A Primer for Reporters Covering the Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Sprawl

A Journalist’s Resource Guide

Rethinking the American Dream

RTNDF

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How many of us can live the good life as we now define it—with ever larger cars and homes consuming ever greater amounts of resources—before it becomes a nightmare life of traffic jams, unpleasant landscapes and environmental degradation?
If you live in an American city of any size at this moment in history, chances are somebody is raising concerns about suburban sprawl. It comes up in stories about traffic and attempts to deal with it. It is named as a culprit in environmental pieces on air pollution and water quality. After simmering for years as a discussion among urban planners, environmentalists and others, the issue of how cities grow has burst forth as a topic of mainstream debate.

More accurately, sprawl is a catchall term for many interrelated issues with hundreds of potential story lines. Although the arcane terms and deadening language of planning can obscure it, sprawl stories are compelling because at bottom they are about how millions of Americans live. The discussion is nothing less than the re-evaluation of the American Dream after 50 years of living it out with phenomenal success. It boils down to a fundamental question: How many of us can live the good life as we now define it — with ever-larger cars and homes consuming ever greater amounts of resources — before it becomes a high and rising tide of traffic jams, unpleasant landscapes and environmental degradation?

In 1998 the sprawl debate entered the political arena in a major way in the November elections, voters approved about 170 of 240 local and state ballot measures aimed at setting limits on suburban growth. The following January 19 governors mentioned the issues in their inaugural addresses. If you haven't already encountered it in your own work, it is likely that you will see topics around managing growth become major issues in local and state political races. (Story tips: Are candidates taking stances on these "quality of life" issues? Sprawl also is guaranteed to be a topic in the 2000 presidential contest, because Vice President Al Gore is making it a key platform plank in his campaign to be the Democratic nominee. Gore has inserted himself into the fray on his opponents stances to take out their own territory on the issues.

There are a number of reasons why sprawl has leapt to the fore here at the turn of the century. For one, urban areas have spread farther and faster in the 1990s than at any other time in history thanks in large measure to an unprecedented, sustained economic boom. Even metro areas that have not gained much in population have sprawled because of trends in real estate development and the desire of real estate developers to change the political arena to meet their needs. (Story tips: Are changes in zoning policies affecting sprawl in your market? Are local builders interested in the sprawl issue?)

For another, sprawl is an issue that allows political figures to make themselves known by representing the needs and opinions of an entire region. In a developing state like Florida, for example, sprawl is an issue that can break down barriers between competing interest groups. (Story tips: Are local residents and business owners for sprawl? Are environmentalists and land-use advocates against it?)

There are also a number of other reasons sprawl has become a hot issue. For one, sprawl is an issue that can attract a lot of attention — and money — from federal and state officials. (Story tips: Are local officials concerned that sprawl threatens their efforts to control growth?)

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Over the next year, virtually every major national news outlet—from CBS, ABC, and the Economist to National Public Radio, The New York Times and USA Today—ran similar pieces.

Metro Atlanta continued to draw negative attention to itself from federal regulators, environmentalists, and the press by its actions after falling out of air quality compliance. Critics of the Atlanta Department of Transportation and road-hungry suburban governments pushed to “grandfather” dozens of major road projects.

Using a provision designed to protect taxpayers from being stuck with half-finished projects, the agency was able more than an idea. Four environmental groups petitioned to stop work on all but a relative handful of the projects in spring of 1999. The bad press and threatened loss of hundreds of millions in road funds in mid-1998 motivated the region’s fretful business community to convene a summit of business, government and civic leaders to debate solutions to congestion and smog problems. (Story tip: Are empty nesters and young professionals resettling your older neighborhoods and city centers?)

As a result, newly international Atlanta had amassed some world-beating statistics. At nearly 35 miles per person, residents drove more miles each day than motorists anywhere else—43 more per day than those in famously car-centric Los Angeles. When all that extra traffic hit the road at rush hour, 12-mile-long backups were the norm.

At the same time, demographic trends are engendering calls for alternatives to the radical separation of home, work, school, and stores that most Americans now take for granted. (Story tip: Are empty nesters and young professionals resettling your older neighborhoods and city centers?)

