

Progressive Planning in Ideologically Conservative Communities

Planners must work in ideologically diverse environments. This report discusses ways to be effective in conservative jurisdictions that are skeptical of new perspectives.

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Abstract

Planners are change managers; we help communities respond to changing demands and new goals. Ideological conservatives skeptical of change are now influential in many jurisdictions. Planners have professional responsibilities to work with stakeholders regardless of ideology. This report examines how planners can respond effectively to changing demands and goals in conservative communities. Although conservatives and liberals share many goals such as affordability, fairness, public safety and health, and community livability, they often differ in how these issues are framed and what solutions should be implemented. This report identifies conservative principles and priorities, and describes how they can be applied to specific planning decisions. Despite differences, there are many areas of overlap; planners can help identify opportunities for cooperation among ideologically diverse stakeholders.

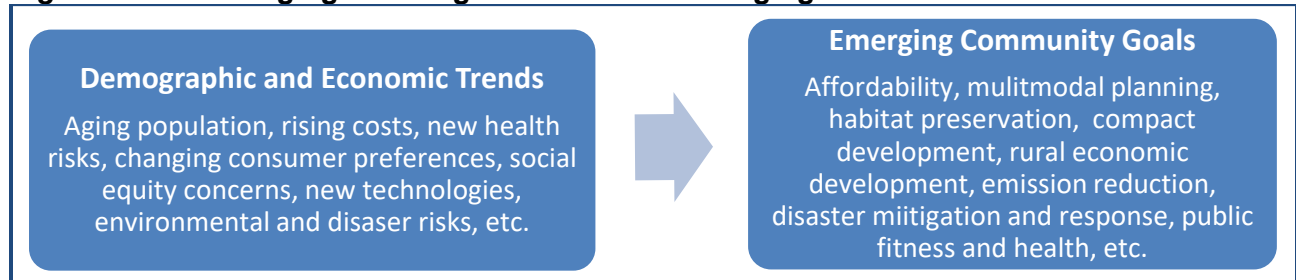
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Introduction: Progressive Planners and Ideological Conservatives

Progressive planners help communities respond to changing demands and new goals as illustrated below.

Figure 1 Changing Planning Demands and Emerging Goals



Demographic and economic trends are changing demands and creating new community goals.

Conservatives tend to be skeptical of new issues and have different priorities than liberals:

Table 1 Comparing Planning Priorities

Planning Issue	Conservative Priorities	Liberal Priorities
Reduce traffic and parking congestion	✓	
Roadway cost savings	✓	✓
Parking cost savings		✓
Consumer savings (affordability)	✓	✓
Improve mobility for non-drivers		✓
Improve traffic safety	✓	✓
Energy conservation and emission reductions		✓
Prevent sprawl to reduce public costs and protect farmland	✓	✓
Prevent sprawl to reduce emissions and protect habitat		✓

Conservatives and liberals have different but often overlapping priorities.

Despite these differences there are many areas of overlap and potential cooperation. For example, both value affordability although they differ in emphasis: conservatives tend to focus on middle-class concerns and favor market solutions while liberals focus on disadvantaged groups and favor government programs. Similarly, although both want efficient transportation, conservatives focus on reducing congestion and parking problems while liberals want to improve mobility for non-drivers and reduce emissions. Stakeholder support for a policy depends on how it relates to their priorities. For example, conservatives may support multimodal planning if shown to reduce traffic problems and save money, while liberals may support those policies if they help disadvantaged groups and reduce emissions.

Regardless of our personal priorities, planners have a professional responsibility to work with all community stakeholders regardless of ideology. Planners will be more effective if they frame problems and solutions based to stakeholders' priorities; conservatives require different arguments and evidence than liberals. This report investigates these issues. It defines conservative principles and priorities, and identifies how they can support responsive planning such as compact infill and multimodal transportation. This should be of interest to policy makers, planners and activists who want to achieve progressive community goals in ideologically conservative communities.

Conservative Principles and Priorities

The term *conservative* literally means cautious and resource-efficient, as in conserving water or energy. It also emphasizes tradition, personal freedom and responsibility, limited government, property rights, free and competitive markets, and human dignity, as indicated in the following table.

Table 2 General Principles by Conservative Thought Leaders

Johnson 2018	Kirk 1993	Wikipedia 2024
Individual freedom	Recognizes an enduring moral order	Favor institutions and practices that enhance social order and historical continuity such as the nuclear family, organized religion, nation-states, property rights, rule of law, the military, and sometimes aristocracy.
Limited government	Adheres to custom and continuity	
Rule of law	Applies the principle of prudence	
Peace through strength	Links freedom and private property	
Fiscal responsibility	Upholds voluntary community	
Free markets and property rights	Applies prudent restraints upon power	
Human dignity	Reconciles permanence and change	

Conservatives tend to emphasize caution, tradition (“custom, convention and continuity”), personal freedom and responsibility, limited government, private property rights and human dignity.

However, these principles are too general to guide planning. The table below indicates how conservative principles can define specific goals, and their implications. This can help determine the analysis needed to respond to conservative priorities and identify opportunities for conservative-liberal cooperation.

