

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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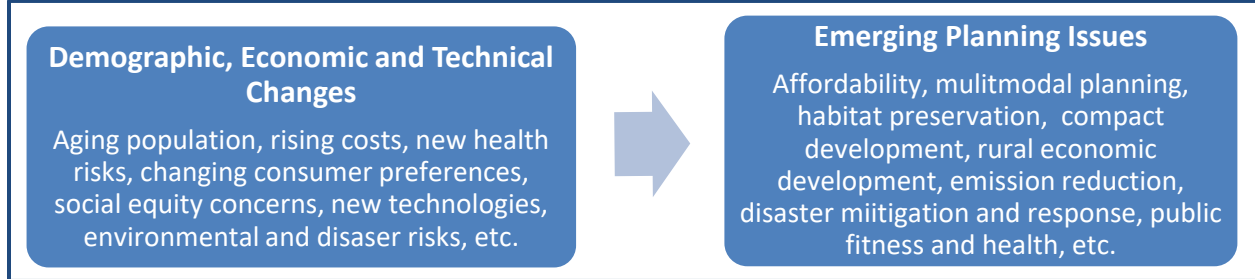
Abstract

Planners are change managers; we help communities respond to emerging issues and new perspectives. Ideological conservatives skeptical of change are now influential in many jurisdictions. Planners have professional responsibilities to support community goals and work with stakeholders regardless of ideology. This report examines how planners can respond effectively to changing needs 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 prioritized. This report identifies conservative principles 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.

Introduction: Progressive Planners and Ideological Conservatives

Progressive planners strive to respond to emerging issues caused by demographic, economic and technical changes, as illustrated below.

Figure 1 Emerging Planning Issues



Progressive planning responds to new issues caused by demographic, economic and technical changes.

Ideological 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	✓	
Improve multimodal accessibility		✓
Government cost savings and lower taxes	✓	
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 areas of overlap and potential cooperation. For example, both ideologies value affordability although they differ in emphasis: conservatives 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 while liberals emphasize multimodal accessibility to help non-drivers and reduce emissions. Each group’s support for a policy depends on how it relates to their priorities. For example, conservatives may support compact development to reduce public costs and preserve farmland while liberals can support it to reduce emissions and protect wildlife habitat.

Regardless of our personal values, planners have a professional responsibility to work with all stakeholders. This report investigates how to do this with ideological conservatives. It defines conservative principles and priorities, and identifies how they can support progressive planning goals such as affordable infill and multimodal transportation. This should be of interest to policy makers, planners and activists who want to achieve progressive goals in ideologically conservative communities.

Conservative Principles

The term *conservative* literally means cautious and resource-efficient, as in reducing risk and conserving energy. It also emphasizes tradition, personal freedom and responsibility, property rights, rule of law, limited government, human dignity, plus free and competitive markets, as indicated below.

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	

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

These general principles are too general to guide planning decisions. The table below summarizes measurable goals related to conservative principles, and their implications for planning.

Table 3 Applying Conservative Principles in Planning

Principle	Goals	Planning Evaluation
Caution and responsibility	Minimize physical and economic risks.	Identify risks and potential mitigation strategies.
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 public 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 analyze how decisions reflect conservative principles and goals.

Although conservatives and liberals have different perspectives, there are areas of overlap and possible cooperation. For example, 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.

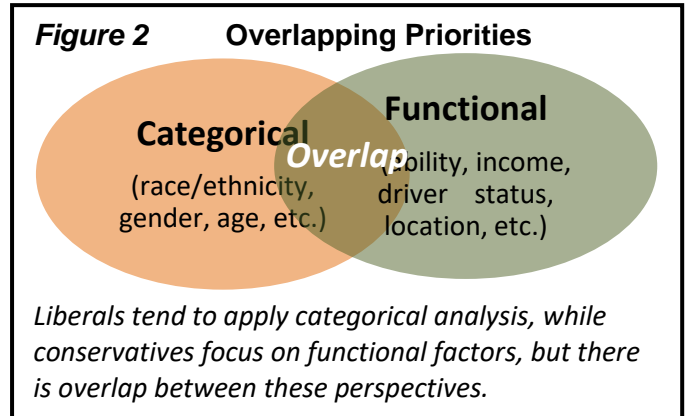
Table 4 **Types of Equity** (Litman 2022)

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.