Sprawl: A Definition

Sprawl to many people is like pornography. It’s hard to define, but they know it when they see it. Sprawl is associated with rapid suburban growth, but not all growth is sprawl. It’s a pattern of development that puts miles of asphalt between home and work, school and shops and home. It sprawls across farmland and forests into house lots, parking lots and streets, and

Atlanta—A Case Study

Throughout the first two-thirds of the 1990s, metropolitan Atlanta was fixated on one goal: preparing for the world party that was to be the 1996 Olympics. This would be Atlanta’s shining moment on the international stage, and every level of government—federal, state, regional and local—was focused on making sure the city was ready. So focused, in fact, that they all but ignored ominous warnings that metro Atlanta’s growth had spun out of control.

As these automobile-dominated areas have grown, they have tended to spread traffic congestion into the once-tranquil suburbs.
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That Elusive "Quality of Life"

It's hard to resist the allure of life on the fringes of a metropolitan area. Out where land is cheaper, one can buy more house for the dollar, on a large lot that affords plenty of privacy. On the Sunday afternoons when open houses are held for potential homebuyers, traffic-free highways seem to offer a reasonable commute to plentiful jobs. School buildings are new and filled with affluent students of similar backgrounds; parents feel assured their children will thrive in the absence of poor children with less well-educated parents. It's quiet and green out near the undeveloped countryside. Small wonder, then, that most of middle-class America is chasing that dream.

But, as more and more Americans are concluding, the very popularity of the metropolitan edge quickly renders that idyllic scene a mirage. Almost from the moment the moving van leaves, the landscape begins to change. Chain-store shopping centers with darkened shuttering neon signs and vast parking lots pop up on every corner to serve the needs of the newcomers. Traffic backs up on the main roads so that it's hard to get out of the subdivision's single exit. The local school overflows into trailers. A wave mentality develops. Every posting of a rezoning—whether commercial or residential—strikes terror into homeowners' hearts and soon engenders rage.

Although the material quality of life is still quite high, these and other factors begin to degrade the experience of life on the edge from what new residents expect.

Traffic

Ask any so-called soccer mom what would make her life better and she's likely to tell you what one such suburban mother told the Wall Street Journal recently: "Lower the driving age to 10." Even more common than Mom's full-time chaperone are the two-worker households in which Dad navigates traffic hell for 20 miles in one direction while Mom endures a 45-minute commute in the other.

Traffic has always been, and probably always will be, a fact of urban life. But sprawl development patterns are requiring more people to spend more time behind the wheel than ever before, and with fewer alternatives. The typical suburban home has a car for every person of driving age—and often more cars than drivers—and generates 12 trips a day. Those trips have become longer in distance because of the low-density nature of sprawl, and they are becoming longer in time because of congestion and poor urban design.

In 1970, each American traveled an average of 4,485 miles a year. By 1993, that had grown to 6,330 miles, a 41 percent increase. Today, the commute to work accounts for only one and a half hours a day. Today, the commute to work accounts for only one and a half hours a day. In 1996 (the most recent year for which figures are available), congestion cost Americans $74 billion in fuel and time, according to the Texas Transportation Institute, which compiles an annual survey of congestion nationwide.
These day, suburban workers are more likely to be commuting to the adjoining suburban county for work than traveling downtown. Commuting through suburban areas that sprawl for miles can mean heavy duty gridlock. Although nominally arranged for the automobile, when examined closely the American suburb almost looks as though it was intended to produce traffic problems, says Wilbur Klassen, an Orlando-based traffic engineer who is a national advocate for restricting suburban design. In subdivisions, roads don’t connect but end in cul-de-sacs, leaving one way in and one way out. And, the one way out is onto arterial roads clogged with fast food drive-throughs, tube shops, car dealers and big-box retailers, onto the strip everyone must travel to meet their daily needs—or to get anywhere at all. These roads dump onto freeways that in most places have swelled as far as they can safely go.

