

Stopping Sprawl by Growing Smarter

by Edward T. McMahon

What do abandoned buildings, clogged highways, and new mega-malls in farm fields have in common? According to a growing list of national experts, all of these seemingly unrelated phenomenon are the direct result of sprawl.

Planning and greenspace advocates have long lamented the sprawling development that gobbles up huge tracts of prime farmland and forests while spawning dawn to dusk traffic congestion. But now they are being joined by low-income housing advocates, social service organizations, church leaders, and others concerned about urban decay and poverty.

In announcing a new legislative initiative to curb sprawl, Maryland Governor Paris Glendenning declared that, "inner city disinvestment and suburban sprawl are two sides of the same coin ... by curbing sprawl, Maryland can save farmland and forests while simultaneously revitalizing our older suburbs and urban centers."

While it is too soon to predict how Maryland's "Neighborhood Conservation and Smart Growth Initiative" will fare with state lawmakers, the initiative is significant because it addresses an issue of growing national significance and it attempts to remedy several of the major problems caused by sprawl.

Economically, environmentally, and socially, sprawl is spawning some of the costliest problems America faces. In Maryland, the problems mirror those found throughout the country.

• **Loss of Green Space** — If current trends continue, Maryland will consume as much land in the next 25 years as it consumed in its first 300 years — and will lose over 500,000 acres of forests and farmland. Elsewhere trends are similar. Between 1970 and 1990, metro New York's population grew only 5 percent,

but consumed 61 percent more land; metro Chicago's population grew by just 4 percent, but consumed 46 percent more land; and metro Cleveland's popu-

lation declined by 11 percent, but still consumed 33 percent more land.

• **Urban Disinvestment** — Between 1970 and 1990 one Maryland county closed over 60 existing schools while simultaneously building 60 new schools farther out. The price tag: \$500 million. Add to this an annual cost of about \$500 per student to pay for school busing. In Chicago, between 1980 and 1990, 81 percent of new jobs went to suburban areas where only 18 percent of the region's people live; at the same time the City of Chicago experienced a growing problem with joblessness and poverty.

• **Fiscal Folly** — A Maryland study predicts that between now and the year 2020 sprawl will cost Maryland residents about \$10 billion more for new roads,

BETWEEN NOW AND THE YEAR 2020 SPRAWL WILL COST MARYLAND RESIDENTS ABOUT \$10 BILLION MORE FOR NEW ROADS, SCHOOLS, SEWER, AND WATER THAN WOULD BE NECESSARY IF GROWTH WERE MORE CONCENTRATED.



On-Line Comments

"The problem, as I see it, is that cities are looking for superficial solutions to fundamental problems. Tear-up a pedestrian mall, plant some trees, add some benches, pave the sidewalks in brick, add period lighting, etc., and businesses and people will return. Leaders like Mr. McMahon are making the right arguments. The question is: how do we let the average citizen (the taxpayers) know the folly of sprawl and the indirect impacts that it has on their lives and pocket-books? Superficial solutions to fundamental problems will not work.

—Mike Ciriello, Raleigh, North Carolina

"I think Ed McMahon's article on sprawl is great. As a front-line soldier in the war against sprawl, I was inspired by his reasoning. His last point, that development is the solution, not the problem, should be the focus of an entire article (or book!)."

—Ross Moldoff, Salem, New Hampshire

"I'm a member of the Columbiana County planning commission, a very small county in Ohio. Even though our largest town is only 15,000 people, we too have a sprawl problem.

This is an important issue, thanks for addressing it."

—Debbie Williams, Fairfield Township, Ohio

"I suspect that one element of the explanation for the sprawl syndrome is the relative ease for a larger contractor to deal with a large tract of raw land, particularly for housing. All work is concentrated in one area. Building is phased, with crews shifting from one cluster to another, as each concludes a phase of the building process.

While the developer doesn't necessarily make tons of money on each sale, the multiplier makes it worthwhile. Also, from a hassle point of view, there is one set of inspectors, one set of regulations, etc. Contrast this with the hassles of infill development, or renovation to existing stock. Small jobs, dispersed locations, differing regulations, and, perhaps worse, the builder has to deal with multiple owners. Excedrin city.

