

Smart Growth for Conservatives

Culs de Sac for Safety?

<http://www.smartgrowthforconservatives.com/2014/02/21/culs-de-sac-for-safety/#more-440>

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by *Emily Washington*

At [Cato At Liberty](#), Randall O'Toole provides a list of recommendations for reversing Rust Belt urban decline in response to a study on the topic from the [Lincoln Land Institute](#). He focuses on policies to improve public service provision and deregulation, but he also makes a surprising recommendation that declining cities should “reduce crime by doing things like changing the gridded city streets that planners love into cul de sacs so that criminals have fewer escape routes.” This recommendation is surprising because it would require significant tax payer resources, a critique O'Toole holds against those from the Lincoln Land Institute. Short of building large barricades, it's inconceivable how a city with an existing grid of streets would even go about turning its grid into culs de sac without extensive use of eminent domain and other disruptive policies.

O'Toole is correct that the grid [owes its origins to authoritarian regimes](#) and that today it's embraced by city planners in the Smart Growth and New Urbanist schools. But while culs de sac may have originally appeared in organically developed networks of streets, today's culs de sac promoted by traffic engineers are hardly a free market outcome. As Daniel Nairn has written, the public maintenance of what are essentially shared driveways “[smacks of socialism in its most extreme form](#).”

Some studies have found that culs de sac [experience less crime](#) relative to nearby through streets, perhaps in part because they draw less traffic. However, it's far from clear that a pattern of suburban streets makes a city safer than it would be with greater street connectivity. Some studies find that [street connectivity correlates with greater social capital](#). O'Toole's promotion of social engineering through culs de sac to create a localized drop in crime at the expense of a city's residents' social capital is not a clear win. If a pattern of culs de sac streets reduces a city's social capital, it could increase overall crime rates.

O'Toole also makes a smart land use recommendation, suggesting that struggling Rust Belt cities can reduce regulation to foster development. He writes:

Reduce regulation, including zoning rules, so property owners can engage in urban renewal without government subsidies or top-down planning. Historic preservation ordinances may sound cool, but they are one of the biggest obstructions to private redevelopment.

It makes sense for cities like Detroit to reduce or eliminate their zoning and permitting requirements, allowing as many new businesses as possible to take advantage of their inexpensive prices. Interestingly, this recommendation for deregulation in the Rust Belt directly contradicts [his past writings on deregulatory upzoning](#) in other cities. O'Toole's native Portland has seen deregulation allowing denser development, and in this case he advocates preserving neighborhood character over allowing the market to drive development styles. I'm glad to see he's changed his tune to support deregulation.