

Freedom Matters

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Dane County, Wisconsin

Preserving Property Rights

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Our republic limits government to securing individual unalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. These rights are eroded by legislatures, and by courts complicit with them. To encourage wise jurists and journalists to help, *Freedom Matters* dedicates itself to the fight to restore that republic.

On Population: Malthus Revised

by Bob Bowman

In 1798, Rev. Thomas Malthus, English economist, published *An Essay on ... Population*, a classic doom-sayer prediction. Malthus argued that the increase in human population would outrace the food resources needed to support it, resulting in starvation as the inevitable outcome for human society and existence. That prediction was most famously extended by a computer study at MIT, published in 1972 as *The Limits to Growth*, Meadows et al. It was followed by two infamous books co-authored by Paul Ehrlich, predicting tens of millions of deaths from famine – even in the U.S. – before 2000; instead, food supply outraced population. Despite duds like those books, Ehrlich remains a darling of the left.

Though the Malthus hypothesis has been reported to hold for animal populations, it has repeatedly failed to predict the human population. It has failed on both sides of the equation. First, the human population does not increase geometrically, as presumed by Malthus. Second, human technology has continued to find vast new resources to support the growing human population.

The past does not prove the future, but it would be a serious mistake to discount prudent extrapolations of the past. Like it or not, comprehensive planning requires extrapolations from past to future, whether explicitly exposed or implicitly hidden. Thus, what can we expect the future to hold in terms of human population? What do we need to "plan" for in terms of land use?

Already, before the year 2000, it was apparent to students of human population statistics that unexpected departures from past human history were occurring. An objective summary of these trends is available in *Earth Report 2000*, edited by Ronald Bailey (McGraw-Hill, 2000), in a chapter by Nicholas Eberstadt, a Harvard-educated student of population statistics.

Eberstadt cites human population as at 1.65 billion in 1900, and 6.08 billion in 2000. He notes that a large part of that large increase was due to improved health care and a resultant large increase in longevity. At the same time, he cites a large and continuing decline in human fertility rates in the developed world, that is also making inroads in undeveloped countries. That decline began in France in the early 1800s; it is long-term.

A most recent review appears in *Scientific American*, Special Issue, September 2005, in an article by Joel Cohen, a population specialist with credentials as credible as those of Eberstadt. Those two experts describe similar data, Cohen being slightly more updated.

The current, "middle-road" projection is for world population to increase from its present 6 billion people to a maximum of about 9 billion people about mid-century (2050), and to fall slowly after that. The present decade, 2000-2010, is a watershed decade for three important population transitions:

- (1) Before 2000, young people outnumbered old people. After 2000, the old will outnumber the young.
- (2) Before 2007, rural people outnumbered urban people. After 2007, urbanites will outnumber rurals.
- (3) From 2003 on, birthrate worldwide will be at or below replacement (2.1 children per woman).

Cohen makes the point that this dramatic fall in birthrate is largely "voluntary." It has happened most greatly in developed countries, starting early in the 1800s, and continuing to the present. It is mostly a matter of individual choices. The result is that the population of industrial nations is peaked or has peaked, while that of the undeveloped countries is still above replacement level. Ultimately, this is not a stable situation; the best resolution is for development in all nations. The world cannot afford primitive countries.

For the United States, our birthrate is below replacement, and has been since at least 2000. Even without immigration, our population would grow for a few more years, due to increased longevity. However, immigration is continuing to fuel our population growth, and it is our national choice whether to allow it to do so. There are economic factors that drive immigration, making it politically difficult to curtail it so far.

What do these population projections mean for land use planning in Dane County? First, the likely scenario is for Dane County to top out in population in the latter half of the century, and second, the growth rate should taper off in approaching that maximum. Thus, given the last decade's increase of 60,000 people, and projecting a population peak in five decades, we do not seem likely to add even 300,000 people to our present 429,000. That implies a peak population density of less than one person per acre of land. So, data do not project a need, or preference, for all people to live in high rises stacked up like so much cord wood.

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