Conservatives and liberals may agree on many equity strategies. Most conservatives recognize the need to help disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, seniors, and moderate-income 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 are more likely 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 (affirmative action, or diversity, equity and inclusion, DEI) policies, while conservatives tend to focus on functional factors related to ability, income and vehicle availability, 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 in lower-income communities.



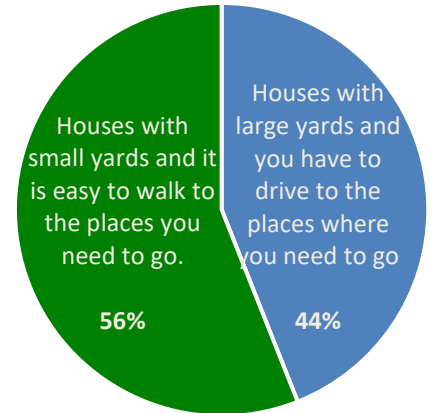
Many conservatives are influenced by populism (which claims to support common people against perceived elites), popular culture (conservatives tend to identify with rural lifestyles, working class families and truck owners), and respond to their funders’ priorities (Kaufman 2023). For example, many conservatives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

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 criticize Smart Growth and advocate for automobile-oriented transport planning and sprawl-inducing development 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:

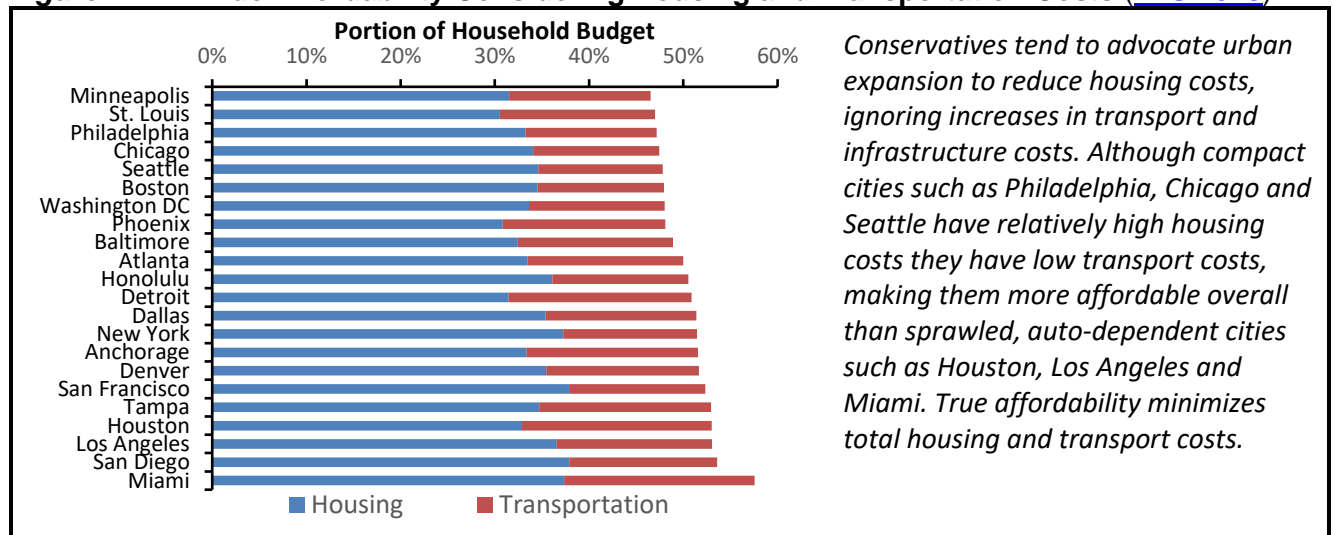
- Although given unlimited resources most households prefer large-lot single-family homes, the National Association of Realtors' *Community Preference Survey* (NAR 2023), finds that when faced with realistic trade-offs, more than half choose compact homes in a walkable urban neighborhood over a larger-lot 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.
- 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.