In large metro areas, transportation engineers have thrown up their hands and declared it all but impossible to build their way out of congestion. Building more roads further outenchures more automobile-dependent demand, and before long, you’re back to where you started. It’s what a Brookings Institution expert, Anthony Downs, calls the “triple convergence principle”: when you widen roads to relieve traffic in a growing metro area, you draw MORE traffic, because: 1) drivers who used an alternate route during peak hour shift to the widened road; 2) drivers who traveled before or after rush hour shift to rush hour; 3) those who took alternative modes such as public transit shift to driving. To make matters worse, thousands of homeowners are now being cut off from one road to another by more different jurisdictions. Their loyalties and attention already thus divided, they then must spend all their waking hours commuting and from work, running errands, dropping off children and standing in long lines to get their mail and newspaper delivered. Not only do roads fill as fast as they’re built, but the political pain required to build them has grown exponentially. Look at this way: When governments first began building freeways through cities, they usually selected the poorest areas where they would encounter the least resistance. In many cases, they were, in fact, selecting gentrification corridors, where the roads are narrow and blacktop, past the point at which the dwindling traffic is too sparse to warrant plucking by the edge of the road. But now to widen highways in the most congested areas means disrupting suburban neighborhoods where the affluent and more politically active live. And the wider metropolitan regions spread, the more neighborhoods must be traversed by ever-widening highways.

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A Lack of Community?

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The anti-sprawl perspective goes like this: Suburban residents “communitarian” are communities in real estate parlance only. Residents who purchase homes in the distant suburbs typically are looking to buy as large a house and lot as they can afford, rather than choosing a community, town or neighborhood. More often than not, residents and facilities are in a jurisdiction and commute to one or another out of necessity when congestion looks dire, only to find that the situation rapidly deteriorates.

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their kids from traffic. The problem is that cul-de-sacs create traffic problems with discontinuous roads, and discourage walking to stores, school or the library by requiring a long circuitous route to the main road which usually doesn’t have sidewalks. They require tons of asphalt. Many urban designers would rather see developers add parks and use narrower streets and other measures to “calm” traffic and ease parents’ fears.

3. Alternative commuting. How many suburban workers in your area car pool, van pool or take other ways to work? Why do they do it, or why don’t they? Are there employer incentives to use alternative modes? Does your area have park and ride lots? High occupancy vehicle lanes? How well are they used, and what are officials doing to lure more? Does anyone offer a guaranteed ride home or prearranged parking for car poolers? How about parking cash-out, the opportunity to take tax-free money instead of a subsidized parking space?

4. Transit in the suburbs. Most suburban areas are extremely hard to serve with transit because they are spread out and intractable. Some suburban areas, such as Montgomery County, Maryland, have had relative success with shorter buses that can navigate subdivision roads. Demonstrate the obsolescence of sprawl present in offering alternatives to the car. Are some suburbs more successful than others in your area at attracting transit riders? What are the plans to introduce buses and trains to suburbs?

5. Profile a suburban family and its travel patterns. Over the course of a week, go with one parent to school, the soccer games and birthday parties, ride with the other parent to work and the stops on the way home. Log the time and the miles traveled, the costs associated with owning and operating the cars. Talk to the kids about how long it takes to travel to school, and to activities and play dates. Put all this into the context of area wide statistics from your regional planning agency.

6. To the phenomenon of road rage associated with sprawl. One national group, the Surface Transportation Policy Project, thinks so, and claims to document it in a recent report on “Aggressive Driving.” This group identified areas where incidents associated with aggressive driving occurred and found that they tended to be higher in areas with low density but high traffic. Next time there’s a serious “road rage” incident in the news, see whether local research can confirm reflexive claims. Notice whether the incident occurs in just such an area.

7. What can your area learn from successes and failures in other cities, counties or metro areas? Portland, for example, chose to expand a major highway in favor of focusing on developing on transit lines. How had city hall in Houston, on the other hand, never met a highway it didn’t like, but now has perhaps the most extensive network of HOV lanes and suburban express buses? Is that a model worth copying?

Schools

1. Overcrowded schools. You see them all the time in the outer suburbs. Brand new schools open with trailers parked in back. How does this happen? Do school system officials coordinate at all with local government that approves developments (almost certainly not, in most cases)? What does this mean for the students and teachers who deal with this environment? How long has the situation lasted at the illustrative schools? What’s the hope for solving the situation?