Table 3 Applying Conservative Planning Principles

Principle	Goals	Implications for Planning
Caution and responsibility	Minimize physical and economic risks.	Identify risks and potential mitigations.
Responsible government	Protect citizens’ interests. Maximize value for money.	Evaluate government impacts. Identify ways to improve services and cost efficiency.
Property rights	Protect property rights.	Avoid unnecessary regulation.
Consumer sovereignty	Public policies should respond to user demands whenever possible.	Identify consumer demands and preferences, and ways to respond to them.
Efficient markets	Apply market principles such as competition and cost-based pricing.	Identify market solutions including public-partner partnerships and efficient pricing.
Economic development	Support local industries, employment, property values and tax revenues.	Evaluate economic impacts and opportunities to support local industries.
Public safety and health	Protect residents’ safety, security and health.	Analyze accident, crime and health risks, and ways to minimize them.
Fairness	Public policies should be applied fairly and resources allocated equitably.	Analyze the distribution of benefits and costs, and whether that is equitable.
Protect vulnerable people	Support physically and economically disadvantaged people.	Identify disadvantaged groups, the obstacles they face, and ways to help them.
Economic opportunity	Help disadvantaged people access education, employment and shopping.	Identify ways to help disadvantaged people access education, employment and goods.

Planners can help identify goals and analysis that reflect conservative principles.

Although conservatives and liberals may differ, there are areas of overlap and possible cooperation. Conservatives and liberals both value social equity but with different priorities. Conservatives tend to focus on *horizontal equity*, which strives to allocate impacts equally between similar groups, while liberals focus on *vertical equity*, which strives to favor disadvantaged groups, as summarized below.

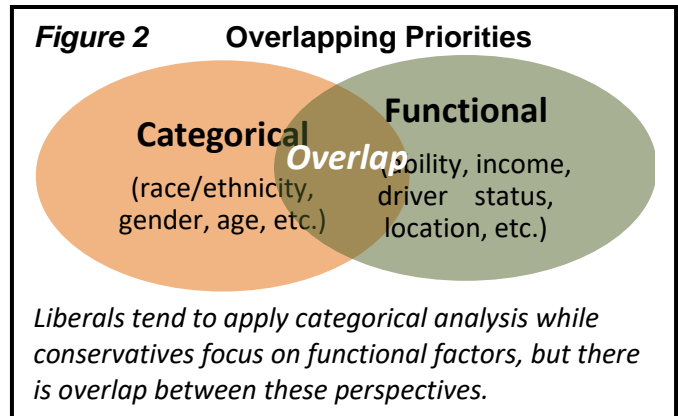
Table 4 **Types of Equity** (Litman 2022)

Type	Description
Horizontal: Similar people should be treated similarly.	
Fair Share	Each person receives a fair share of public resources.
External costs	Travellers minimize the costs they imposed on others.
Vertical: Public policies should favor disadvantaged groups.	
Inclusivity	Everybody enjoys basic (essential) services and economic opportunities.
Affordability	Lower-income households can afford basic goods and services.
Social Justice	Everybody is treated with fairness and dignity. Past injustices are corrected.

Conservatives tend to focus on horizontal equity and liberals on vertical equity.

Despite differences, conservatives and liberals may agree on many equity strategies. Most conservatives recognize the need to help disadvantaged groups (what they often call *underdogs*) such as people with disabilities, seniors, and working-class families with children. They value hard work, education and employment to reduce poverty, and are skeptical of public assistance. Both conservatives and liberals can support policies that improve housing and transportation affordability, although conservatives emphasize middle-class and liberals low-income perspectives. Both groups want to help people with disabilities, although conservatives tend to emphasize cost-efficiency (e.g., universal design requirements targeting areas with more impaired travellers) while liberals tend to support minimum standards (e.g., universal design requirements for all new facilities).

Liberals tend to favor categorical analysis focusing on race, ethnicity and gender, and programmatic solutions such as affirmative action and DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) policies, while conservatives tend to favor functional analysis based on ability and income, and may be skeptical of DEI programs. However, there are overlaps between these approaches, as illustrated to the right. For example, since minorities tend to have high disability and poverty rates, both conservatives and liberals can support policies that improve affordable housing and travel options, particularly in lower-income communities.



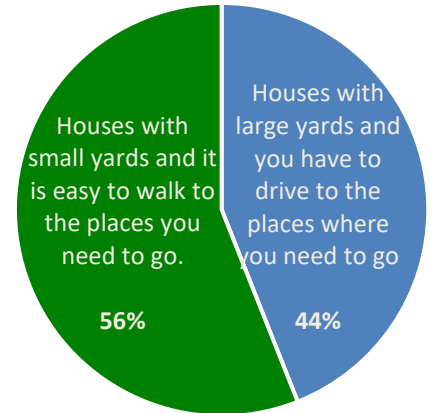
Many conservatives are influenced by populism (which claims to support common people against perceived elites), popular culture (conservatives tend to identify with rural lifestyles, working class families and truck owners), and their funders’ priorities (Kaufman 2023). For example, many conservatives support single-family zoning and auto-oriented planning because they are currently popular with conservative voters, but may support Smart Growth policies if framed in terms of conservative goals such as cutting regulations, helping disadvantaged groups, and supporting local economies. Planners can provide the analysis needed to gain that support.

