MORE OFFICE SPACE: A REPLY TO `TOOTHPASTE TUBE' ARGUMENT
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IN 1989 the voters of Seattle will consider the Citizens Alternative Plan, or CAP, which would limit office development in downtown Seattle for 10 years. It would allow half a million square feet of office space for the first five years and 1 million square feet for the second five years.

One argument against the measure is that if growth were limited in downtown Seattle, it would be squeezed out to the suburbs and create Los Angeles-style sprawl. This is called the "toothpaste tube" effect.

The specter of sprawl is serious. However, study of the Seattle region indicates that the CAP initiative would divert little downtown growth to the suburbs. Even if it did, it would be a drop in the bucket compared to the wave of office suburbanization transforming every metropolis.

Firms locate in downtown Seattle because of its office space, prestige, central location, and accessibility to other firms. Forces pushing firms out include high rents, congestion, inadequate housing, and other urban problems. Forces pulling them to the suburbs include the supply of labor and affordable housing, lower rents, easier parking, less congestion, and other amenities.

In 1960 over 90 percent of the region's office space was in downtown Seattle. Today the downtown area contains less than half.

During the 1980s the region's office space more than tripled.

Two-thirds of this growth happened outside downtown Seattle.

With the exception of downtown Bellevue, which contains about a third of the suburban office space, most of the offices are low in density and use 15 times as much land per office worker as does downtown Seattle.

The question is not whether the CAP measure would cause office suburbanization but whether it would substantially alter what is already occurring.

The most likely way it would alter the balance is by increasing rents downtown. This is not likely to happen, because the initiative would allow enough office development during its 10-year lifetime to prevent a drop in the downtown vacancy rate.

Downtown Seattle and the Denny Regrade, the areas covered by the Downtown Plan and the CAP initiative, will add about 29,500 jobs between 1990 and 2000, according to the Puget Sound Council of Governments.

Assuming that 90 percent of the jobs will be office work and the rest will be retail, hotel, restaurant, and other types of work, between 6.5 and 7.5 million square feet of office space will be needed for the new jobs.

Under the CAP initiative, 7.5 million square feet of office space could be built. If less than this amount were required to support new jobs, the current surplus of office space could increase.

If the projected job increase occurred evenly during the 1990s, it could lead to an office-supply shortfall of about 1.25 million square feet in the first five years. If most of the job growth occurred early in the decade, there would be a greater shortfall.

The shortfall could be made up from existing surplus space or from the surplus space that could be built in the
second five years.

There is probably enough existing surplus to make up the shortfall without significantly affecting rents. However, in the first five years the CAP initiative may draw down the vacancy rate, pushing rents up and encouraging some displacement to the suburbs.

Just how much displacement will occur is difficult to project.

It depends on many more factors than would be affected by the CAP initiative. But the point is that any offices displaced from downtown Seattle would be few compared to the suburban development that will occur with or without the CAP.

During the next 10 years the office-space equivalent of roughly two downtown Seattles will be built in the suburbs. If the entire 1.25-million-square-foot shortfall were displaced to the suburbs, it would increase the total amount of new suburban office development by less than 3 percent. Even if half the projected new downtown jobs located in the suburbs, it would increase suburban office growth by only about 7 percent.

Such development, compared to other land uses, consumes little land, which makes the issue of displacement even less important. In King County, for example, between 1.5 and 3 percent of the land area outside Seattle will be used for office buildings by 1990.

Again, if the projected shortfall mentioned above were displaced to the suburbs, the land-area equivalent of one downtown Seattle would be required to accommodate the additional suburban growth. This is about one-fortieth the amount of land required to accommodate the suburban office development that will occur no matter what the downtown growth policies turn out to be.

Suburban jobs make it easier for people to live in suburbia and beyond. Residential development, not growth, has always been the real culprit behind suburban sprawl. But here as well, displaced downtown growth will not have much impact.

Two-thirds of downtown workers live outside Seattle anyway, and the housing needs for the growing downtown work force comprise only a small fraction of the region's demand for new housing. Shifting more jobs to suburbia would shorten commutes, but it would not make much of a difference in suburban housing growth.

If the projected 1.25-million-square-foot shortfall went to the suburbs, an area about the size of one downtown Seattle would be needed to build the necessary housing. If as many as half the projected new jobs moved to suburbia, which is very unlikely, an area about four times the size of downtown Seattle would be needed to build the necessary housing.

This pales in comparison to the 15 downtowns' worth of land that will be needed to house the workers holding the new downtown jobs that are expected during the 1990s no matter where the jobs are located - or the 200 downtowns' worth of land, twice the land area of Seattle, that will be needed to house the people holding the new jobs projected for the whole region.

If the people of Seattle want to reduce office suburbanization, we should consider the need for low-rise, lower-rent, back-office-type office space.

If we want to capture a larger share of the suburban "new blue collar" and "pink collar" office explosion, we should pursue the development of affordable middle-income family housing and modern, stocky, "office/factory" buildings, rather than being preoccupied with downtown superscrapers.

If people are concerned about the Los Angelization of Pugetopolis, there is much that can be done. Worrying about the CAP initiative is not one of them.

There are lots of other gloom-and-doom predictions about what will happen if the CAP measure passes. They range from economic disaster to the inability to support regional transit.
But people should wonder whether, like the toothpaste-tube argument, they are based on sound evidence or political rhetoric.

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Caption: PHOTO
RICHARD S. HEYZA / SEATTLE TIMES: LOOKING NORTH FROM THE 76TH FLOOR OF THE COLUMBIA TOWER.