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Urban Sprawl and Smart Growth

WHEREAS, the issues of urban sprawl and smart growth have become major public and political issues, as demonstrated by the recent passage of hundreds of ballot initiatives, ordinances and laws; and

WHEREAS, urban sprawl strains all working families by creating overly-long commuting times, fueling air pollution responsible for skyrocketing children's asthma rates, creating a lack of affordable housing near jobs, eroding public services, and denying workers a choice about how to get to work; and

WHEREAS, sprawling big-box retailers such as Wal-Mart undermine unionized neighborhood grocery retailers that provide family-supporting wages and benefits; and

WHEREAS, unionized, inner-city hospitals have been disproportionately shut down, partly because of the concentration of inner-city poverty caused by sprawl; and

WHEREAS, the abandonment of our cities, caused by sprawl, undermines their tax base and thereby harms the quality of public services, which in turn creates pressure for privatization of those services; and

WHEREAS, the same tax-base erosion is a fundamental cause of school funding inequities and classroom crowding, which fuel pressure for school vouchers; and

WHEREAS, the rise of "edge cities" on the fringe of urban areas has harmed the collective bargaining strength of janitorial and building maintenance unions and dispersed the hospitality industry, harming the wages of restaurant and hotel employees; and

WHEREAS, sprawling development on urban fringes creates new jobs beyond public transit grids, leaving commuters no choice about how to get to work, and undermining public transit ridership; and

WHEREAS, anti-union manufacturers flee cities for outlying areas as part of their union-avoidance strategies, making jobs inaccessible for many people who need them most, including dislocated workers who have been victimized by deindustrialization and NAFTA; and

WHEREAS, many other unions have suffered as a direct result of the disinvestments, corporate flight, and tax-base erosion caused by sprawl; and

WHEREAS, many unions have long worked to defend urban institutions that benefit all working families; and

WHEREAS, unions of transit workers have for decades advocated to improve public transportation that improves air quality and gives working families a commuting choice; and

WHEREAS, many locals of the United Food and Commercial Workers have joined community coalitions against Wal-Mart and other anti-union “big box” retailers; and

WHEREAS, the AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust has used Building Trades pension-fund investments to construct tens of thousands of units of low- and moderate-income housing, helping address America’s affordable housing crisis; and

WHEREAS, many other central labor bodies and state labor federations have long advocated for policies now collectively called “smart growth,” such as affordable housing, better public transit, school rehabilitation, and the reclamation of brownfields; and

WHEREAS, organized labor rightfully deserves credit for these many achievements, but has so far been largely overlooked in this national debate; and

WHEREAS, “smart growth” is an ambiguous and evolving term that applies to several different kinds of policies, and many competing interest groups are now seeking to define it; now therefore be it

RESOLVED that the AFL-CIO authorize and direct its leadership to actively engage in the emerging public and political debates surrounding urban sprawl and smart growth, asserting labor’s rightful role in the national debate about the future of America’s cities for the benefit of all working families.