Conservative Policy Debates

Conservative thought leaders such as Wendel Cox (2023 and 2024), Judge Glock (2024) and Joel Kotkin (2024), and their organizations such as the Cato, Heritage and Reason foundations, tend to criticize Smart Growth and support auto-oriented, sprawl-inducing policies. They argue that most North American families want homes in sprawled, automobile dependent areas, that housing unaffordability results primarily from urban containment regulations and can be alleviated by allowing more low-density urban expansion, and that compact development is economically and socially harmful (Litman 2025). These assumptions are easily refuted:

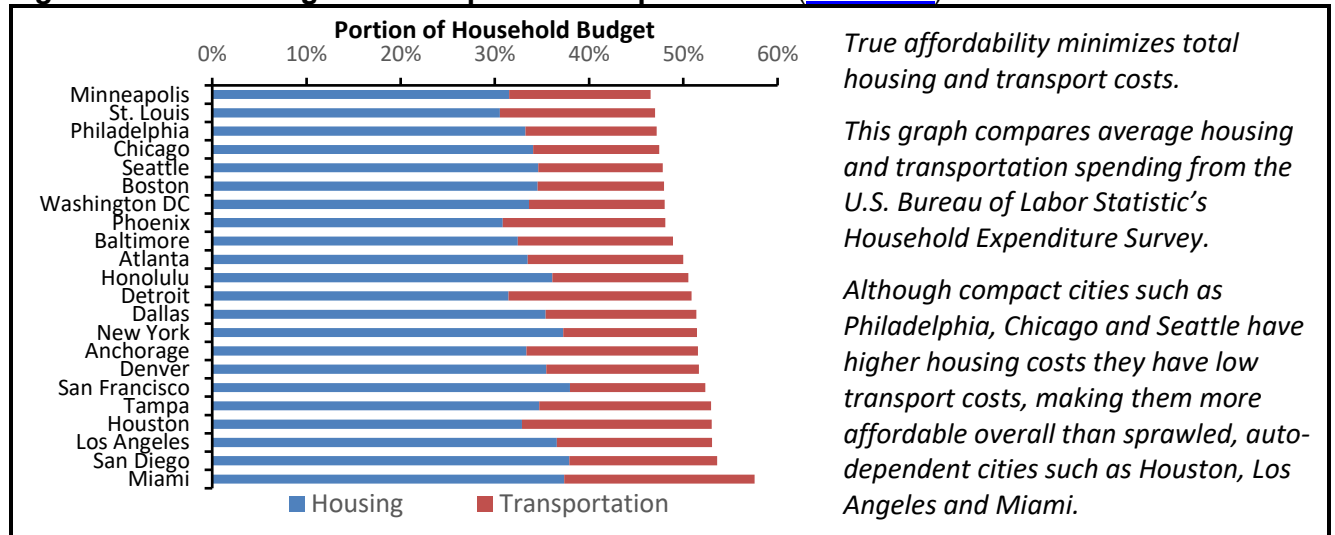
- Although given unlimited resources most households prefer large-lot single-family homes, the National Association of Realtors' *Community Preference Survey* (NAR 2023), finds that when faced with realistic trade-offs, more than half choose compact homes in a walkable urban neighborhood over a larger-lot home in a sprawled area, as illustrated to the right.
- The study, *How Often Do Cities Mandate Smart Growth or Green Building?* (Lewyn and Jackson 2014) found that urban growth boundaries are rare, while restrictions on density and multifamily housing, and parking minimums are imposed in most North American urban neighborhoods.
- Critics such as Kotkin (2024) are wrong to claim that Smart Growth represents "planners' preference for urban density." Rather, Smart Growth policies that create compact, multimodal neighborhoods respond to community goals such as affordability, health and safety, and economic opportunity; planners' role is help communities identify ways to achieve their goals.
- True affordability must consider both transportation as well as housing costs. Although sprawled areas tend to have lower housing costs, this is generally offset by higher transportation costs, so compact cities tend to be more affordable overall, as illustrated below.

Figure 3 Community Preferences Survey (NAR 2023)



National Association of Realtor surveys indicate that most people prefer a compact home in a walkable neighborhood over a house with a larger yard in a sprawled area.

Figure 4 Housing and Transportation Expenditures (BLS 2023)



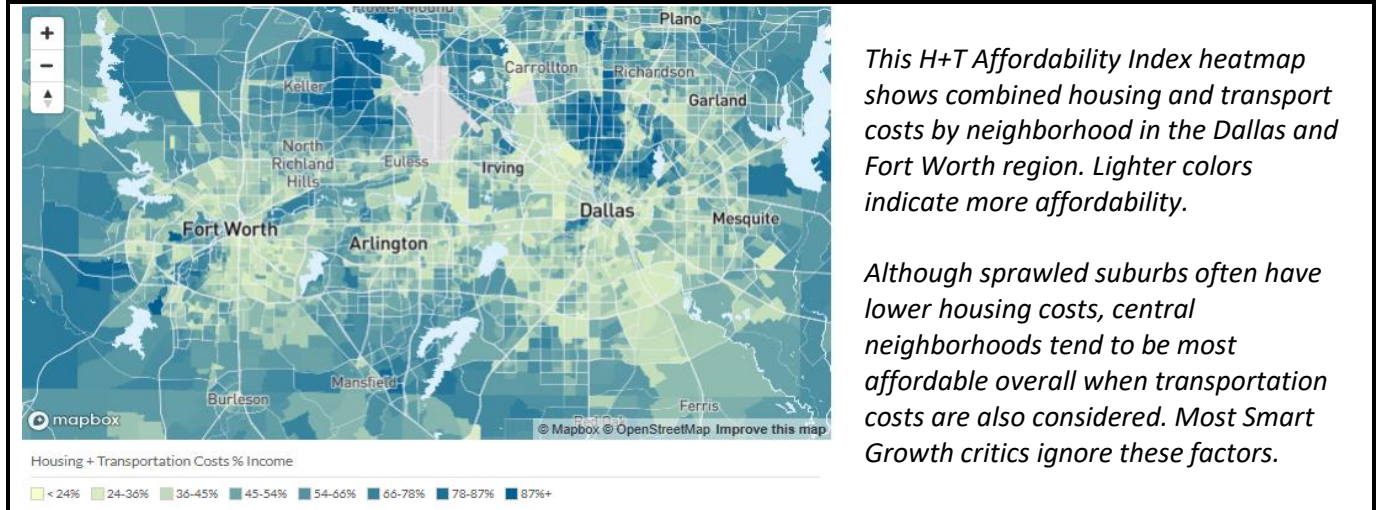
True affordability minimizes total housing and transport costs.

