'Zoom Towns' are Exploding in the West

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First, there were boomtowns. Now, there are Zoom towns.

The coronavirus pandemic is leading to a new phenomenon: a migration to “gateway communities,” or small towns near major public lands and ski resorts as people’s jobs increasingly become remote-friendly. This is straining the towns’ resources and putting pressure on them to adapt.

A new paper published in the Journal of the American Planning Association shows that populations in these communities were already growing before COVID-19 hit, leading to some problems traditionally thought of as urban issues, like lack of affordable housing, availability of public transit, congestion, and income inequality. And while COVID-19 has accelerated the friction, the study suggests that urban planners can help places adjust.

Places like Sandpoint, Idaho, which is located on a lake and near a popular ski resort, had already begun to see increased migration over the past 5 to 10 years. Now, it’s bracing for even more remote workers due to COVID-19, says Rumore, who is from Sandpoint and is currently looking into how the virus is affecting these gateway communities.

The question is whether they can adapt to the aforementioned big city challenges and develop sustainably. Many are experimenting with a range of possible ways to do so, like encouraging accessory dwelling units (small, secondary housing on existing property), relaxing land use and zoning regulations, developing publicly owned land for affordable housing, and increasing access to public transit and bike lanes, according to the study.

However, many of the communities lack staff and resources to get ahead of the curve—especially in a crisis. One interviewee in the study acknowledged his community was in a major period of growth and needed to get ahead of the curve, but “we didn’t have design guidelines in place.” So Rumore launched a related effort called the Gateway and Natural Amenity Region initiative to help.

GNAR is in the process of launching an online toolkit, which will provide basic urban planning information these communities need, like case studies and model ordinances. While the name “Zoom town” is a wink to the past, the researchers wrote in the paper that these small communities with big city problems might just be a peek into the future, as “valuable laboratories for novel planning approaches and planning innovation.”
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