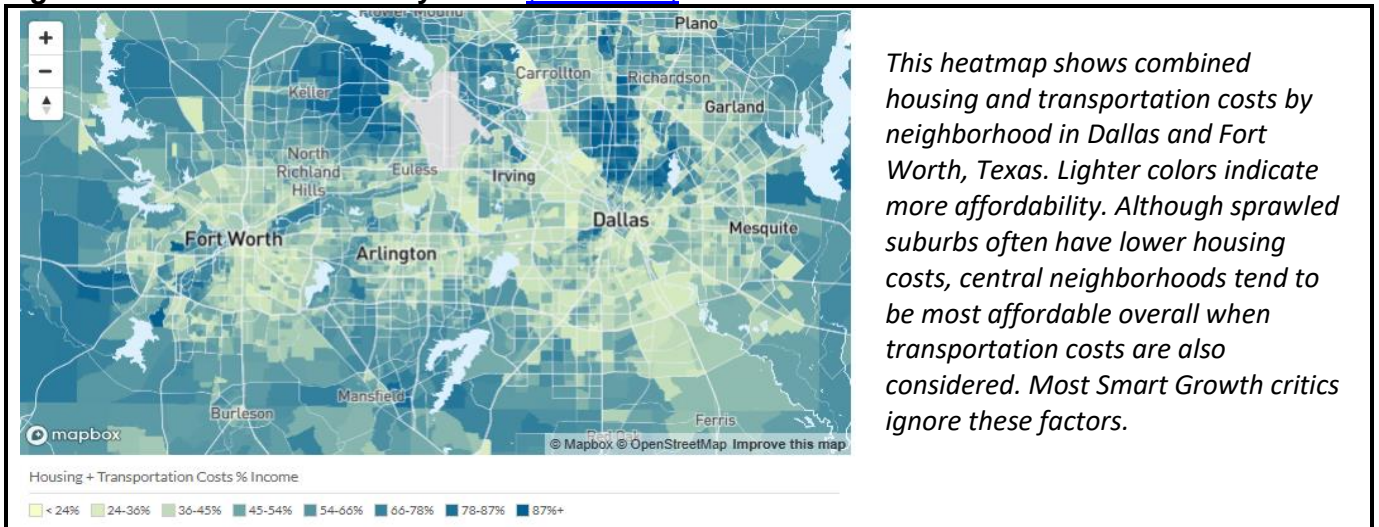
Figure 4 True Affordability Considering Housing and Transportation Costs (BLS 2023)



Conservatives tend to advocate urban expansion to reduce housing costs, ignoring increases in transport and infrastructure costs. Although compact cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago and Seattle have relatively high housing costs they have low transport costs, making them more affordable overall than sprawled, auto-dependent cities such as Houston, Los Angeles and Miami. True affordability minimizes total housing and transport costs.

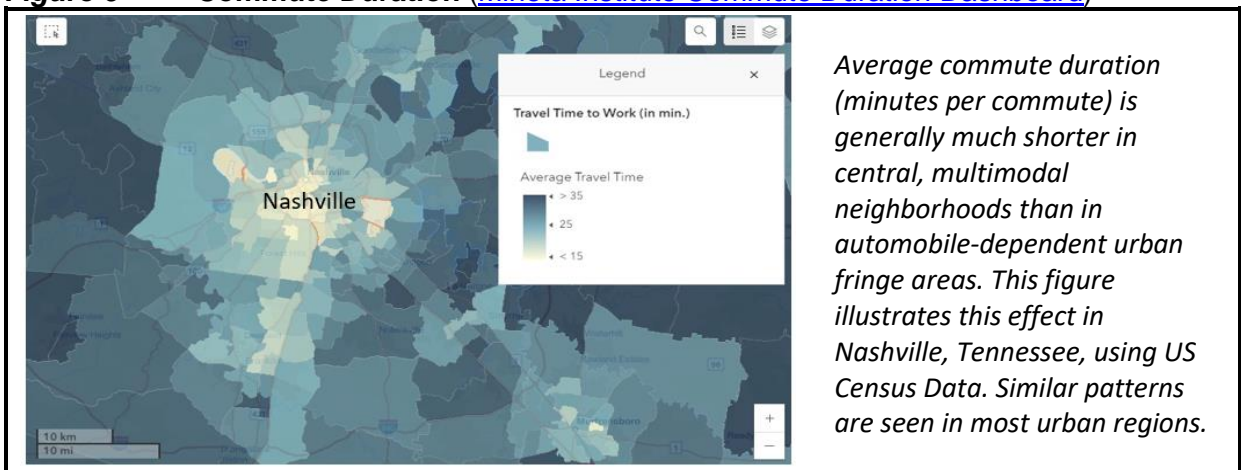
- Every region is unique, so it is inappropriate to assume that solutions in one region are transferable to others. For example, Cox and Kotkin cite low housing prices in geographically unconstrained regions like Columbus, Houston and Nashville as examples for geographically constrained cities like New York, San Francisco and Seattle to follow, ignoring their lack of nearby land for development. In constrained areas, affordability requires growing up, not out.
- True affordability considers transportation as well as housing costs. 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, such as basic multifamily, in central neighborhoods tend to increase affordability overall, particularly in constrained regions where urban expansion is limited.