This graph compares average housing and transportation spending from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic's Household Expenditure Survey.

Although compact cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago and Seattle have higher housing costs they have low transport costs, making them more affordable overall than sprawled, auto-dependent cities such as Houston, Los Angeles and Miami.

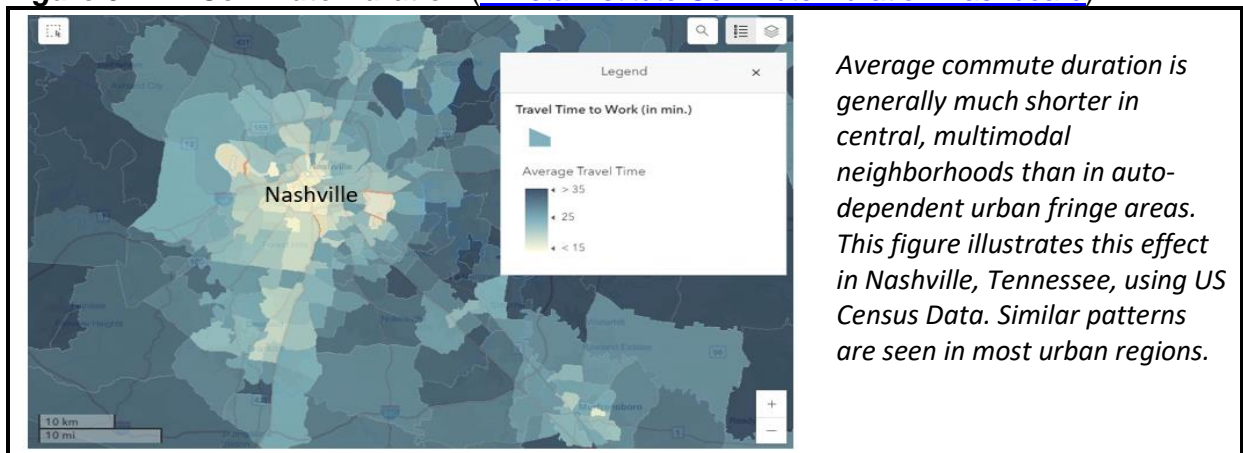
- In most U.S. urban regions, central neighborhoods are most affordable overall due to low vehicle costs. Smart Growth policies that allow lower cost housing types (basic townhouses and multifamily with unbundled parking), in central neighborhoods tends to increase affordability overall, particularly in constrained regions where urban expansion is limited.

Figure 5 H+T Affordability Index (CNT 2018)



- Every community is unique, so it is inappropriate to assume that solutions are transferable between regions. For example, Cox and Kotkin cite low housing prices in geographically unconstrained regions like Columbus, Houston and Nashville to argue that geographically constrained cities like New York, San Francisco and Seattle can become more affordable by allowing more expansion, ignoring their lack of developable land nearby. In constrained areas, affordability requires growing up, not out.
- Compared with urban fringe areas, central neighborhoods provide better access to economic opportunities, reduce travel time costs, as illustrated below, and provide better economic mobility (the chance that children from lower-income families earn more than their parents), as described in “Does Urban Sprawl Hold Down Upward Mobility?” (Ewing, et al. 2016).

Figure 6 Commute Duration (Mineta Institute Commute Duration Dashboard)



- Conservative principles support efficient transport pricing. Conservative organizations such as the Reason Foundation support road tolls (Gilroy 2008), although this has declined as they embrace populism, and Don Shoup's 2011 article, "Free Parking or Free Markets" challenges conservatives to support parking policy reforms and efficient parking pricing.

Although some conservative leaders and organizations continue to support sprawl and auto-oriented planning, as illustrated by the Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025* recommendations (HF 2024; Lewyn 2024; Remond 2024), a growing group of conservative urbanists supports Smart Growth and multimodalism (Brown 2017), promoted by organizations such as [Market Urbanism](#), [Beacon Rebellion](#), [American Compass](#) and [Pro-Transit Conservatives](#). Conservative leaders Paul Weyrich and William Lind, plus New Urbanist leader Andres Duany, wrote *Conservatives and the New Urbanism: Do We Have Some Things in Common?*, which describes why conservatives should support policies that create compact, walkable neighborhoods where residents know their neighbors, instead of auto-oriented sprawl.

American Conservative magazine articles describe how Smart Growth aligns with conservative priorities. Jonathan Copping's 2014 article, "The Conservatism of New Urbanism," argues that "Traditional neighborhoods foster traditional culture, and shouldn't be abandoned to the left." Charles Maron's article, "The Conservative Case Against the Suburbs" describes the economic costs of sprawl and savings provided by compact, multimodal development. Glen Bottom's article, "How to Reclaim Suburban Sprawl," advocates free market policies to allow more compact development.

The conservative Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* also publishes pro-urban articles oriented to conservative readers. For example, John Ketcham's "Dynamic Continuity: Conservative Urbanism is not an Oxymoron" argues that urban densities can improve civic engagement and resilient, create more multigenerational communities, and reduce problems of loneliness and isolation. He writes, "Conservative urbanism therefore holds promise, both to resist idealistic progressivism and the entrenched political forces that impede accountability and efficiency, and as a disposition within urban communities that appreciates the need for both preservation and change."

