

# Sprawl Is Like the Weather

by Brent Thompson

**S**prawl is like the weather in that everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it.

Proof of this is how our cities continue to develop. No public official or paid city planner is going to advocate sprawl, but too often the land use decisions made by planning departments, planning commissions, and city councils contribute to just that.

Under a comprehensive plan and ordinance framework having such laudable goals as maintaining low skylines; providing varied housing, employment and shopping opportunities; and providing adequate open space, public facilities, and parking, local decision making bodies continue to approve planning actions that contribute to sprawl.

But what is sprawl? Sprawl is the continual use of more land than is necessary to accomplish a given development goal. Sprawl is the consumption of resources and land in excess of what is needed to create a comfortable, livable and functional city.

Sprawl costs cities and counties tremendous amounts of money in extra paving and road maintenance costs, and extra sewer and storm drain construction and maintenance costs — and extra costs for the many other services local governments provide. Sprawl also needlessly gobbles up farm and forest land and open space.

Sprawl, therefore, costs taxpayers money and depletes the resource base. It costs developers money because developers get less done on any given parcel of land.

Given this, why do officials continue to contribute to land wasting development practices even when they would often profess to being against sprawl as well as being advocates of people being able to exercise their property rights to the fullest?

One reason is the widely held belief in the virtues of low density development. In the approval process for almost any development, there is a call for lowering the

development's density. But those who testify against higher density don't seem to realize that the cumulative result of lower density development is sprawl.

Decision-makers listen to arguments for lower densities and believe they are contributing to livability if they reduce density

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on any given project. However, the result of lowering densities is that it takes more space to house people and to provide services for them. Distances between everything increase. As distances increase, the need for parking lots increases, because with greater distances, walking and bicycling are not convenient. Public transportation is not viable because bus lines cannot economically cover the huge spaces the cities consume for development.

The end result of this development pattern is the waste of land, the increased use of automobiles, the need for more parking lots, and greater air pollution. All this, of course, detracts from the very livability that was so eagerly sought with the plea for lower densities.

What is the solution to this problem?

One part of the solution is to increase allowable densities. Within developed areas, increased population could be absorbed through small accessory dwellings or apartments in single-family zones. Space wasted by parking lots could be redeveloped into more stores or residences. Parking for normal needs could be retained, but overflow parking for peak days could be declared surplus. All commercial zones except for heavy industry could become

mixed-use zones. Parking requirements could be based on which use, residential or commercial, created the greater demand, with no additional requirement for the use that requires less parking.

Another part of the solution is to increase common open space to mitigate the effects of increased density. Most projects call for one- or two-story buildings that result in a great waste of land. If two-, three-, and four-story buildings became the norm — with a portion of each project set aside for a park or open space — more development could be undertaken in a smaller area with less negative impact. In subdivisions and apartment complexes, density bonuses could be tied to the provision of open space.

Density is not the enemy of livability, sprawl is. ♦

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