Figure 5 H+T Affordability Index (CNT 2018)



- Central neighborhoods provide better access to economic opportunities and minimize commute duration, as illustrated below, particularly for non-drivers, and provide more economic mobility (the chance that children from lower-income families earn more than their parents) than sprawled areas, as described in “Does Urban Sprawl Hold Down Upward Mobility?” (Ewing, et al. 2016).

Figure 6 Commute Duration (Mineta Institute Commute Duration Dashboard)



Although many 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), an emerging group of conservatives supports Smart Growth, New Urbanism and multimodalism (Brown 2017), through new organizations and websites such as [Market Urbanism](#), the [Beacon Rebellion](#), [American Compass](#), and [Pro-Transit Conservatives Speak Out](#).

For example, 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 policies that create more compact, walkable neighborhoods instead of auto-oriented sprawl to facilitate connected communities where residents know their neighbors.

Numerous articles published in *The American Conservative* describe how Smart Growth benefits align with conservative priorities. Jonathan Coppage'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, in the continuous and communitarian spirit of Edmund Burke."

The conservative *Reason Magazine* published a debate between Wendell Cox and Christian Britschgi (2023) that challenges conservative orthodoxy. Cox claims that most people want to live in sprawled areas and are restricted by growth boundaries, but Britschgi responds 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 further 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 (2024) also wrote "Do Americans Really Only Want Sprawl?," a thoughtful critique of Joel Kotkin's 2024 article, "Let American Sprawl: Planners' Preference for Urban Density Should Not Supersede Americans' Preferences for Suburban or Exurban Living." Britschgi points out that Kotkin's arguments are one-sided; they exaggerate urban growth boundary impacts and ignore the negative effects of restrictions on compact infill.

Applying Conservative Principles to Housing Policies

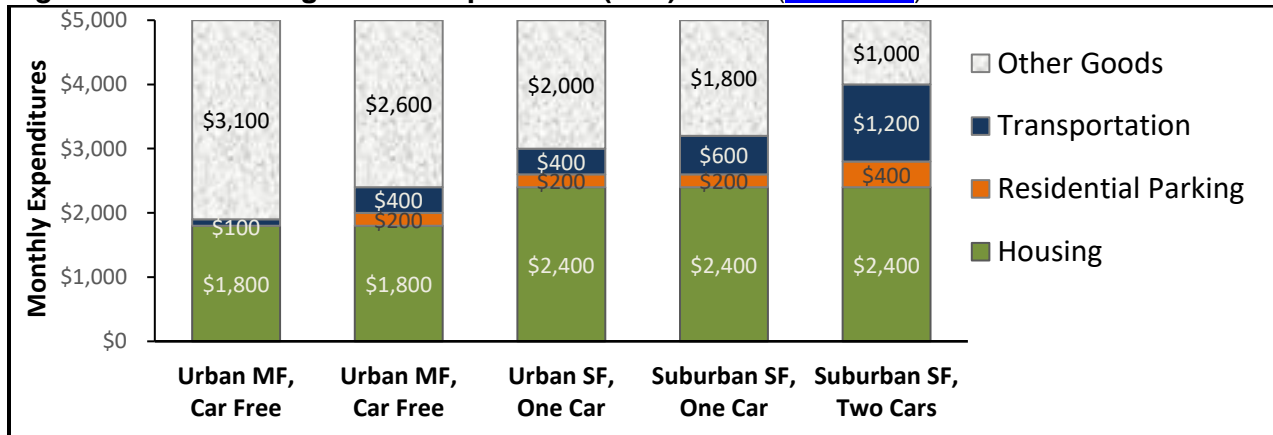
Progressive planning responds to growing demands for affordable housing in compact, walkable neighborhoods. Since most North American jurisdictions currently restrict development densities and compact housing types, impose parking minimums and fees that discourage affordable infill, this requires a number of policy reforms which together are called *Smart Growth*.