A *Reason Magazine* debate between Wendell Cox and Christian Britschgi (2023) illustrates shifting perspectives. Cox claims that most people want to live in sprawled areas and are restricted by growth boundaries, but Britschgi points out that many families want to live in compact, walkable neighborhoods but cannot due to regulations, so "expensive urban metro areas would benefit most from upzoning already-developed neighborhoods to allow more infill development. If [conservatives are] forced to choose, we should prioritize the legalization of more town homes, apartments, condos, and high rises downtown over eliminating restrictions on exurban McMansions."

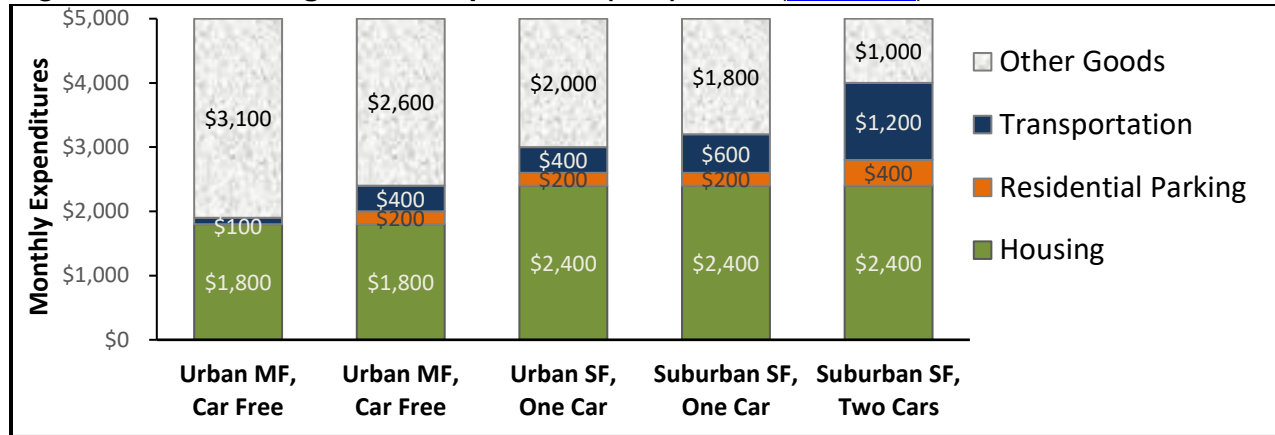
Britschgi also responds to Cox's claims that density causes high housing costs. "Critics of upzoning sometimes argue America's densest cities are also its most expensive. Allowing more dense housing, they say, will just get you a larger, more expensive city. This confuses stocks and flows. San Francisco and New York City are expensive not because developers started building dense housing but because downzonings stopped them from adding more to meet continually rising demand."

Britschgi's "Do Americans Really Only Want Sprawl?," (2024) a thoughtful critique of Joel Kotkin's article, "Let American Sprawl: Planners' Preference for Urban Density Should Not Supersede Americans' Preferences for Suburban or Exurban Living." Britschgi points out that Kotkin exaggerates urban growth boundary impacts and ignores the negative effects of restrictions on compact infill.

Applying Conservative Priorities to Housing Policies

Voth conservatives and liberals consider housing unaffordability a major problem, and as previously described, true affordability requires low housing and transportation (H+T) costs. The graph below compares housing and transport costs for various housing types. Considering both, the most affordable option is multifamily housing with unbundled parking located in a multimodal neighborhood where households can minimize their transportation costs (CNT 2018).

Figure 7 Housing and Transportation (H+T) Costs (BLS 2022)



Compact housing with unbundled parking and affordable non-auto travel is most affordable, leaving households more money to spend on other goods. (MF = multifamily; SF = single family.)

Although both ideologies claim to support affordable housing, and both advocate eliminating regulations (“red tape”) that limits affordable housing development, they differ in priorities. As previously described, traditional conservatives advocate eliminating urban growth boundaries, while conservative urbanists and YIMBY (yes in my backyard) liberals advocate reducing regulations that limit development density and building heights, multifamily housing, and parking minimums.

To increase affordability many liberals also support rent control, affordable housing mandates and housing subsidies, although those approaches have significant limitations. For example, rent controls reduce rents for current tenants but by reducing rental building profitability tend to reduce future rental supply and increase rents for new tenants (Gibb, Soaita and Marsh 2023). Similarly, affordable housing mandates may increase affordability for the households that receive the subsidized homes, but by increasing development costs they tend to reduce the supply and increase the costs of non-subsidized housing (Phillips 2023). Liberals cite examples of affordable European social housing (Condon 2021), although they require large long-term investments and upzoning to allow compact housing types.

Most experts conclude that increasing affordability requires broad upzoning to allow affordable housing types (attached and multifamily) in most neighborhoods, eliminating parking minimums, reducing development fees for lower-cost housing in compact neighborhoods, and enough social housing to serve people with special needs (Freemark 2023). They cite the affordability of cities like Montreal, which allow compact housing in most neighborhoods (Polèse 2020). By creating compact communities with multimodal transportation, this type of development provides additional economic, social and environmental benefits (Ewing and Hamidi 2017; Litman 2023).

The table below compares these approaches.

