

# Suburban Economics

This is being written during the first heat wave of the season in the Boston area. It is being written while much of the East Coast area is suffering the effects of air pollution. It is being written while a shortage of water has resulted in a ban on outside watering in many communities (this in spite of the fact that the first six months of this year had 2.1 inches more rain than the same period last year). It is being written while the Northeast has an enforced decrease in electrical voltage. We are entitled to ask why, in the richest nation on earth, we, the enlightened middle class, must suffer these inconveniences.

The answer is, simply, that we are reaping what we have sown. Our population has become too large, too rapidly, for our resources, natural and artificial, to cope with our demands. We have the technology to solve our problems. We can change our sources of energy or change our methods of generating energy to clean up our air. It will be expensive, it will take some years, but we do have the technology to do it. We can clean up our rivers and streams and lakes and ponds. We can enlarge our reservoirs and build larger pipelines to bring the water to our cities. We can increase our supply of electricity. It will be expensive and it will take some years, but we do have the technology to do it. All of our technological capacity will be to no avail, however, if we do not control the size and growth of our population. At present our population is growing too rapidly for our technological capacity to cope with it.

Let us take a homely example. In the suburban town in which I live we have just had a proposal for the construction of a 24-unit apartment complex. This will, the builders say, bring to the town some \$12,000.00 in new real estate tax revenue annually. Let us do the arithmetic and see what really will happen.

We are told that about 50% of our tax dollar goes for support of the schools, the other 50% for running the town. If our per student school cost is about \$700.00, and the number of students approximates the number of taxable units, then each family (or taxable unit) must be assessed, on average, some \$1,400.00 per year. This is, in fact, the approximate assessment on a \$30,000.00 property. However, the families living in our 24-unit apartment complex will be paying no real property

tax, and will have on the average only about \$2,000.00 of assessable personal property. At our current rate of about \$40.00 per thousand, this will return to the town only about \$80.00 per family per year. In other words, each family will cost the town some \$1,320.00 per year. For our 24-unit complex this will total some \$31,680.00 per year. Real property assessment on the complex we are told will bring in only \$12,000.00. Therefore, the complex will cost the town some \$19,680.00 annually. If we assume that each \$100,000.00 of costs adds \$1.00 to the tax rate, then this apartment complex will cost each family in town about \$0.20 per thousand of valuation, or \$6.00 per year on a \$30,000.00 property.

Make no mistake. The only people who benefit from an increase in population in your town are the real estate agents, the developers, and the builders. The town does not benefit from them, and you, as a taxpayer, only stand to lose money.

At our present level of taxation my town cannot keep up with its responsibilities to its citizens. It cannot afford the new schools that are necessary now. It cannot afford to hire the teachers it needs for best educational conditions. It cannot maintain its roads and streets in good condition. Local sources of water are now being exploited to maximum capacity. It could not afford to buy water elsewhere even if alternative sources were available — which they are not. And our 24-unit apartment complex will require at least 6,000 gallons of water per day.

We are told that we must preserve our environment. What is it that we must preserve? When the first settlers arrived in New England they found a countryside characterized by vast stands of white pine. They found sandy coasts with stands of pitch pine. They found rocky hills covered with scrub oaks. They also found forests of white and red oak, and hickory. The pines and scrub oak are maintained in our area by burning. Under natural circumstances they would have been replaced in a few hundred years by oak and hickory. Forest land is able to sustain a relatively small population of animals, including man. Man is an animal of forest edges and adjacent grasslands. The first settlers cleared the forests, burning many of the felled trees. Through the colonial period and after, this clearing continued. One hundred and fifty years ago 80% of southern New England was cleared, or at least cut over. As the land wore out and as population increased, large numbers of farmers left the land, either moving to the cities or moving westward. The fields grew up to trees. Only the most fertile

lands within reach of the cities and towns remained in farmland. Beginning in the 1930s even these farms became unprofitable and many of them were abandoned. Again the fields grew up to trees. Today, we are planting subdivisions in these areas. The scrubby woodlots that now blossom with houses were, not too long ago, fields and pastures. What is it that we wish to preserve? Second growth scrub? Farmland? What?

The songbirds that we wish to maintain are not creatures of the forest primeval, the climax forest, but are denizens of second growth scrub and woodland margins. So are the deer and the rabbits and the foxes. So, we might add, are the pink lady slippers and the trailing arbutus, the hepaticas and the violets. The fact of the matter is that we do not want to preserve nature in its primeval condition. We desire to preserve an environment that can only be created in nature by "disasters." Under natural conditions such things as hurricanes and forest fires exercise this function. In an agrarian society this is maintained by the farmers. In our society which suppresses natural disasters and agrarian clearing our human environment disappears, going back to forest. Much of southern New England is now unsuitable for human habitation, Dense forest, albeit second growth scrub, covers more than 60% of the land surface. We maintain our dense populations of songbirds and deer by artificial feeding in the wintertime. We lament the disappearance of the pink lady slipper and the trailing arbutus — but we suppress the environment in which they can survive.

