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Cities Are Still the Place to Be

By Dr. Elizabeth Strom, Associate Professor, Urban & Regional Planning

For Urban and Regional Planners, one of the tenets of our field is to promote well-designed, compact cities. We like places that have density, where houses and stores are close together, where people can walk, bike, or use transit. We encourage these trends because we know the alternative—sprawling suburbs linked by highways—comes with high environmental and social costs.

Yet today, as we remain "safer at home," urban density isn't looking very appealing.

It's clear that places where people are in frequent contact—public transit, crowded sidewalks—can be fertile ground for transmission.

Stay at home orders, furthermore, are easier to swallow when said home has a few extra rooms and some outdoor greenery. Throw in a backyard swimming pool and being "stuck at home" can sound pretty appealing. These amenities, however, are rare in city neighborhoods.



Source: Peter Fazeks

Does our experience weathering Coronavirus mean that efforts to encourage urban density are misguided? Urban geographer and author Joel Kotkin has never been a big fan of the push for density; he predicts that **COVID-19 will bring on the "coming age of dispersion"** as people flee large cities for less dense places.



Source: David Shankbone

But there are good reasons to continue to promote strong cities, even now.

First, let's dispel the notion that Coronavirus is uniquely an urban problem. To be sure, our densest city, New York, has had a dramatic struggle with COVID-19, with over 19,000 deaths as of May 7th. But there are other examples of dense cities that have managed the pandemic more successfully, for example Hong Kong and Seoul. In the U.S. we see examples like San Francisco, our second densest city, where just 31 patients have died of COVID-19. Evidence suggests that early adoption of widespread testing alongside clear stay-at-home directives can help reduce impacts, even in cities.

And let's remember that some of the first COVID-19 clusters have been found in suburban areas like New Rochelle, NY and Kirkland, Washington. When we look nationally at counties with **high per capita infection rates**, we find rural counties in Georgia, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania among those most impacted by COVID-19. Here in Florida, while our worst hotspots are in the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale area, we find higher infection rates in rural Suwannee, Liberty, and Madison County than in Tampa or Orlando. Those living outside cities,

lacking access to testing facilities and medical treatment, could face worse outcomes than city dwellers if the infection spreads in their area.

Moreover, this pandemic should not blind us to even more profound threats to our health and economic well-being. There are reasons planners want people to drive less: in 2018, the U.S. reported 36,560 automobile fatalities. The new highways we need to link far-flung exurbs destroy animal habitat and create polluting runoff. And aren't zoonotic viruses, such as this novel Coronavirus, thought to be more prevalent today because of encroachments on animal habitats? Automobile commutes account for some one-quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions, hastening the climate change trends that are particularly problematic for Floridians.

Finally, urban agglomerations are epicenters of economic, scientific, and cultural innovation. **Studies associate cities with higher levels of productivity and innovation.** No doubt the research that will lead to a COVID-19 vaccine will be done in urban areas. City environments will be the launching pads for our much-needed economic regeneration.

Florida cities like Miami, Tampa, and Orlando have gained population in recent years, and with the **state projected to gain 20,000 new residents a month**, we need to continue to promote city living. Even dense urban areas can have high quality buildings and open spaces that afford comfort for those needing to stay at home. Don't let the Coronavirus chase us out of town.