Table 5 Comparing Housing Policies

Conservative	Experts	Liberal
<i>Encourage low-density urban expansion. However, this increases sprawl-related costs including transportation and public service costs, and environmental impacts.</i>	<i>Upzone to increase compact housing in multimodal neighborhoods, with unbundled parking and efficient infrastructure pricing. This tends to be most cost effective and beneficial.</i>	<i>Rent controls, inclusivity mandates and housing subsidies. However, this tends reduce new housing supply, increase market housing costs, and be expensive.</i>

Conservatives, liberals and experts tend to favor different housing policies.

The table below summarizes the implications of conservative principles applied to housing policies.

Table 6 Applying Conservative Principles to Housing

Principle	Implications for Housing Policy
Caution and responsibility	Limit development in risky areas. Enforce safety standards.
Responsible government	Favor compact development that reduces costs of providing public services.
Property rights	Minimize restrictions on housing types and density, and parking mandates.
Consumer sovereignty	Respond to changing consumer demands and community goals.
Efficient markets	Apply cost-recovery development and utility fees. Reform parking mandates.
Economic development	Implement policies that support local industries, businesses and workers.
Public safety and health	Create compact, mixed, walkable neighborhoods.
Fairness	Reduce restrictions on lower-cost housing and parking minimums.
Protect vulnerable people	Support housing for people with disabilities and low incomes.
Economic opportunity	Support affordable housing in high opportunity neighborhoods.

Conservative principles justify policy reforms. Planners can provide analysis to support them.

This suggests that conservative principles can justify many Smart Growth policies because they respond to consumer demands, reduce public costs, improve public health, and increase economic opportunity.

Housing Policies that Reflect Conservative Priorities

- Apply comprehensive cost and risk analysis. Prevent development in risky areas such as floodplains.
- Evaluate affordability considering total housing and transportation costs. Identify unmet demands for affordable housing in walkable urban neighborhoods and ways to serve those demands.
- Identify and reform current regulations that unintentionally increase housing costs.
- Upzone to allow more compact and lower-cost housing types (attached and multifamily) in multimodal urban neighborhoods.
- Reduce or eliminate parking minimums, and unbundle parking so households are no longer forced to pay for costly off-street parking they don't need.
- Locate lower-cost market housing and social housing in accessible, high opportunity areas.
- Reduce development fees for lower-cost infill housing, reflecting their lower public service costs compared with sprawled locations.

Applying Conservative Principles to Transportation Policies

Progressive planning responds to both older and emerging transportation goals, as summarized below.

Table 7 Transportation Goals

Older Goals	Emerging Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce congestion • Increase parking convenience • Reduce crash rates • Infrastructure cost savings • Optimizing new technologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase affordability • Increasing accessibility • Social equity, provide independent mobility for non-drivers • Improve public fitness and health • Conserve resources and reduce emissions

Progressive planners respond to both older and emerging transportation goals.

Conservatives, particularly populists and those funded by automobile industries, tend to favor auto-oriented planning such as roadway expansions and parking mandates, while liberals tend to support multimodal transportation, TDM incentives and parking reforms. The table below summarizes typical conservative and liberal priorities. However, there are many exceptions. Some conservatives support public transit, efficient road and parking pricing, and multimodal planning (APTA 2024; Lewis 2020) while some liberals oppose road pricing and parking reforms due to equity concerns, as indicated by Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul’s opposition to New York City’s road pricing program.

Table 8 Transportation Priorities

Conservative	Liberal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce traffic and parking congestion • Increase middle-class affordability • Increase traffic safety • Improve Rural transportation • Reduce government costs • Taxpayer fairness (“get what you pay for”) • Support new transportation technologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support multimodalism (active and public transport) • Conserve resources and reduce emissions • Increase low-income affordability • Improve travel for disadvantaged groups • Increase public safety and public health • Support transportation demand management (TDM) • Support efficient transportation technologies

Conservatives and liberals have different but often overlapping transportation priorities.

Conservative principles can support transportation planning reforms, as summarized in this table.

Table 9 Applying Conservative Principles to Transportation Planning

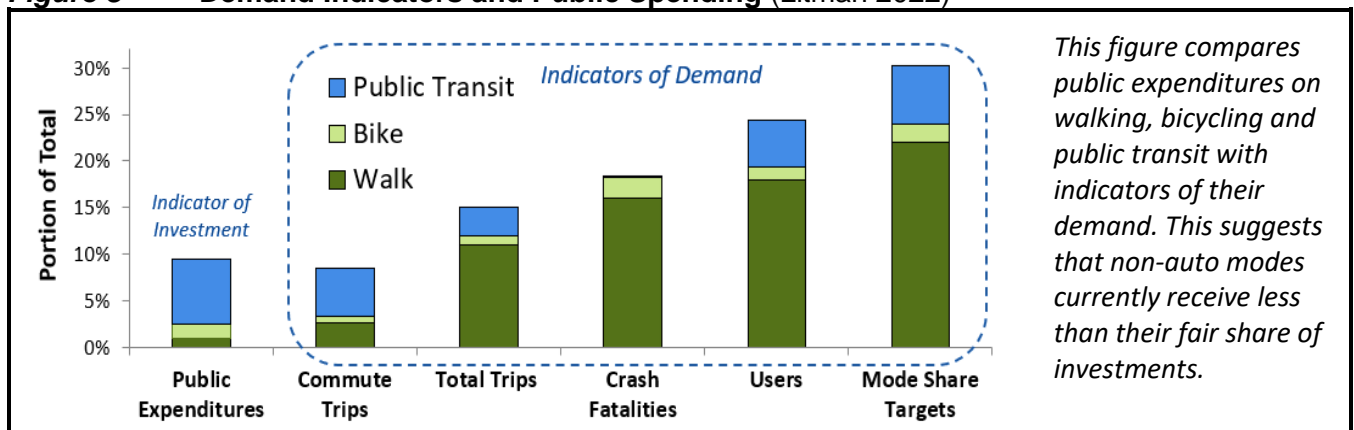
Principle	Implications for Transportation Planning
Caution and responsibility	Multimodal planning increases transport system efficiency and resilience.
Responsible government	Multimodal planning and TDM can reduce government costs.
Property rights	Parking reforms allows property owners to determine parking supply.
Consumer sovereignty	Multimodal planning responds to latent demands for non-auto travel.
Efficient markets	Cost-based tolls and parking fees increase efficiency and fairness.
Economic development	Efficient and affordable transport supports local industries.
Public safety and health	Multimodal transport reduces crashes and increases public fitness and health.
Fairness	Multimodal transport and cost-based pricing are fairer to non-drivers.
Protect vulnerable people	Multimodal transport improves non-drivers’ mobility and affordability.
Economic opportunity	Multimodal transport improves disadvantaged groups’ access to opportunities..