Both conservatives and liberals claim to support affordable housing but differ in approach. Conservatives favor urban expansion, citing lower housing costs in sprawled cities such as Houston and Atlanta, as described previously.

Liberals tend to 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.

Considering both housing and transportation costs, the most affordable option is multifamily housing with unbundled parking located in a multimodal urban neighborhood where it is easy to be car-free. This allows households to spend less than \$2,000 per month on housing and travel, leaving plenty of money for other goods. Smart Growth policies that allow more multifamily housing with unbundled parking in multimodal neighborhoods tend to provide true affordability.

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.)

Most objective experts conclude that increasing affordability requires broad upzoning to allow affordable housing types (attached and multifamily) in most urban areas, eliminating parking minimums, and adjusting development fees to reflect the lower costs of providing public services in compact neighborhoods, plus social housing to serve people with special needs (Freemark 2023). They cite the affordability of cities like Montreal, which allows compact housing in most neighborhoods (Polèse 2020).

The table below compares these approaches.

Table 5 Comparing Housing Policies

Ideologically Conservative	Most Effective	Ideologically Liberal
<i>Encourage low-density urban expansion. However, this increases sprawl-related costs including household transportation costs, public infrastructure 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 effective and maximizes total benefits.</i>	<i>Subsidize social housing, inclusivity mandates and rent controls. However, this tends to be costly, and inclusivity mandates and rent controls tend to drive up market housing prices.</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 Principles

- Apply comprehensive analysis of costs and risks. Prevent development in higher risk areas.
- Evaluate affordability considering total housing and transportation costs.
- Analyze housing demands, including unmet demands for affordable, compact housing.
- Identify and reform current regulations that unintentionally increase housing costs.
- Upzone to allow more compact and inexpensive housing types (attached and multifamily) in accessible 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 low public service costs.

Applying Conservative Principles to Transportation Policies

Progressive planning responds to 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 • Multimodal accessibility • Social equity, more 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 aligned with motor vehicle industries, tend to favor automobile travel and therefore roadway expansions and parking mandates, while liberals tend to support multimodal accessibility, 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 efficient pricing can reduce government costs.
Property rights	Parking reforms allows property owners to determine parking supply.
Consumer sovereignty	Multimodal planning responds to future consumer demands.
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 is fairer to non-drivers.
Protect vulnerable people	Multimodal transport improves non-drivers’ mobility and affordability.
Economic opportunity	Multimodal transport improves opportunities for disadvantaged travellers.

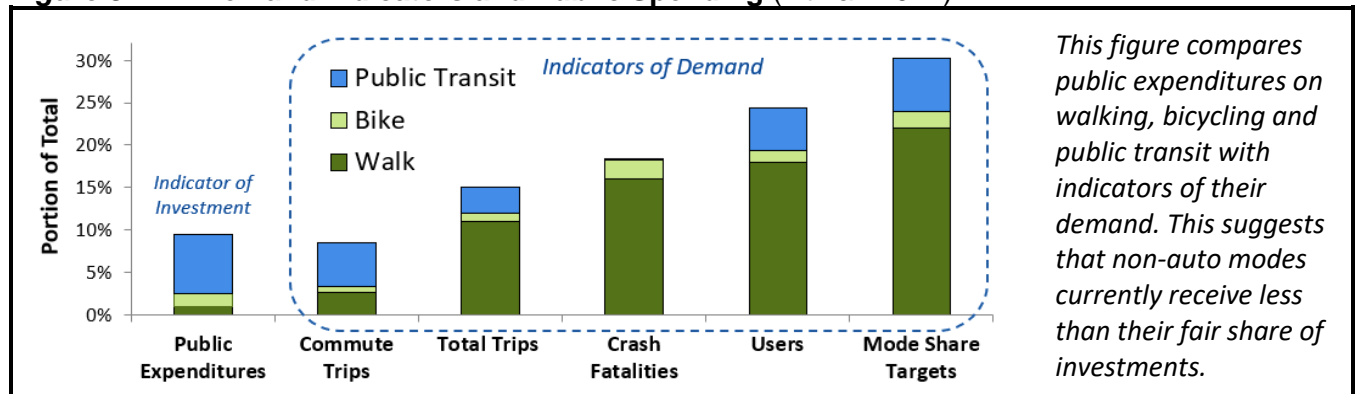
Conservative principles can justify more multimodal planning and reforms that responds to consumer demands, increases transport system efficiency, and improves mobility options for vulnerable people.

