
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Bloomberg trumpets “bigger is better” but ignores quality of city life

Commentary | By Craig Gurian | NYC, Population, Urban Policy

March 21, 2013 — New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg was ecstatic last week, [announcing](#) that the city’s population had swollen to an all-time high of 8,336,697 as of mid-2012 Census Bureau estimates. “There’s no better indication of the strength of our city than a record high population and a net population influx,” crowed Bloomberg. “People are voting with their feet.”

HOW MUCH OF THE COUNTRY LIVES IN NYC?

In 1940, 5.66 percent of the entire population of the U.S. lived in New York City; in 2010, New York represented only 2.65 percent of U.S. population (in other words, the city’s share of the national total was less than half of what it had been 70 years earlier).

One interpretation is simply that a smaller percentage of Americans are *interested* in living in New York City.

But consider for a moment the possibility that approximately the *same* percentage of the nation *wants* to live in New York City as did in 1940.

Then you begin to see how the pressure of that demand (the pressure that percentage of interest applied to a 2010 population of 308 million instead of to a 1940 population of 131 million) powerfully fuels unaffordability here.

I don’t mind a little civic boosterism from time to time, but not when it represents a toxic failure to balance multiple values. For 11 years now, this mayor — whom the docile New York press corps often portrays as a refined and elegant patron of the arts — has acted based on a crude, one-dimensional philosophy: bigger is better.

In general, the mayor remains completely dissociated from the many *negative* consequences already arising from the city’s population “boom,” let alone those that would plague us if the Bloomberg administration’s 2006 [projection](#) of the city’s population in 2030 (9.1 million) were realized.

As a life-long New Yorker, I’m not looking for a quiet, rural retreat. But I don’t think that city life is supposed to generate an unrelieved state of

crowding and noise. And, you can’t walk in popular New York City neighborhoods, take the subway, or drive a car without realizing very quickly that life here is distinctly more crowded and noisy than it was just 10 years ago.

Very simply, packing more people into this city creates a variety of intensifying pressures. Were there sufficient political will, some of these pressures could be resolved with policy changes: greater funding for mass transit, for example (the mayor’s sensible but unsuccessful effort to implement congestion pricing to reduce the number of cars streaming into Manhattan business districts would have helped, too). But political will has long been lacking, and, just as critically, many pressures of a growing population are not susceptible to resolution.

Housing is Exhibit A. As landlords and developers have continued to get carte blanche to convert middle-class housing into luxury housing (and to build ultra-luxury housing often owned by those who don't actually call New York their home), the housing crisis for middle- and working-class New Yorkers has intensified throughout Mayor Bloomberg's tenure. And that doesn't even include the more than 50,000 New Yorkers who are homeless.

What does population increase do? It makes that crisis worse, forcing even more people to chase fewer affordable apartments. That is not a supply-and-demand formula that is friendly to any families other than those who move in Bloomberg circles and who can wall themselves off (at least until they find themselves in an emergency room, where, even at the city's best hospitals, staff is overwhelmed by — population again — an ever-growing number of people seeking their services).

Take a look at parks. For anyone who is serious about the quality of urban life, the importance of adequate park space can't be overstated. New York has well-known jewels in its park system, but the system as a whole not only lacks resources, it simply doesn't provide enough park for each New Yorker. A growing New York population means that parkland per capita goes down (just at a moment when existing parkland is being eyed jealously for its potential housing development potential).

And what about schools? Some current problems (including the problem of overcrowding) would be mitigated if New York State complied with a court decision that stated the state needed to remedy the funding formula by which it historically shortchanged New York City schools. But, with or without that help, large numbers of new students in a still-growing city would almost certainly overtax the best-faith efforts to recognize and overcome the enormous existing problems of the city's school system, even were such efforts brought to bear.

But the mayor doesn't see these consequences of population growth, and doesn't want to hear about limits (for another example, see "No limits to tourism either?").

As such, we shouldn't be surprised that "too tall" is not in the mayor's vocabulary either. Bloomberg is [pushing to overhaul zoning](#) "so that buildings in Midtown Manhattan can soar as high" as those in other world capitals like Tokyo, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of meeting "the needs of globe-trotting corporate tenants."

No limits to tourism either?

Population increase, of course, is not only reflected in the number of people living in New York full-time. The number of tourists descending on New York has a big impact, too. If Goldilocks were mayor, she would have no problem saying that too few tourists would mean that an engine of the New York economy would be sputtering, at the cost of jobs and tax collections, just like she would have no problem saying that too many tourists would mean too much noise and crowding. She, like many New Yorkers, would like it just right.

Not our mayor. There is no such thing as "too many." In 2000, there were [36.2 million visitors](#) to New York City, according to "NYC & Company," the city's "official marketing, tourism and partnership organization." In 2012, [The New York Times reported](#), there were 52 million visitors (an increase of about 16 million or 44 percent), and yet the mayor is still not satisfied, wanting to reach a goal of 55 million by 2015.

I'm sure there are some things about Tokyo that it would be well for New York to emulate. But its density of super-high-rise towers and a population of more than 13 million should not be among them. We can't just measure the health of a city by how much per square foot a real estate broker can charge for the most expensive office space. We need to take seriously how much New Yorkers rely on the presence of low-rise and mid-rise structures to maintain their own internal balance.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

There have been circumstances where the Bloomberg administration has “downzoned” (zoned for less permissible density) for what it has called “preserving neighborhood character.”

Those downzonings have been in parts of Staten Island and Queens that feature environmentally unsustainable low-rise, one- and two-family housing.

These neighborhoods also tend to be racially segregated, so that downzonings that make the construction of affordable multi-family housing financially unfeasible act to perpetuate that segregation.

It really is quite striking: this globe-trotting mayor has seemingly never thought about (let alone has caused to be studied) the public health consequences of a growing New York City population. Nor has he examined any alternatives to his vision: How could a stable population not only sustain New York City, but also help it thrive for more of its residents than it has in the past? How could smaller be better? How could we cooperate with neighboring jurisdictions instead of just beating our chest as the biggest and best?

And he has apparently failed to do so even though he often *does* take a public health perspective in *other* contexts. The Bloomberg administration, for example, recently unveiled a [new public education campaign targeting teen pregnancy](#), and defended that controversial but factually accurate campaign on the

grounds that it sends an important message that “teen pregnancy has consequences — and those consequences are extremely negative, life-altering, and most often disproportionately borne by young women.”

Broader population trends, too, can be extremely negative, city altering, and disproportionately borne by those with the least resources.

Which three boroughs were home to *fewer* people in 2010 than in 1940?

The Bronx (but only by about 9,000 people); Brooklyn (by almost 200,000 people); and Manhattan (by slightly more than 300,000 people).

By contrast, Staten Island's population is larger by almost 300,000 people, and the population of Queens is larger by more than 900,000 people.

Housing patterns are complex phenomena, though, and one needs to take care before one concludes that Manhattan, for example, could easily return to its larger, 1940 population. Today, there are more and smaller households than there were back then. Indeed, though Manhattan had 300,000 more people in 1940 in 2010, it had 230,000 more *housing units* in 2010 than it did in 1940.

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