Conservative principles can justify more multimodal planning and TDM for efficiency and fairness..

Planners can help support rational transportation policies by providing comprehensive travel data so planning decisions can respond to consumer demands. Conventional data often undercounts and undervalued non-auto travel. For example, travel demands are often evaluated by commute mode share data, which indicate that walking and bicycling serve less than 5% of trips and so deserve minimal support. However, more comprehensive surveys indicate that about 15% of trips are made by walking, bicycling and public transit, and their potential is higher. The study, *The Multimodal Majority?* found that during a typical week about 65% of Americans use non-auto modes at least once a week, 25% use non-auto modes more than five times a week, and 7% rely entirely on non-auto modes (Buehler and Hamre 2015). Non-auto mode shares tend to be higher in urban areas and often increase significantly after their conditions are improved, indicating latent demands.

For fairness analysis, planners can compare transportation spending with travel demands, as illustrated in the figure below. Currently less than 10% of transportation funding is spent on non-auto modes, indicated by the column at the left. This is comparable to the commute trip mode shares but less than their portion of total trips, traffic casualties, total users (how walk, bike or use public transit at least three times a week) or potential mode shares if non-auto travel conditions were improved.

Figure 8 Demand Indicators and Public Spending (Litman 2022)



Planners can also help identify cost-effective ways to help disadvantaged groups. For example, conservatives may support sidewalk improvements and universal design standards to provide independent mobility for all residents, improve community livability, and support local economic development (Geitner 2024). They may support school transport management (called “safe routes to schools” programs) to reduce neighborhood traffic and parking problems, increase safety, reduce parents chauffeuring burdens, and increase children’s fitness and health.

Similarly, planners can provide information on ways that multimodal planning, TDM and parking reforms can respond to conservative goals such as reducing government costs, supporting property rights and increasing economic development. For example, conservatives may support road tolls and parking fees if described as a way to reduce traffic and parking problems, and charge users for their infrastructure costs, but not if described as vehicle travel or emission reduction strategies. The following table shows which TDM strategies tend to support various conservative goals; this type of analysis should be applied to specific policies and programs.

Table 10 TDM Strategies and Conservative Goals

TDM Strategy	Save Public Money	Economic Efficiency	Consumer Sovereignty	Fairness	Helps Disadvantaged
Improve active travel	✓		✓	✓	✓
Improve public transit			✓	✓	✓
Reduce parking minimums	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Efficient parking pricing	✓	✓		✓	
Efficient road tolls		✓		✓	
Fuel tax increases		✓		✓	
School transport management	✓	✓			✓
Commute trip reduction	✓	✓		✓	✓
Upzoning and infill	✓		✓		✓
Restrict urban expansion	✓				

Planners can show that TDM strategies help achieve various conservative goals.

Progressive planners can use this analysis to determine how TDM strategies can help achieve conservative goals. For example, given information on travel demands, impacts and benefits conservatives are likely to support sidewalk, crosswalk and bikeway improvements, particularly near schools, to reduce government costs, improve public safety and health and help disadvantaged groups; efficient road tolls and parking pricing to reduce traffic and parking problems, and ensure that non-resident motorists pay their fair share of road and parking facility costs; and compact infill development that responds to demands for homes in walkable neighborhoods. However, conservatives are less likely to support TDM policies if described simply as ways to reduce vehicle travel and emissions.

Transportation Policies that Reflect Conservative Priorities

- Perform comprehensive analysis of travel demands, including unmet demands for non-auto travel. Analyze how current demographic and economic trends may (aging population, affordability concerns, growing e-bikes use, etc.) are likely to affect future demands.
- Apply accessibility-based, multimodal planning which evaluates transportation system performance based on door-to-door time and money costs, rather than just vehicle traffic speeds.
- Apply multimodal planning that responds to unmet and future demands for non-auto travel.
- Identify ways to provide basic mobility for people who cannot or should not drive. Find creative, cost-effective ways to improve mobility and accessibility for disadvantaged groups including completing sidewalk networks, improving public transit services, and subsidizing disadvantaged people’s taxi and ridehailing services.
- Increase investments in non-auto travel based on consumer demands, economic savings and fairness to people who cannot, should not or prefer not to drive.
- Apply market principles to parking: eliminate mandates, unbundle and cash out free parking, and efficient pricing public parking so motorists “get what they pay for and pay for what they get.”
- Apply universal design to accommodate people with disabilities and other special needs.

Responding to Conservative Criticisms of Progressive Planning

Conservatives sometimes criticize progressive planning with exaggerated claims or inaccurate information. Planners can respond with credible evidence and analysis that reflects conservative priorities. The table below describes common criticisms, responses, and required analysis.