2. Ability of schools. Profilize two schools, one on the suburban fringes that is rapidly growing another, a closer-in school where demographics are shifting and the student population is stable or in decline. Focus on one or two children in each and the principle and a faculty member of both. Contrast the challenges they face and put them in the context of their geographic location.

3. The school commute. More parents today drive their children to school, particularly in the suburbs, than at any other time in history—and this is in supposedly “safe” areas of the metro region. The number of students and added traffic hassles that parents previously didn’t have to negotiate. Interview parents about why they do it. Is it paranoia, or because kids don’t have sidewalks? Frequently it’s because sprawl development means schools are built on arterial roads far from neighborhoods. Buses can have longer commuting times and traffic congestion.

4. The high costs of new subdivisions. Who pays for the new roads that come with development? Some areas charge impact fees, which developers pay and pass on to homebuyers. But that is the exception. Most states actually subsidize “school sprawl” by contributing a large share to local systems for new construction. Frequently, though, jurisdictions must raise property taxes or pass special levies to come up with enough money quickly—practically residents subsidizing sprawl. Could this be avoided with more orderly growth?

5. Environmental costs.

Environmentalists fear that the huge reductions in pollution from smokestacks and tailpipes over the last 30 years are in many ways being offset by the escalating rate at which people are driving. Watersheds are being paved, forests and farmland carved into lawns. The endless miles of new roads, required to open land to sprawl, blur natural areas and leave wildlife stranded on shrinking islands of suitable habitat. Predicated growth trends have serious implications for the quality of the nation’s air, water and land, environmental experts say.

Air

The nearly 30-year effort to clean up America’s air is a good news, bad news story. The good news is that the toxic fumes that once spewed forth from the nation’s smoke-stacks and factories and pounded the lungs of millions each day have been reduced by 30 percent. Cars today emit 70 to 90 percent fewer pollutants than the cars of a few decades ago.

The bad news is that the easy cuts have been made, and the gains are beginning to be eroded. The numbers tell a cautionary tale on auto manufacturers, though they are not completely off the hook, and more on the cumulative behavior of millions of individuals. Sprawl development patterns that require more driving, to say nothing of maintenance requirements of large subdivision lots, are making it extremely difficult to continue improvements in air quality, environmental officials say. As noted in the chapter on traffic, the number of miles driven by each vehicle has growing rapidly, at the total number of miles driven by vehicles. In rapidly sprawl metro Atlanta, the total number of miles driven for all purposes each day grew 20 percent from 1982 to 1996. Dallas, which already was in sprawl in the early 1990s, saw its total miles increase 50 percent in the same period. In both places, the total miles driven each day in 1990 would stretch the 59 million miles to the sun and begin the journey back to Earth. While the U.S. population grew by 25 percent from 1960 to 1990, the number of car trips per person surged 42 percent and the miles driven per person increased 36 percent, according to a 1994 report by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Perhaps because of the distances they must cover and the time they spend doing it, motorists are opting for roomier, but higher-polluting vehicles. Take for example the phenomenon of sport utility vehicles, minivans and other heavy-wielded vehicles cluttered in “truck-like” ones. These new account for nearly half the vehicles on the United States, but their contributions to pollution and fuel consumption are even greater. Regulations from the 1970s exempt trucks, vans and SUVs from the fuel efficiency and pollution requirements for passenger cars because they were assumed to be far for people to live by themselves and not rely on transit or other means of transportation. As a result, the number of miles driven has continued to increase, leading to more pollution and congestion. This has implications for the quality of the nation’s air, water and land, environmental experts say.
work vehicles for farmers and tradesmen. As a result, automakers with a large share of SUVs and vans today can sell a fleet that is only 75 percent as fuel-efficient as one made up of passenger cars. Some vehicles, such as the Chevrolet Suburban and the Ford Expedition, are so heavy that they are exempt altogether from the rule for light vehicles. Depending on their weight, SUVs can exceed cars by two to three times in their emissions of nitrogen oxides, a principal component of smog. With growing numbers of these vehicles driving more and more miles each year, the EPA projects they will begin to offset many of the gains from improved technology. After many years of steady decline, automobile emissions will begin to pick up again after 2005. That’s one reason the EPA has issued proposed new rules that would require heavier vehicles to meet the same standards as cars. But there will be a long time before down SUs and minivans become the norm automakers would have until 2007 to phase them in for the heaviest vehicles under EPA’s proposal of spring 1999. These trends will make it especially difficult to reverse lingering air pollution problems. Transportation uses of all sorts account for about a third of U.S. emissions of carbon dioxide, the fuel-efficiency transatlantic-dependent, but for even more vehicles as well. In other words, in areas where urban amenities are close at hand, walking is pleasant and alternatives are available, even more rural residents tend to drive, and thus pollution levels.

