

Open Space, Smart Growth, Urban Sprawl

Kai Anderson, GSA Congressional Science Fellow



Discussions with friends and colleagues who live and work beyond the Washington, D.C., Beltway commonly lead to the question of how the impeachment trial of President Clinton affected my work as a Congressional Science Fellow. I compare the atmosphere on Capitol Hill during the impeachment process to a persistent but not impenetrable fog at San Francisco International Airport. Much as foggy conditions cause re-routings and flight delays, impeachment proceedings in the Senate chamber disrupted the legislative routine at the beginning of the 106th Congress.

My experience within the belly of the impeachment beast suggests that the common perception that the trial brought the Senate to a standstill is only partly true. The trial slowed the pace of Senate business, and legislative initiatives were placed in a temporary holding pattern as their authors waited for the impeachment fog to clear. However, during the trial, out of view of most of America, legislation concerning issues as disparate as open space conservation and education funding was being written, vetted, and rewritten. As soon as the trial ended, legislators introduced a flurry of bills in an effort to make up for real and perceived lost time.

Although the regular Senate business suffered an extended slowdown during the impeachment saga, the same was not true for my particular workload. At about the same time Kenneth Starr delivered his report to the House of Representatives, my mentor, Senator Lieberman's longtime environment and energy advisor, was promoted to a post as the minority staff director for the Government Affairs Committee. My supervisor's promotion caused an order of magnitude increase in the volume of paper landing on my desk and a similar increase in my portfolio of issues. The temporary but dramatic expansion of my responsibilities early in my fellowship year allowed me the opportunity to play a significant role in designing Senator Lieberman's environment and energy legislative agenda for 1999.

Paradoxes of Urban Sprawl

One issue that has captured the attention of some lawmakers is the relationship between open space conservation and urban sprawl. Issues such as urban sprawl, which reflect many interrelated problems, require multifaceted solutions. To comprehensively address urban sprawl, communities must understand the barriers to urban renewal and the incentives that drive migration to suburban areas. One key obstacle to urban redevelopment is the

presence of polluted industrial sites called "brownfields." Developers are commonly loath to assume the regulatory risk and considerable expense associated with cleanup of such sites and choose instead to develop in cheaper, previously undeveloped "greenfields" on the outskirts of existing communities.

Greenfields development is only one of the forces that contributes to sprawl; migration to the suburbs reflects people's desire to live in a safe, healthy environment near open space and quality schools. For those who live in suburbs across the country, morning and evening commute times are on the rise as traffic congestion grows more pronounced, in part because more folks seek to realize the perceived advantages of suburban life. In many places, vigorous suburban development has led, ironically, to the disappearance of the open space so coveted by those who led the population migration away from urban centers. Bulldozers and construction projects have leapfrogged toward the countryside as development has spread outward from urban centers. This growth has stranded many suburbanites—an hour or more of stressful driving from their places of work—in subdivisions that lack the urban amenities they once traded for open space and a quieter lifestyle.

Where Are Those Wide Open Spaces?

Open space is increasingly a priority issue for Americans. In November 1998, voters passed more than 70% of state and local ballot initiatives designed to encourage smart growth and protect open space. Nationwide, the desire to protect open space and mitigate and avoid the negative impacts of urban sprawl are contributing to a groundswell of support for so-called smart growth practices.

Smart growth is seen by many people to be an antidote to the plague of unmitigated urban sprawl. Many things contribute to urban sprawl, and unraveling the direct relationship between cause and effect is challenging. The Senate Smart Growth Task Force (SGTF), in which my boss is participating, provides a forum for better delineating the effects that federal policies and programs have on urban sprawl. For example, the SGTF hosted a dialogue on how federal funding for transportation projects has impacted community development historically (for better and worse) and how future transportation funding might best be used to encourage smart growth practices and prevent urban sprawl.

Open space is one of the most obvious casualties of urban sprawl. Farmland and forests disappear as residential and commercial development radiate away from urban centers and crop up along roads and highways. In many cases, communities are hard pressed to raise the money necessary to purchase and protect urban and suburban green spaces for permanent conservation. This problem is compounded by the reality that the most successful open space conservation requires coordinated local and regional planning efforts. These observations suggest that the most productive federal efforts to mitigate urban sprawl may prove to be those that provide funds to help foster regional, state, and local collaborative planning and those that provide financial assistance for state and local acquisition and enhancement of open space.

Bills for Bills

The Land and Water Conservation Fund of 1964 (LWCF) represents a viable, though traditionally underappropriated, source of federal money dedicated to open space conservation. The fund is authorized to receive up to \$900 million annually in royalty revenue from outer continental shelf oil and gas production. The purchase of the Headwaters Forest of Northern California is a recent example of LWCF open space acquisition. In practice, because the fund is subject to the annual appropriations process, it rarely receives full funding. Moreover, despite the widespread popularity of the fund, the portion of it allocated for use by state and local governments has been defunct for the past five years.

