On Municipal Underbounding

By SHANNON VAN ZANDT, Ph.D.

As cities grow, they often annex areas of new or existing developments that are adjacent to or near existing city boundaries. When new areas are annexed, cities have the responsibility to extend city services to them, usually in the form of infrastructure (roads, water, sewer, gas, electric, etc.), as well as fire and police services, public libraries, and other public amenities. When a municipality opts not to include such areas within its official boundaries, it is called “municipal underbounding.” It is a form of gerrymandering designed to exclude a particular neighborhood or community from the benefits that come with being a citizen of a particular municipality.

Most of the evidence of municipal underbounding is found in African-American communities in the South, as well as in the Hispanic colonias along the U.S.-Mexico border. Despite being directly adjacent to (or sometimes even surrounded by) existing cities, these communities have intentionally been left out of annexations, leaving them without public services. By selectively excluding minority communities, local governments undermine the political standing of minorities and their ability to advocate for their needs. Even more than disinvestment in poor communities within city limits, underbounded minority communities are denied access to the same levels of infrastructure, as well as access to services including police and fire protection, trash pickup, and code enforcement. While local governments may claim that they are trying to reduce the tax burden on minority communities, evidence shows that the individual provision of water and sewer through septic systems is a greater financial burden than the tax increase would be.

The city of Mebane, North Carolina, for example, has strategically and intentionally drawn its boundaries to exclude four African-American communities that lie just outside city limits. These communities are, however, in the Extra-territorial Jurisdiction (ETJ), which allows the city to control development...
but without representation or negotiating power for those who live in the ETJ. ETJs are designed to give the cities some control based on the assumption that these areas are likely to be annexed into the city at some point in the future, but the failure to do so maintains the African Americans’ disenfranchisement.

Such inequitable provisions have far-reaching consequences for the low-income and minority individuals who live in such underserved neighborhoods. Without adequate infrastructure and services, residents’ health risks increase and property values decrease, perpetuating health and wealth inequalities.

In Mebane, the septic systems used by the underbounded black communities have been found to have failed or be near failure, according to the EPA. Septic system failure can happen because the soil doesn’t drain properly, because of soil compaction, or by the growth of roots into the drain lines. Newer
regulations also require larger drain fields than are possible on their small lots. In attempts to address their septic problems, the African-American communities have requested many times to be annexed, but have always been rejected. As a result, the failing systems put the health of the residents at risk of infections from E. coli and other waterborne pathogens.

Another consequence of municipal underbounding is to expose these towns to greater risks of unwanted development and land uses. Many large infrastructure projects, like bypasses or bridges, attempt to connect communities without disrupting them. Planners of these projects look carefully for the “paths of least resistance,” where there will be the least opposition. That means that routes are likely to skirt urban areas, avoiding highly populated areas and instead targeting vulnerable communities that have little political power. Almost always, these are communities of color.

Government decision-making in Mebane and many other towns like it have systematically and intentionally institutionalized separate and unequal power and social, health, and economic conditions for African Americans and Hispanics. They prevent residents from advocating for themselves by disenfranchising them; they expose them to serious public health threats from substandard infrastructure and services; and they intentionally target these communities for locally unwanted land uses.