

Bringing Sprawl to a Crawl

by Eben Fodor

We are witnessing a dramatic and unprecedented transformation of our landscape. Urban development is consuming land at a rate of more than 340 acres an hour in this country. More farms, forest, natural areas and open space have succumbed to urban development in the last fifty years than in all previous history.¹

Thanks to the convenience of the automobile, and massive federal road-building campaigns, we have removed many of the spatial constraints that formed the compact urban develop-

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1997 National Resource Inventory (available at: www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/nrihigh.html). The rate of land consumption more than doubled from the 160 acres/hour reported in the 1992 National Resources Inventory (covering the 1982-92 period).

ment of our older communities. This freedom has allowed us to expand across the landscape in a sprawling mass of subdivisions, strip malls, and industrial parks.

Not everyone agrees that sprawl is bad. But the bottom line is that sprawling development consumes our limited supply of land and means less nature, less farmland, and less rural tranquility for all of us. The poorly planned, low density development associated with sprawl is also an added drain on taxpayers who must fund the new roads, sewer lines, and other costly public infrastructure this growth requires.

While the pace of sprawl may be at an all-time high, so is concern about it. Fortunately there are actions and polices that can help bring sprawl to a crawl.

1. Stop building so many roads. Building more and wider roads doesn't just convert green space into asphalt, it promotes auto dependence and energy-

GROWTH BOUNDARIES ENCOURAGE COMPACT AND ORDERLY GROWTH

intensive auto usage. From 1969 to 1990 the number of cars increased six times faster than the U.S. population and the daily vehicle miles traveled per person increased 51 percent from 3.9 to 5.9 miles.² In my hometown, Eugene, Oregon, citizens have fought several major road projects, and defeated an \$80 million, 8-lane bridge expansion and freeway that was planned to run through the downtown. This massive project would have encouraged more sprawl to the north of the city and further drained the life out of the downtown. The cost to taxpayers for

² U.S. Federal Highway Administration, Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey (1990).

INSIGHTS: TWO PERSPECTIVES ON SPRAWL

The Anti-Sprawl Mantra

by Wayne Lemmon

Ever since publication of the landmark study, *The Costs of Sprawl*, in the mid-1970's, planners have been chanting a sort of mantra, which sounds something like: "Sprawl is Bad! Must Fight Sprawl!" And without too much discerning thought, suburban growth in nearly all forms has frequently been equated to sprawl. When new subdivisions or major road projects are proposed, suburban growth is often portrayed as an evil, consuming force, which must be fought and stopped in its tracks wherever it rears its ugly head.

Anti-growth activists tell anyone who will listen that:

1. Growth and sprawl are expensive drains on capital budgets and tax dollars.

2. Growth and sprawl are inherently harmful to the environment.

3. Growth needs to be confined to developed areas already served by public facilities and mass transit.

4. Growth and sprawl consume land and spoil natural landscapes.

Against this pervasive prejudice in the land planning profession, I wish to offer a simple, contrarian message: It ain't necessarily so!

This is not to say that the anti-growth activists are wrong. As frequently practiced and implemented, all of these alleged evils attributed to suburban growth can be found and do indeed occur. I'm simply suggesting that these unfortunate consequences do not always occur, and with good planning and proper taxing and land use policies, they don't have to occur. Let me share a few specific examples to illustrate my point.

Low-density suburban development is often portrayed as representing a

LOW DENSITY HOUSING CAN PROVIDE A NET BENEFIT TO THE GENERAL FUND

drain on the public treasury. In fact, low density housing can provide a net benefit to the general fund, and pay its own fair share of school and other capital facilities costs.

The large lot home site is typically a premium product, with a premium price tag and a commensurate tax bill. It appeals to affluent families who can afford it, and who also tend to be older and further along in their career cycles. This means substantial real estate taxes are generated, with very little demand per household on social services, public recreation amenities, or public safety operations. The road which provides

facilitating this new sprawl would have amounted to about \$5,000 for each new commuter using the bridge.

2. Keep the urban footprint as small as possible. Establish an urban growth boundary or greenbelt of undeveloped land that directs and limits future development. All new growth must occur within these boundaries. Outside the boundary land is considered rural and development is discouraged. These have worked well in Oregon and elsewhere. Boulder, Colorado's pioneering greenbelt system, for example, has helped contain growth while boosting local quality of life. Growth boundaries encourage compact and orderly growth, save money on extensions of urban services, protect farm and forest lands, and reduce unproductive land speculation.