Changing Standards: An Important, Changing Story

- The EPA’s current health-based standards say an area cannot exceed 120 parts per billion of ozone for any one-hour period.
- In June 1998, EPA adopted a new standard that says an area may not exceed an average of 80 parts per billion over an eight-hour period. (Areas that were in violation of the existing standard must meet that one first; EPA will then give them a timetable to meet the new standards.)
- The EPA was ordered to update the standard after environmentalists won a lawsuit to force them to do so.
- The new standard is based on the theory that prolonged exposure even to lower levels of ozone is more harmful than brief exposure to high levels.
- In July of 2000, EPA will designate areas that are in violation of the new, 8-hour standards. (Such jurisdictions are called “non-attainment” areas.) EPA will base that on an average of ozone violations for 1997, 1998 and 1999.

Ground-level ozone, a principal component of smog that can literally singe the lungs, has been the most hard-to-control air pollution problem in the United States, according to the EPA. Because it forms in warm sunlight, it is primarily a summertime problem, but can crop up in affected areas anytime between April and October.

Key Facts about Ozone.

- Ground-level ozone is good, because it helps filter out harmful ultraviolet rays. But it is not meant to be breathed by humans, animals, and plants, and it is damaging to all three at ground level. Ozone is a molecule made of three oxygen atoms linked together. By itself it is odorless and colorless. It is not emitted from smokestacks and tailpipes, but forms from pollutants emitted by them. The pollutants, volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides, combine in the presence of sunlight and stagnant air to form ozone. Mix in sooty particles known as particulates and you have smog.
- Ozone is a severe irritant that can cause choking, coughing, and stinging eyes. It damages lung tissue, aggravates respiratory disease, and makes people more susceptible to respiratory infections.
- Children and the elderly are especially vulnerable to ozone’s harmful effects, as are people with asthma and other lung and heart ailments. People who exercise on high-ozone days may actually be damaging their lungs by breathing polluted air. Ozone also inhibits plant growth and can cause widespread damage to crops and forests.

Ozone Smog

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areas were less than half as dense, but covered several times more territory. Suburbs built since 1960 have an average of 50,000 acres per square mile. Throughout the nation, where sprawling suburbanization is a major problem, the Farmland Trust has calculated that about 400,000 acres of “prime farmland” were lost to development from 1982 to 1992. There is debate over just how serious a problem over-development that can endanger the quality and sufficient supply of water? What are the measures in place to prevent over-development that can endanger the quality and sufficient supply of water? What are the measures to protect them? Who owns them? Is development headed their way?

1. Profile a child with asthma and his family on a day when ozone is forecast to be high. Many children with asthma are kept indoors and not allowed outside on those bright, sunny summer days.

2. Spend a high-ozone day or two in an emergency room to chronicle how doctors respond to increased cases of asthma and other ailments.

3. Many summer-time athletic leagues for adults and children hold matches in the late afternoon when ozone is worst; likefoss for joggers. People who think they are doing the healthy thing may be harming themselves. Interview the league organizers, athletes and parents, as well as public health emergencies for piece on the ironies—and dangers—here.

4. Is your area in violation of ozone standards? If not, how likely is your county to be labeled nonattaining next year? Check with the air pollution officials in your state environmental protection agency.

5. Most of your audience probably visit areas that are degraded by sprawl and ripe for reclamation. What simple measures such as filling up cars after dark, putting off mowing on ozone alert days and other actions can help the ozone problems. Create a feature piece on these steps everyone can take.

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1. Profile a city with asthma and his family on a day when ozone is forecast to be high. Many children with asthma are kept indoors and not allowed outside on those bright, sunny summer days.