Conservatives tend to support, and liberals sometimes oppose, road and parking facility expansions to reduce congestion. It's not that liberals ignore congestion problems but they tend to recognize research indicating that facility expansions do little to reduce long-term congestion, and by inducing more vehicle travel and sprawl exacerbate traffic problems including downstream congestion, crashes, pollution and sprawl-related costs. Conservatives tend to dismiss these arguments. Conservatives tend to support mobility-based planning, which evaluates transportation system performance based on vehicle travel conditions, while liberals tend to support accessibility-based planning that evaluates system performance based on door-to-door travel time and money costs, which justifies more multimodal transportation planning and more compact community development.

Progressive planners can support multimodal planning in conservative communities by providing more comprehensive travel demand data. Conventional planning often undercounted and undervalued non-auto travel. For example, in the past, planners often relied on commute mode share data, which tends to undercount active travel. Measured this way, less than 5% of trips are by active modes which implies that they deserve minimal support. However, comprehensive surveys indicate that about 15% of trips are by non-auto modes and their potential is higher. The study, *The Multimodal Majority?* found that during a typical week about 7% of Americans rely entirely on non-auto modes, 65% use non-auto modes at least once a week and 25% use non-auto modes more than five times a week (Buehler and Hamre 2015). Non-auto mode shares tend to be higher in urban areas where traffic problems are most severe, 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 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 commute trip mode shares but much less than their portion of total trips, traffic casualties, total users (people who 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 can support sidewalk improvements and universal design standards to provide basic mobility, improve community livability and support local economic development (Geitner 2024). They may support safe routes to schools programs as cost-effective ways to increase children's safety and fitness, reduce traffic and parking problems, and reduce parents' chauffeuring burdens.

Similarly, planners can provide information on ways that multimodal planning, TDM and parking reforms support conservative principles such as government efficiency, property rights and economic development. For example, conservatives may support road tolls and parking fees if framed as equitable infrastructure funding and congestion reduction strategies but not if described as ways to reduce total vehicle travel and emission (Shoup 2011). The following table shows how TDM strategies support various conservative priorities; this type of analysis can be applied to specific policies and programs.

Table 10 TDM Strategies and Conservative Priorities

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	✓				

These conservative principles can be used to evaluate and prioritize planning decisions.

Progressive planners can frame TDM strategies in terms of conservative goals such as responding to consumer demands, enhancing community livability or reducing government, business and household costs. For example, although some conservatives may be skeptical of bikeways they can support sidewalk improvements, particularly near schools and other popular destinations. They may support efficient road tolls and parking pricing if revenues are used to finance transportation facilities or invested in local amenities, rather than to achieve vehicle travel and emission reduction targets.

Transportation Policies that Reflect Conservative Principles

- Multimodal planning responds to growing demands for non-auto travel due to trends such as aging population, health concerns and growing use of e-bikes.
- Multimodal planning and TDM incentives that are cost effective ways to reduce traffic problems and infrastructure costs.
- Favor inclusive and affordable modes (walking, bicycling and public transit) to provide basic mobility for people who cannot or should not drive.
- Active transport (walking and bicycling) improvements that improve public fitness and health.
- 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.”
- 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.
- 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 demands 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

Regardless of our personal ideologies, planners have a responsibility to help communities respond to changing needs. This requires building understanding and support from diverse stakeholders, including ideological conservatives and liberals. Planners can do this with analysis that responds to various groups' perspectives and priorities. For example, current demographic and economic trends are increasing demands for affordable housing in walkable urban neighborhoods, and are causing vehicle travel to peak; rational planning should respond with policies that allow more affordable infill, more multimodal transport planning, and parking policy reforms.

Progressive planners in conservative communities can support these policies by providing analysis showing how they reflect conservative goals such as congestion reduction, affordability, government efficiency and property rights 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 congestion relief strategies.
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.	More multimodal planning and compact development.	Portion of travellers who cannot or should not 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 these too overlap. Conservatives tend to focus on functional factors such as ability and income, while liberals are more concerned with categorical factors such as race and gender. Since minority groups tend to have high disability and poverty rates, policies that improve affordable housing, non-auto travel options, neighborhood services, community livability, non-driver safety, and public health tend to benefit disadvantaged minorities. 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.

Conservative media often criticizes progressive policies with false or biased information; planners should be prepared with credible, evidence-based information framed to appeal to conservative priorities.

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