3. Develop standards for efficient land use. Set a maximum size for residential lots. Create areas that allow higher density development and permit mixed uses (residential above



Urban growth boundaries in Oregon sharply demarcate the edge of urbanized areas.

retail/commercial, for example). Avoid wasting large areas of land in a sea of asphalt parking spaces by locating parking lots above or below buildings or using multistory lots.

4. Stop subsidizing growth. Most communities are subsidizing growth. These subsidies are often "invisible" to the public and include such things as free, or below cost, infrastructure

(streets, schools, sewage plants, etc.), economic development programs, developer incentives, federally-subsidized road building, and tax increment financing.

Communities that are being overrun by growth can start by reducing or eliminating these subsidies. In a survey of growth management strategies,

continued on page 18

INSIGHTS: TWO PERSPECTIVES ON SPRAWL

access to this house is a two-lane road with very low traffic volume and thus low frequency of repair needs. The large lot home site is typically served by on-site well and septic, further avoiding the need for these public services.

Many town and county governments have also adopted schedules of impact fees through which the subdivision developer, and ultimately the home buyer, pays into a fund earmarked for school construction, libraries, and other new public facilities.

Dispersed, low density development is often said to be harmful to the environment. The argument is made that this pattern of growth spreads air pollution as a result of more commuters and increased automobile trips. Anti-growth arguments are often heard to the effect that land use policies should limit growth to areas served by mass transit, and encourage higher density developments within these areas to make public transit more economically viable. With

greater public transit use, air pollution generated by cars would be reduced.

In theory, this seems to be good land use policy. But does this approach really reduce pollutants in the air? Modern automobiles, particularly the small-to-mid-sized vehicles preferred by single-driver commuters, generate less pollution than was the case just ten years ago. The amount of pollution given off by a late model car running at 30 to 50 miles an hour over low traffic roads is very, very small. Consider this the next time you are driving behind a bus. Watch the cloud of dense, oily smoke expanding into the air you're about to breathe with every acceleration it makes. And then realize that clouds of smoke just like this are coming from every stop-and-go this bus makes, again and again, for the whole ride. And then, multiply all those smog clouds times the number of busses in the mass transit fleet which are doing the same thing. Can this really be less pollution than

generated by one- and two-passenger cars carrying the same number of people?

A dispersed development pattern can spread out trip origins and destinations, reducing the frequency of traffic jams. Dispersion can avoid "hot spots" and spikes which can violate federal air quality standards. Concentration of development may be causing more environmental problems than a marginal increase in transit usage can solve.

Another policy often advocated is to focus development into areas served by existing public facilities. In general, this makes fiscal sense. But again, there are limits and exceptions. There is an unspoken assumption in such policies that developed areas actually have unused capacity in the public facilities which serve them. Think for a moment of an urbanized area, with sidewalks directly abutting the street, and buildings edged directly on the sidewalk.

continued on page 18

Bringing Sprawl to a Crawl

continued from page 17

Eugene's residents strongly favored having development pay more of its own way. The City Council is implementing this policy by increasing development impact fees to reflect the full cost of providing public facilities. Communities can also adopt "growth neutral" policies that discourage local governments from actively promoting growth.

Planning for growth may be necessary, but avoid over-investing in growth with big infrastructure projects like a major sewage plant expansion that may not be fully utilized for 20 or 30 years. The financing costs for this excess capacity can double the ultimate cost to taxpayers. Instead, make small incremental investments in added capacity that don't over-commit the community to a future of growth.

5. **Do a sprawl makeover.** Given that we have already committed vast urban areas to low density sprawling develop-

ment patterns, what can we do to make these areas more livable and make better use of our limited land supply?

The most promising approach is to rework commercial strip development into village centers. Sometimes referred to as "nodal" development, the idea is to create an urban center or node that can meet a wide range of commercial and personal needs within a walkable distance. A central area provides a variety of commercial services and amenities that are within a convenient five minute walk from the surrounding higher-density residential development. Successful projects typically combine convenient transportation connections with public amenities such as a library, civic center, or park. *Editor's Note: For more on this approach, see Richard Unter-mann's "Center-ing Our Suburbs" in PCJ #22 (Spring 1996).*

6. **Take responsibility for your own actions.** Reconsider the fantasy of escaping to a "rural lifestyle." The

A RURAL HOME COMBINED WITH A CITY JOB IS A RECIPE FOR DISASTER

notion of escaping the urban environment for some rural dream house is a major driving force for the sprawl we have today. A rural home combined with a city job is a recipe for disaster. Is it really worth spending a couple of hours a day commuting when you could be spending quality time with your family and friends instead? Consider the irony of a lifestyle that requires you to consume a gallon of gas just to get a gallon of milk.

