RESEARCH YOU CAN USE
Costs of Sprawl Revisited
If climate change becomes the defining issue for planners in this century, as I’ve argued in past columns that it must, then containing sprawl will become the defining challenge. This is so because sprawling regions generate so much more VMT (vehicle miles traveled) than compact regions, and each vehicle mile traveled produces about a pound of carbon dioxide. Projections by the Center for Clean Air Policy show that more fuel-efficient vehicles and lower carbon fuels can only take us so far. Much of the benefit of technological innovation will be lost through the projected growth of VMT.

In 2000, with sponsorship from Smart Growth America, our team at Rutgers University developed sprawl indices for counties and metropolitan areas. With these indices, we found that sprawling regions like Riverside-San Bernardino, California, and Atlanta generate about 35 percent more VMT per capita than do compact regions like New York and San Francisco. The difference is not due to socioeconomics, since the compact regions actually have higher per capita incomes and therefore likely higher car ownership and more VMT. The difference is not due to higher fuel prices, either, since fuel prices do not vary that much from region to region. Rather it is the built environment that determines VMT in sprawling and compact regions.

At the time of our study, sprawl was a high-profile issue. Sprawl rankings made the front page of USA Today, and a study showing that sprawl contributed to obesity reached an estimated 41 million Americans through print, radio, and TV. Our sprawl indices were used by different researchers to establish links between sprawl and physical inactivity, obesity, traffic fatalities, air quality, residential energy use, emergency response times, teenage driving, and private-vehicle commute distances.

Back on the agenda
After a flurry of academic activity, scholarly and popular interest in sprawl waned around the time of the housing meltdown. Why worry about sprawl when no one is building anyway? But academic interest seems to be resurfacing, and popular interest will follow. I recently reviewed three papers on sprawl. One was on sprawl in Europe, where this is an emerging issue largely due to loss of what they refer to as “soil.” Most European presenters at a recent international workshop in Venice of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Their paper appears in the open access journal Sustainability. The article is available without a subscription. I will say more about open access journals at the end of this column.

The Wilson/Chakraborty article, titled “Environmental Impacts of Sprawl: Emergent Themes from the Past Decade of Planning Research,” covers the international literature through 2012. The article starts by describing different ways in which sprawl has been measured, then reviews empirical studies of sprawl’s impacts in four areas—air, energy, land, and water—and finally explores cross-cutting themes. You cannot help but come away impressed with the high costs of sprawl.

With funding from the National Institutes of Health and the Brookings Institution, we have updated our sprawl measures to 2010, and refined and validated them. By the time this column appears, sprawl indices at the census tract, county, urbanized area, and metropolitan area scales will be available on the NIH website. It is our hope that practitioners will see just how well their communities are doing in containing
spawl, and that researchers will use the metrics to more fully explore the costs (and benefits) of sprawl.

Parenthetically, the journals featured previously in this column, like the Journal of the American Planning Association and Journal of Planning Education and Research, support their operations through paid subscriptions. These are the premiere journals in the planning field. However, open access publishing is emerging as another publication model. OA journals, also peer reviewed, make articles available free of charge on the web. Since someone has to pay the costs of publication, the authors themselves are charged a publication fee. Since the year 2000, the average annual growth rate of OA journals has been 18 percent and OA articles has been 30 percent. This can be contrasted with a reported 3.5 percent yearly volume increase in journal publishing generally. Planners can expect to see a trend toward OA journals and articles in our field, with academics like Wilson and Chakraborty leading the way.

—Reid Ewing
Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah and an associate editor of JAPA. The Sustainability article is available at www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/5/8/3302 and the original Smart Growth America sprawl report is at www.smartgrowthamerica.org/research/measuring-sprawl-and-its-impact.

LETTERS
Our island neighbor
I am saddened by the circumstances under which Alex Marshall saw Cuba (“Cuba Up Close,” October); however, his experience speaks to the very real issues that everyday people are dealing with there. No doubt Cuba is a Third World country with educated individuals, many of whom eventually decide to risk their lives on the Florida Straits in order to reach our shores because that education does them no good in a deteriorating country.

Unfortunately, many Americans and planners continue to prop up an idealistic view of Cuba as a wonderfully “misunderstood” place with a great many things to rival the U.S. I wonder if Mr. Marshall would have continued to perpetuate this view had his bike ride throughout the countryside not gone horribly wrong.

—Odalys Delgado, AICP
Miami, Florida

Look again
Alex Marshall’s article on Cuba was either intentionally misleading or his 25 years as a journalist were for naught. There is zero personal liberty in Cuba, and it has been that way during the entire 54 years that the ruling elite have maintained the Castros in power. From there you can debate whether medical care and literacy gains have been worth the cost.

Every entity Mr. Marshall mentioned is state-controlled. There have been no other options for half a century. This includes the few folks that can now operate and pay significant state taxes for the luxury of running a small business.

Had the author dug a little deeper, he would have found out that Cuba had a relatively well-run and efficient passenger rail system before the Castro reign. That system has been obliterated by the state. I have fond memories of riding the train when I was nine years old, before we came to the U.S.

Transportation is one of the many daily nightmares that Cubans must endure. I was there last May and saw the students at Santa Clara University waiting for overcrowded and dangerous-looking buses. At the time I thought, don’t these bright and educated young people know there’s another way? No, they don’t. Cuba has virtually no Internet. But you can buy as many books about Fidel and Che as you want.

—Oscar J. Gonzalez
Washington, D.C.

Who’s guilty?
I take issue with Chris Schildt’s Viewpoint, “Reflections on the Zimmerman Trial” (October 2013). Ms. Schildt says it was a “sad moment” in our history when George Zimmerman was tried by a jury of his peers and found innocent in a court of law. The jury determined that he was acting lawfully in self-defense.

To blame this incident on racial and ethnic bias ignores the complex issues of neighborhood and crime and seems to completely exonerate the actions of Trayvon Martin, who made the initial attack. Schildt tries to create sympathy for Martin and somehow blame the incident on noninclusive communities. She should be reminded that the neighborhood where the incident took place was only 49 percent white.

If planning and zoning are about nothing else, they are about due process. To blame the George Zimmerman incident on poor land-use planning is ludicrous, and to diminish the legal process that acquitted Zimmerman is irresponsible.

—Janis N. Johnson, AICP
MainStreet Planning Company
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Photo friends
I really enjoyed the October Planning Practice article (“Making the Camera Your Friend”). It has been several years since I was introduced to the general rules of photography and I really appreciated the review. It also reminded me to go over the basics with staff and future interns who may have had little or no training.

The section on ethics was especially helpful now that we carry phone cameras at all times and are more likely to point and click than ever before. I also plan to look into some of the free and inexpensive apps that were mentioned.

It was a great refresher, and I encourage you to explore more often the less obvious practical skills that benefit the field.

—Aletha Dunston, AICP
Planning Director
Marion, Indiana

Less parking, better health
In “Health First” (October 2013), Alisia Rivera missed a chance to highlight a planning and zoning change that could encourage people to live a healthier lifestyle. The article emphasized banning smoking in public housing and making sidewalks more pedestrian-friendly and adding bicycle...