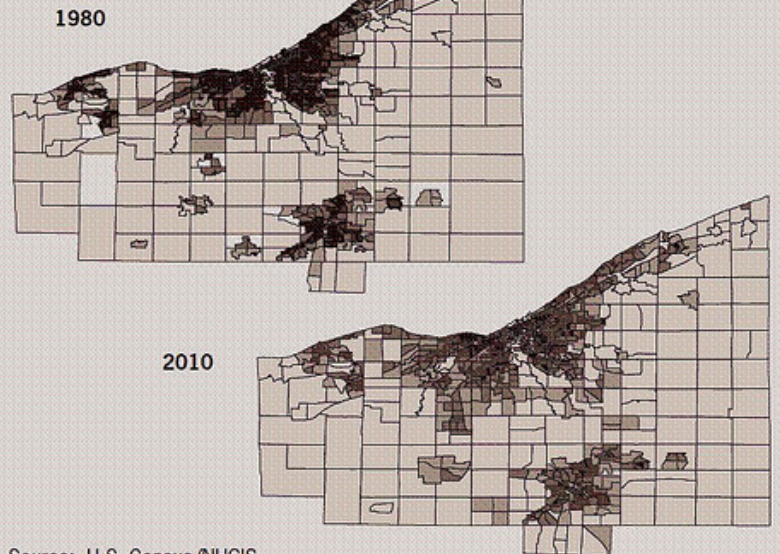
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Figure 4. Population Density, Cleveland



Source: U.S. Census/NHGIS.

governance makes finding solutions to the interrelated problems of central city decline and regional sprawl more difficult. He would prefer to see regional controls on growth and revenue sharing programs, along with a more limited approach to demolitions and conversions of now-urban land.

Benfield points out that the spread of infrastructure is expensive, not only to build but to service over time: “It just makes sense to channel that growth to places and in ways that reduce its per-person expenses.”

Nevertheless, Benfield is realistic about the prospects of regional cooperation in absence of a top-down mandate. “The first step will probably have to be at the state level; it’s unlikely that the individual jurisdictions in these regions are going to create a regional mechanism on their own.”

Benfield points to California’s SB 375 as a recent, positive example of state-led policy to encourage strong regional coordination. This law requires regional planning to reduce carbon emissions. The most likely result is that new growth will be primarily concentrated in existing centers. “I think that the effect of SB 375 will be less sprawl and more governing mechanisms that the regions will have to put in place to meet their statutory mandate,” says Benfield.

Benfield knows that reversing the decline in older, post-industrial cities will be difficult, but he wants to make sure that experts and practitioners don’t lose sight of the bigger picture. “It seems to me, whatever the solutions are they must recognize that there’s something going on here that is not just confined to the central jurisdiction.”