Thus, the challenge to be faced is how to more clearly identify the disincentives that exist to infill development and renovation, and figure out ways to reduce these. Or to have states develop systems of fees and subsidies to help even the playing field."

—Lindsley Williams, Washington, D.C.

Resources on Sprawl and Its Alternatives

Bank of America et al, *Beyond Sprawl: New Patterns of Growth to Fit the New California*, 1995. Outlines the costs of sprawl in California and suggests new ideas for growth in the future. To order call: 415-622-8144.

Chesapeake Bay Foundation, *A Pattern for Living*, 1995. A slide show and video illustrating alternatives to sprawl. To order call: 410-268-8832.

Hylton, Tomas. *Save Our Land, Save Our Towns*, Harrisburg, PA, R.B. Books, 1995. A coffee table type book that dramatically illustrates sprawl and its alternatives. To order call: 800-497-1127.

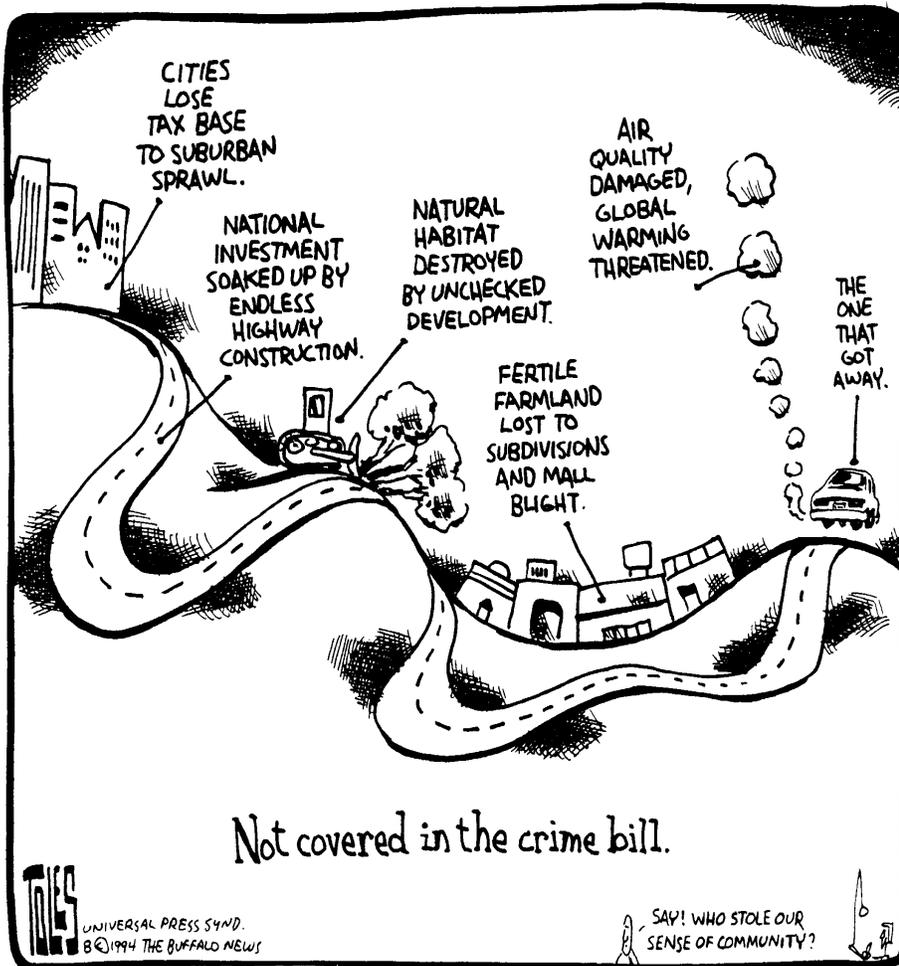
Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, *Alternatives to Sprawl*, Cambridge, MA. 1995. The proceedings of a national conference on alternatives to sprawl co-sponsored by the Brookings Institution and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. To order call: 617-661-3016.