Make your community the place it should be. Get involved in your neighborhood association or attend city council meetings to find out how to make the changes you want. Most local

INSIGHTS: TWO PERSPECTIVES ON SPRAWL

The Anti-Sprawl Mantra

continued from page 17

What is the cost of widening the street here, as opposed to adding five miles of two-lane highway with no demolition? Can the urban street widening even be done? In a heavily developed area, what does it cost to upgrade a 12-inch water main to an 18-inch line, including the night construction and overtime to avoid crippling traffic delays while the streets are torn-up? Is this really more cost-effective than running 6-inch lines alongside a country road with no construction obstacles? Which is more easily fixed if it springs a leak? Which repair job causes the least disruption?

What about cultural facilities, parks, and libraries? A dispersed development pattern can be served with smaller facilities on smaller sites, with lower overall costs. Yes, if already urbanized areas have excess capacity, then costs for providing these facilities can be avoided by focusing development towards these

areas. But at some point the available capacity will be consumed, and new facilities or expansions needed. With a more concentrated service population, you will then need larger facilities in larger buildings on larger sites.

The one complaint made against dispersed development that is obviously true is that it does consume more land. Which land is consumed, and which land is left in "natural" or rural state can be a matter of conscious policy rather than random market forces. Describing development as "consuming" land does not tell the whole story, however. This act of consumption frequently means that private, inaccessible lands, often held fallow without crops or tree cover, are converted into attractive and vibrant neighborhoods. This is not always a bad thing. And, with current state-of-art land planning, parks, recreational facilities, nature trails, and open spaces are typically included in larger, planned subdivisions. This is not

DESCRIBING DEVELOPMENT AS "CONSUMING" LAND DOES NOT TELL THE WHOLE STORY

the old slash and bulldoze, all-in-a-row tract housing of the 1950's.

Community planning and development today is extraordinarily sensitive to the natural amenities and aesthetics of the land as a result of developers' enlightened self-interest – such an approach adds value to the finished product. Yes, an old rustic farm can have a certain charm. But an attractive, landscaped neighborhood street can be stunning. The "consumption" of land for such purposes can in some cases make the land more truly green than it ever was in its natural, undeveloped state.

governments are busy investing in all the infrastructure that new development needs and are neglecting existing neighborhoods. Insist that they fund quality-of-life investments in your neighborhood such as traffic calming measures, parkland acquisition, public safety measures, street beautification projects, or whatever else is needed.

Finally, consider how much you consume. On average, each North American requires 11 to 13 acres of ecologically productive land to supply his or her current consumption levels. We consume five times more natural resources per capita than the average World citizen.³ A growing number of

people are starting to pay closer attention to the impacts of their own lifestyle.

As individuals and as citizens actively involved in planning for our communities, we can make a difference – and help slow sprawl to a crawl. ♦

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3 See *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*, by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees (New Society Publishers, 1996).

Eugene, Oregon

by Eben Fodor

Eugene, Oregon is a microcosm of the rest of the country. Growth has pushed out across prime farmland covering sixty percent of the best soils



New homes in Eugene, Oregon – built on class II farm soils.

in the county with urban development. The Willamette Valley's scenic grasslands and forested hillsides have given way to subdivisions, quick-marts, fast food restaurants and chain stores. Roads are noticeably more crowded each year and it takes longer to get everywhere. Housing prices have doubled in the last decade and the cost of living is pushing out lower-income residents. What could have been called a "town" ten years ago is now clearly a "city." But the city lacks a vital downtown and instead has allowed malls and "big box" retail stores on the urban fringes.

While Eugene made a laudable investment in parks, bike paths and public facilities in the early 1970s, little has been added since then. The city continues to allow auto-dependent developments where residents can't conveniently and safely walk or bike to major destinations such as a parks, schools, grocery stores, restaurants, or workplaces. A study of travel patterns by the local government shows that people living on the outskirts of Eugene travel approximately four times further by car each day than those living near the city center. When these travel distances are mapped, they look like concentric rings. The further you are from the city center, the more dependent on the car you are likely to be.



This can't be Vermont? Unfortunately traffic congestion is a growing problem even in Vermont (seen here in South Burlington). Is increased low-density development a cause, or part of a solution?

From all of these observations, I am not trying to suggest that all low-density, dispersed development is a good thing. To be sure, there are ample examples of unwisely located, poorly planned developments with minimal amenities, which have cost far more taxes than ever generated by the new development. But today these are increasingly the exception, not the rule. It's time to stop chanting the anti-sprawl mantra, and recognize that with quality planning and appropriate local policies in place, low density, dispersed development can make sense. ♦

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