The presence of an authorized vehicle (the LWCF) and the bipartisan grassroots demand for both open space conservation and smart growth planning efforts provides a rare opportunity to create a permanently dedicated trust fund, exempt from the annual appropriations process, to support federal, state, and local open space acquisition. Several bills introduced in the Senate this year aim to capitalize on this opportunity:

- Dianne Feinstein's (Democrat—California) Conservation and Recreation

Improvement Act of 1999 guarantees that money in the LWCF would be available annually without further appropriation.

- Similar to the Feinstein bill, the Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1999 introduced by Senator Mary Landrieu (Democrat—Louisiana) would exempt LWCF money from the annual appropriations process. In addition, the Landrieu bill would provide \$1.24 billion dollars of "impact assistance" to coastal and Great Lakes states through a formula based on coastline length, coastal population, and production of oil and gas on federal outer continental shelf properties.

- A third contending Senate bill is the Permanent Protection For America's Resources 2000 sponsored by Barbara Boxer (Democrat—California). As with the Feinstein and Landrieu initiatives, the Boxer bill stipulates that the LWCF be available every year without further appropriation. Moreover, it earmarks additional funds generated by the outer continental shelf royalties to be used for a broad range of conservation activities, including habitat restoration and farmland protection.

I spent much of my time during the impeachment proceedings evaluating these proposals and drafting an open space conservation bill more sensitive to the priorities of non-petroleum-producing coastal states such as Connecticut. Although Senator Lieberman has not—and may never—introduce this legislation, it was an interesting way to stay focused on a substantive issue during the impeachment circus.

Your Two Cents' Worth

The debate over the bills described above and their companion legislation in the House of Representatives is beginning to heat up. If you are interested in open space conservation and urban sprawl, the bills described above (Feinstein—S.532; Landrieu—S.25; and Boxer—S.446) are accessible on the World Wide Web at <http://www.congress.gov>. Read the legislation, evaluate it, and contact your Senators to let them know whether you want them to support or oppose the initiatives if the bills reach the floor later this year. ■

Kai Anderson, 1998–1999 GSA Congressional Science Fellow, serves on the staff of Senator Joseph F. Lieberman (Democrat—Connecticut). This one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award No. 1434-HQ-97-GR-03188. The views and conclusions contained in this article are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government or GSA. You can contact Anderson by mail at 1905 37th Street, Washington, DC 20007, by phone at (202) 224-7201, or by e-mail at kai@lieberman.senate.gov.

Summer Outreach Conundrum

I Want to Lead a Field Trip— Now All I Need is an Audience

Wendy Cunningham, Senior Project Coordinator, GSA

Summer is here! For many of us, summer means opportunities for field work, professional development, and (let's face it) fun. Summer is the perfect time to develop and participate in enjoyable outreach activities, especially those that give you an excuse to get outside. Leading field trips is a great way to enjoy the outdoors while supporting your community by enhancing public knowledge of and appreciation for Earth and its resources. For many geoscientists, the hardest part of conducting a field trip is finding an audience and preparing the trip for non-geoscientists. Below, we have provided some ideas to guide you in developing rewarding, successful field trips.

- Come up with a few ideas for field trips that you would feel comfortable leading. If you are not sure what would be of interest to the public, ask a nonscientist friend or relative. Check the newspaper for issues of geologic significance (such as land slides, mining, earthquakes, or water contamination) around which you might be able to structure a field trip.
- Decide on a general age group that you would like to target.
- Consider teaming up with a colleague or a local teacher (contact a local school). Teacher-scientist collaborations are powerful and effective; teachers learn more about local science, scientists learn more about presentation style, and everyone on the trip benefits.
- Research local groups who might be interested in summer field trips. Consider leading trips for scouting groups, youth groups, members of local parks, special interest groups (rockhound clubs, bird watchers), local teachers, policy makers, summer camps, and child care programs.

Some good places to start locating these groups are: your town's chamber of commerce; the phone book (community pages); churches, synagogues, temples; community centers (YMCA, YWCA); community newspapers; school district offices; community Internet pages.

- Do not be discouraged if you do not find an audience right away. Ask groups you contact if they know of other groups who might have the ability or interest to go on field trips.
- Once you have made a contact, work together to develop a field trip that will cater to the knowledge and interests of your audience.
- Be sure to explain what geoscientists do and how geoscience impacts everyone's lives. You might also consider wearing your field gear on the trip.

If leading a field trip doesn't appeal to you, there are multitudes of other opportunities for summer outreach. Consider constructing rock and mineral kits for local schools, developing a local walking tour guide, inviting students to help you with a day of field work, creating a virtual field trip, helping with workshops for teachers, and working on museum exhibits. Whatever you choose to do, have fun with it.

If you would like outreach ideas and support year-round, access to a network of 1,800 scientists and teachers participating in outreach, and other resources, consider joining GSA's free Partners for Education Program (PEP). For more information, or to join PEP, please refer to our Web site (<http://www.geosociety.org/educate/pep.htm>) or contact Wendy Cunningham, Senior Project Coordinator (phone 800-472-1988, extension 182, wcunningham@geosociety.org). ■

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