Maryland Office of Planning, *Land Use and Development Patterns in Maryland*, Baltimore, MD, 1994. [Maryland study cited in the column]. To order call: 410-767-4500.

Rutgers Center for Urban Policy Research, *Impact Assessment of New Jersey Interim State Development & Redevelopment Plan*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1992. [Rutgers study cited in the column]. To order call: 908-932-2178, and request the Executive Summary.

The *Planning Commissioners Journal* Web site now has available a special resource guide dealing with sprawl. Not only will you find links to a number of other resources on sprawl and its alternatives, but you will also find additional feedback and responses to Ed McMahon's column. We welcome your participating in this on-line dialogue on a topic of critical importance to communities across North America.

To access our Sprawl page, go to: <http://www.plannersweb.com/sprawl.html>



schools, sewer, and water than would be necessary if growth were more concentrated. Similar studies in California, New Jersey, Florida, and elsewhere have demonstrated a direct relationship between sprawl and the spiraling costs of government.

Clearly there are alternatives to sprawl that are less costly, more efficient, and less environmentally destructive than current haphazard development patterns. But changing directions won't be easy, particularly because of the myths that have grown up around the issue of sprawl. According to Henry Richmond, founder of the National Growth Management Leadership Pro-

ject and former president of 1000 Friends of Oregon, there are four myths that block reform:

MYTH NO. 1 — Free Markets. Apologists for sprawl argue that reform means interfering with free markets. What's more, they say, "we just build what people want." In fact, sprawl is the result of numerous free-market warping policies. Highway construction, mortgage policies, flood plain insurance, fragmented property tax systems, and favorable tax treatment of house sales and mortgage interest all shape the "market" to encourage sprawl. In Maryland, an analysis of state policies and

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programs found that the state was directly subsidizing growth on the exurban fringe while discouraging investment in existing cities and towns. In the future, Maryland will only pay for road construction and sewer and water systems in "designated growth areas."

As for building what people want, Richmond argues that, on the contrary, people buy the only thing that is available. Despite ample opportunities for high quality in-fill development in desirable neighborhoods developers focus their efforts on the fringe.

MYTH NO. 2 — Property Rights. Defenders of "anything goes" land use policy argue that "stopping sprawl denies their free use of property and the financial gain that comes with freedom." Richmond points out that all property owners have property values at stake. Relatively few will profit from subsidized speculation while many others will see taxes rise and property values fall thanks to sprawl and urban disinvestment. For example, a recent Rutgers University study showed that sprawl costs taxpayers over 20 times what it provides in financial gain to speculators.

MYTH NO. 3 — Loss of Local Control. Land use reformers are *for* local control. But we must recognize that local governments are increasingly impacted by forces beyond their control: federal and state budget cuts, global economic trends, unfunded mandates, and actions by neighboring municipalities that negatively effect your own community. What's more, sprawl is no longer just a big city problem. In many places, sprawl is hurting small towns and suburban communities just as much. For example, of 262 municipalities in the Chicago region 100 are flat or declining socio-economically. Curbing sprawl can bolster the fiscal independence and strength of local government by containing municipal costs and by boosting private investment and tax base.

MYTH NO. 4 — Development is the Problem. Development is not the prob-

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lem; it is really the solution. The real problem is the patterns of development. The key is putting quality development in the right place. Land use regulations can direct development to certain areas and protect open lands. But regulation, by itself, can't remedy the problems associated with current land use patterns. Only new development and a strong comprehensive plan can do this.

Oregon, the only state with urban growth boundaries around all of its cities, facilitates development inside the boundaries. As a result, Portland is one of the nation's healthiest cities. While Metro Portland's population has grown by almost 50 percent since the greenline was adopted in 1975, the area has only consumed about 2 percent more land. Home prices are lower than other major West Coast cities and builders support the growth boundaries because there is less red tape and more flexible zoning within the designated growth areas.

Being against sprawl doesn't mean being against growth. As Maryland and other states are discovering, the real question is not whether our communities will grow, but how. ♦

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