

‘POLITBÄR BROWN BAG’ DEALING WITH THE URBAN SPRAWL INITIATIVE



On 10 February 2019, Swiss citizens will vote on the Popular initiative ‘Stop urban sprawl – for sustainable urban development’ (also called ‘Urban Sprawl Initiative’). As usual, many employees came to Zurich-Altstetten to listen to the arguments presented by national representatives of all major political parties.

The panel discussion has been recorded. In case you could not attend the event, you may watch the video (in German) linked on the right.

Daniel J. Sauter welcomed everyone and thanked the politicians present for coming. Due to his resignation as Chairman, the event was the last one for him. He also thanked the employees, without whose interest the ‘PolitBär’ series would not be such a success. Last but not least, he praised the militia system as an important pillar of Switzerland’s success and mentioned the Bank’s support of its politically engaged employees.

Introduction

There is a lot of building going on in Switzerland – at the expense of nature and the countryside. Therefore rules are needed to combat urban sprawl. These were adopted by the people in 2013 in a vote on the Spatial Planning Act: building zones may now only comprise as much land as is needed within the next 15 years.

Building zones that are too large must be reduced in size. The cantons are currently implementing these requirements, thus ensuring better protection for nature and the landscape.

The proposal

In 2016 the Young Greens submitted the popular initiative ‘Stop urban sprawl – for sustainable urban development (Urban Sprawl Initiative)’. This initiative aims to freeze the entire area of building zones in Switzerland: a new building zone should only be approved if an area elsewhere of at least the same size is declassified as a building zone. The initiative also aims to stipulate in the Constitution which buildings and facilities may still be built outside building zones. It also calls for better use of areas that have already been built on. The Confederation, cantons and communes should also promote sustainable forms of living and working.

Simon Binder moderated a very factual discussion in his competent, yet tranquil way. He introduced the following panellists:

In favour of the initiative

- **Aline Trede** (Green Party)
Alice Trede has been a member of the National Council since 2018 (first term: 2013 – 2015), representing the Canton of Berne. She is owner of a campaign agency.
- **Thomas Hardegger** (Social Democratic Party, SP)
Thomas Hardegger has been a member of the National Council since 2011, representing the Canton of Zurich. He is managing director and board member of a real estate agency.

Against the initiative

- **Hans-Ulrich Bigler** (Free Democratic Party / the Liberals, FDP)
Hans-Ulrich Bigler has been a member of the National Council since 2015, representing the Canton of Zurich. He is Director of the Swiss Federation of Small and Medium Enterprises (SGV).
- **Philipp Kutter** (Christian Democratic People’s Party, CVP)
Philipp Kutter has been a member of the National Council since 2018, representing the Canton of Zurich. He is a communication consultant.
- **Bruno Walliser** (Swiss People’s Party, SVP)
Bruno Walliser has been a member of the National Council since 2015, representing the Canton of Zurich. He is a chimney sweeper with his own business.



From left to right: Pascal Gentinetta, Hans-Ulrich Bigler, Bruno Walliser, Philipp Kutter, Daniel J. Sauter, Aline Trede, Thomas Hardegger, and Simon Binder

Key takeaways of the debate

- **Aline Trede** calculated that 1 square metre of land per second would be developed in Switzerland, which corresponds to eight football pitches a day. For her, the crucial question is whether we want biodiversity and protect our landscape or if we want to continue like this. She believes that there should be a better use of already built areas, e.g. by high-density building and the increase of low buildings by another one or two floors. She welcomed the Spatial Planning Act, which is currently implemented, but believes that the bill does not go far enough.
- **Thomas Hardegger**, who basically also welcomes the Spatial Planning Act adopted in 2013, criticised some aspects of the law that offer false incentives. He further insisted that the exchange of land as demanded by the initiators must be possible, since “there are 80,000 cheap flats in unattractive locations that nobody wants, while at the same time living in the city is almost unaffordable.” Thomas Hardegger is also of the opinion that there is a great potential for high-density building, and he admitted: “Implementing the initiative would be a challenging task for architects and the municipalities.”
- **Hans-Ulrich Bigler** is of the liberal view that “soil should not only be protected but also used.” Regarding the exchange of land, he warned that a rural community in another canton could ask for an exorbitant price for exchanging their plot with the city of Zurich. As a result, the tenants in Zurich would pay the bill and rents would further increase. The key question for Hans-Ulrich Bigler is whether the currently implemented Spatial Planning Act will take effect or not. He sees first positive signs in this

respect, since the per capita construction activity has already fallen by 18 square metres.

- **Philipp Kutter** showed some sympathy for the concerns of the initiators. However, he is of the opinion that the existing law is sufficient, since it addresses the problem of urban sprawl and fosters high-density building as well as the possible extension of existing buildings. “Your initiative comes simply too late,” he told his colleagues on the left. Philipp Kutter furthermore criticised some aspects of the proposal as “too rigid and unnecessary.”
- **Bruno Walliser** pointed out that there is still enough land to develop, “but not where we need it.” He agreed with everyone on the podium that there must be denser construction. At the same time, he also believes that the Spatial Planning Act suffices.