The environment that we live in is not stable. It is not natural for a large population of any organism, *Homo sapiens* included, to maintain itself indefinitely without deleterious effects upon other organisms. To maintain a large population of people we must clear land for habitation and industry that would otherwise be in forest or grassland. We must clear additional land to raise crops and to raise cattle. We must maintain unnaturally large populations of food producing organisms — and to do this we must ruthlessly exterminate those organisms that would destroy our crops. If we do not do this we will starve. We must remove our wastes and deposit them somewhere else in the environment. If we do not do this we will suffer pestilence. The environment which we create is also suitable for other organisms. Rats and cockroaches share our habitations. Potato bugs, gypsy moths, and rabbits share our gardens. Deer share our orchards. We destroy predators — weasels, foxes, bobcats, owls and hawks — which would help to control the vermin and pests because they also threaten (we think) "our"

animals and plants. We have built up an artificial environment to preserve our own lives — and, if we are to survive at our present standard of living, we must preserve this artificial environment by artificial means.

In the past, when the human population was smaller, our present means of pest control and waste disposal were sufficient for our needs. Today, with a large and rapidly increasing population of humans, yesterday's techniques are not sufficient. We must use pesticides to preserve our crops so that we will not starve. We must use more effective methods of waste disposal so that our excreta does not sterilize our land and water. Simple reduction in the percentage pollution, accompanied by an ever increasing number of individuals will result in a net increase of pollution. If we wish to preserve our artificial environment so that we may survive, we must reduce the size of our population.

We are told that we live under the threat of atomic extinction. We are probably much closer to extermination by starvation, or thirst, or pestilence. Quite possibly, the limitation of our water resources will be the factor that first sets a limit on the size of our population. For example, the town of Stoughton has imposed a five-year ban on new building because it does not have sufficient water to support additional population. Many other communities have had to impose a ban on outside water use. In my town we are assured that we have plenty of water, it is *just* that we cannot pump it fast enough to supply peak demand. Four years ago our town fathers employed an engineering consultant firm to study our water needs. They estimated that by 1986 our town would need to pump 3.4 million gallons of water per day. During the last week our water department has been pumping 3.8 million gallons per day. Over the period 1959–1965 our water requirements were 1.84 million gallons per day or less. Obviously, something is seriously wrong with our expert study. If other towns are in the same position, and it is fair to suspect that they are, then our water supply situation is critical. If we add to this the serious threat of salt pollution from winter salting of our roads, our problems of water supply are compounded.

We are told that the suburbs must accept some of the excess population of the core cities. In theory this is an acceptable thesis — but in practice it is clear that this will only hasten the arrival of our time of crisis. We must have fewer people, not more. We must limit the size of our population.

This past year has seen a number of efforts sponsored by

citizens groups to improve the quality of the environment. Many of these movements, however, have not taken into consideration the effects of specific programs on the total problem. For example, we in the Boston area now have a ban on all outdoor burning. As a result, in my town the amount of rubbish taken to our sanitary land fill has increased by 41%. Disposal of solid wastes was already a problem in eastern Massachusetts before the ban on burning was imposed. This will only increase the seriousness of the problem.

A second citizen effort has been to ban the use of sprays for street trees in a nearby town. One can confidently predict that within a year or so this town will have a serious problem with birch leaf miner. It will be more difficult and more costly to control dutch elm disease. Aphids on lindens will become a serious nuisance. And it is quite possible that the gypsy moth will move in to defoliate all of the trees.

This is not a plea for business as usual. It is a plea for reason and moderation. We must develop and utilize pesticides and pesticide techniques that are specific for the pests that trouble us. We must develop strategies and techniques for effective disposal and/or reuse of solid wastes. We must extend domestic sewer lines to serve all of the properties in our suburbs — and build modern sewage treatment facilities that will serve all of our cities and towns. If we started today we could not have these facilities in operation sooner than five years from now. (It would take at least a year for planning and drawing up specifications, the better part of another year for the production of building plans, and at least three years to construct the facilities.) These are the realities of the situation. In the meantime, unless we change our ways overnight, our total population will have increased by at least three per cent, and our volume of waste by an astronomical figure. All of this will cost us money in the form of additional taxes. We must stop our growth. We must change our ways. One last word. It is not the poor who have done this to us. It is the middle class families who can afford \$30,000 houses, and who fill those houses with three, five, or ten children. People who insist on having dishwashers and washing machines and dryers and air conditioners and three cars in their garages. In short, we have done it to ourselves. We are the ones who must change our ways.

GORDON P. DE WOLF, JR.



DeWolf, Gordon P. 1970. "Suburban Economics." *Arnoldia* 30(5), 175–179.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/228012>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/249600>

**Holding Institution**

New York Botanical Garden, LuEsther T. Mertz Library

**Sponsored by**

IMLS LG-70-15-0138-15

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder.

Rights Holder: Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University

License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Rights: <https://biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.