Making this top 10 isn’t big news in Arlington

Pretty much everyone seems determined to ignore a new study from Smart Growth America labeling Arlington-Fort Worth as one of America’s 10 most sprawl-dominated American habitats.

Smart Growth America, incidentally, is organizationally and philosophically inclined to favor considerably more dense and synergistic development or re-

Sprawl may not be smart, but people know what they like. Development. The kind with cleaner air. The kind that reduces traffic congestion via heavy reliance on mass-transit systems such as rail. The kind that blends jobs, residences, shopping, dining and entertainment amenities into energy efficient communities.

It sounds great, though in fact it’s difficult to find many such communities, not counting Manhattan. Island life does tend to force things up instead of out.

“This report signals to us that you can’t sprawl your way out of congestion,” Smart Growth Executive Don Chen was quoted by The Associated Press as saying.

“Sprawl measures up to poorer quality of life.”

Such an attitude has to come as hard news to boomburbans such as those in Arlington, many of whom labored under the illusion that buying a little snout house — those with big garages and a small parking lot for three or four cars out front — represented an upgrade in their quality of life.

Alas, the report clearly indicates that the more sprawl, the more traffic and traffic fatalities — Arlington will probably concede that one — and the poorer the air quality. With the lower number signifying more sprawl, Arlington ranked 10th behind Knoxville, Tenn., at eighth and Oxnard-Ventura, Calif., No. 9. The No. 1 city for sprawl in the report was Riverside-San Bernardino, Calif.

The report ranks areas by population and housing density; the mix of homes, jobs and services or lack thereof; the availability and use of town centers (translation: downtowns); and the street network.

Further, top-ranking sprawl cities virtually always have inadequate or nonexistent mass-transit systems. They’re so auto dependent that traffic jams become an everyday experience.

Sound like anyplace you know? No wonder Arlington made the list. It could have been the sprawl poster child.

Thus far the general reaction around town to making the top 10 super sprawler list has been something akin to “And your point is?”

It’s a bit late to change the game in Arlington, although it should be pointed out that the city really is focusing on the street network and town center inadequacies. And 44 percent of the population did recently endorse adoption of a mass-transit system that would have included a study of rail. Unfortunately, 44 percent does not a majority make.

Maybe fast-growing cities of the future will look like the ones that Smart Growth proposes, but people still vote with their feet. And their feet — influenced by affordability, occupational opportunities and choice — keep taking them to places like Arlington or Mansfield or Southlake.

It may not be the smartest growth, but people know what they like.

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