Table 11 Responding to Conservative Criticisms (Litman 2025)

Criticism	Potential Responses	Required Analysis
Americans want to live in single-family housing and drive.	Demographic and economic trends are increasing demand for compact housing in multimodal neighborhoods. There is a shortage of such housing.	Information on latent demands for compact housing and non-auto travel, and potential benefits of serving them.
Planners ignore the benefits of automobile travel and roadway expansions. (Planners are leading a “war on cars”).	Although auto travel provides benefits, current trends are increasing non-auto travel demands. Serving those demands benefits travellers and communities.	How travel demand are changing and the many benefits of serving those demands. Multimodal planning success stories (particularly local examples).
Motorists’ user charges (fuel taxes and vehicle fees) finance roadways. It is unfair to spend public money on other modes.	Road user charges fund only about half of U.S. roadway spending, the rest is financed by general taxes that residents pay regardless of how they travel.	Roadway funding, including cross subsidies by non-drivers. Infrastructure savings provided by shifts from driving to non-auto modes.
Public transit is subsidized, costly and inefficient.	Although transit requires public subsidies those are often smaller than total road and parking costs of auto travel to serve the same trips.	Demand for transit travel. Total vehicle and infrastructure costs of automobile travel, including costs of chauffeuring non-drivers.
Bikeways are not used and increase congestion and parking problems.	In many locations, bikeways significantly increase bicycling and reduce automobile trips, which reduces traffic and parking problems overall.	Bicycle travel demand, including latent demands. Bikeway costs and benefits, including affordability, health and reduced traffic and parking problems.
Environmental risks are exaggerated, and emission reductions are costly.	Smart Growth and multimodal planning are justified for many reasons, not just environmental goals.	Economic and social benefits of Smart Growth and multimodal transport.
Smart Growth reduces affordability by limiting development on inexpensive urban fringe land.	Smart Growth can increase housing affordability by allowing compact housing with unbundled parking, and increase total affordability by reducing transportation costs.	Costs of sprawl and benefits of compact development. Demand for compact housing and non-auto modes, and their potential savings. Total affordability analysis.
Compact development reduces livability and ruins neighborhoods.	Compact development can provide many livability benefits including increased affordability, walkability and local economic development.	Identify specific ways that compact development will benefit neighborhoods and achieve community goals.

Progressive planners should be prepared to respond to criticisms with appropriate analysis.

Planners can help address criticisms by asking stakeholders to identify their concerns and investigating ways to adjust plans to address them. For example, Smart Growth policies, multimodal planning and TDM incentives can be designed to address concerns and help achieve diverse stakeholder priorities.

Conclusions

Planners are responsible for helping build agreement and cooperation among diverse stakeholders. For example, most community residents of all ideological perspectives want better mobility and accessibility, more affordable housing and transportation, increased public safety and health, more independence and opportunity for physically and economically disadvantaged groups, and a clean environment. Planners must help them agree on how those goals should be achieved.

Conservatives and liberals differ in perspectives and priorities. Planners will fail if they use arguments that do not resonate with a particular group. For example, conservatives are unlikely to support Smart Growth policies and multimodal planning if described as ways to reduce auto-dependency, sprawl and climate emissions, or to correct for racial injustice; skeptical conservatives may respond by describing the benefits of automobile travel and low density development, questioning the justifications for reducing emissions, and arguing that other groups deserve justice. However, conservatives may support the same policies if described as ways to save public money, respond to unmet consumer demands, reduce traffic and parking problems, improve fairness or help the underdog. Progressive planners can build support for rational policies by presenting arguments that resonate with conservatives and providing the analysis needed to justify support, as illustrated below.

Table 12 Conservative Goals, Policies and Analysis

Goals	Policies	Planning Analysis
Reduce traffic and parking congestion.	Improve space-efficient modes. Apply TDM incentives.	Demand for space-efficient modes. Cost efficiency of multimodal solutions.
Housing and transportation affordability.	Upzoning and parking policy reforms. Improve affordable modes.	Demand for compact housing in accessible neighborhoods, and for affordable modes.
Government efficiency.	Multimodal planning. Compact development. TDM incentives.	Costs of sprawl. Savings and benefits from compact development and TDM.
Economic opportunity.	Multimodal planning and Smart Growth.	Portion of travellers who cannot drive.
Local economic development.	Upzoning and eliminating parking minimums. TDM incentives.	Potential savings from development policy reforms. Latent demands.
Traffic safety.	Reduce traffic speeds. Implement traffic safety programs and TDM incentives.	Community concerns about crash rates. Support for lower speeds and mode shifts.
Public fitness and health.	Improve active modes. Support public parks and recreation facilities.	Sedentary residents who would be more active if conditions improved.
Neighborhood livability.	Reduce traffic speeds and volumes. TDM. Improve walkability. Increase greenspace.	Neighborhood priorities and goals. Demand for non-auto modes.

In conservative communities, planners should identify progressive policies that achieve conservative goals.

Liberals and conservatives differ in their equity concerns but there is overlap. Conservatives prioritize functional factors such as ability and income while liberals are more concerned with categorical factors such as race and gender, but since minority groups tend to have high disability and poverty rates, policies that address these problems can receive broad support. Similarly, conservatives are more concerned with local environmental quality and neighborhood livability, while liberals are concerned with global environmental risks; progressive planners can identify policies that achieve both goals. Because conservative media often criticizes progressive policies with false or biased information; planners must prepare credible analysis that responds to inaccurate criticisms.

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