2. Spend a high-ozone day or two in an emergency room to chronicle how doctors respond to increased cases of asthma and other ailments.

3. Many summer-time athletic leagues for adults and children hold matches in the late afternoon when ozone is worst; likefoss for joggers. People who think they are doing the healthy thing may be harming themselves. Interview the league organizers, athletes and parents, as well as public health emergencies for piece on the ironies—and dangers—here.

4. Is your area in violation of ozone standards? If not, how likely is your county to be labeled nonattaining next year? Check with the air pollution officials in your state environmental protection agency.

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Land

1. Most metro areas have landscapes, forests, topographical features and other natural and pastoral lands that are regarded by many as regional treasures. Frequently we don’t talk about them until they are threatened.

2. Profile a major, high-profile development project in your area. The American Farmland Trust has calculated that about 400,000 acres of “prime farmland” were lost to development from 1982 to 1992. The Farmland Trust is concerned about important segments of the country’s supply, especially in the far west and in eastern agricultural areas. The Trust is working to develop a “prime farmland” program that will identify and protect these lands.

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ECONOMIC COSTS

The economic ramifications of rapid, land-intensive, low-density growth provide perhaps the most contentious and confusing debate in the sprawl discussion. The real estate, construction and commercial enterprises that profit from turning cheap land at the fringes into homes, offices and shopping centers are such a large part of the economy that the market is perceived as the will of the market, another claims the market forces behind sprawl were perverted long ago by government policies.

Among serious analysts of the subject, the pessimists appear to be winning more converts. They worry that sprawl is a profoundly inefficient use of resources that, while the boom won't always be a guaranteed fact of life. And some metro areas are beginning to worry that, as Newsweek magazine put it, there will come a "point at which each new subdivision subtracts more from the quality of life than the new inhabitants will contribute to the economy."

Sprawl and Taxes. A growing body of research does appear to indicate that sprawl-style development costs taxpayers more than more traditional, pre-war development patterns. Local governments frequently make the argument that they need the new development. Highways, expanded sewer and water systems to foster development in order to expand the tax base. But in almost every case, the cost of these systems is so profligate that development causes a growing tax burden, not a declining one.

The former Congressional Office of Technology Assessment estimated that sprawl development raises infrastructure costs as much as 20 percent. That's largely because sprawl development requires more miles of asphalt, water and sewer lines and school bus routes per dwelling than does denser development. Most of the extra costs are borne not by businesses or households in the newly developed areas but by local and state taxpayers in already-developed areas, which directly or indirectly subsidize infrastructure development on the fringes. This makes sprawl worse, by making it cheaper and easier to develop new areas than to redevelop or finish developing existing ones.

In Phoenix, one study determined that the city and Maricopa County subsidize new suburban development at the rate of $12,000 per dwelling unit. This is in line with findings as early as the 1990s by a federal commission report called "The Costs of Sprawl," which concluded that highway, low-density growth was significantly more expensive than higher-density development. In the 1990s, a research team at Rutgers University led by Robert Church found that by planning where, when and at what density new growth occurs, New Jersey could have saved $1.79 billion in 1998 dollars between 1990 and 2030. Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening, in developing his Smart Growth program aimed at containing sprawl, noted that, "Every new classroom costs $50,000. Every mile of new sewer line costs roughly $200,000. And every single lane of new road costs at least $14 million." Those costs, he noted, are paid not by developers, but by taxpayers throughout the region and state.

When rapidly developing counties are spending hand over fist for new school buildings, roads and sewage treatment plants, existing schools usually are languishing, the existing road network must struggle to keep the traffic out of sediment. This is to say anything of libraries, recreational facilities and parks. Rather, often than raise taxes to pay for the go, governments resort to debt financing. Fast-growing Howard County MD saw its debt triple from $200 million to $694 million from 1987 to 2007, or $1,660 per resident, the Baltimore Sun reported. Loudoun County VA saw debt-service climb from 3 percent of its budget in 1990 to 31 percent in 1999.

It pays big to wonder, then, that tax revenues have become commonplace in affluent suburbs. Homebuyers are lured to the fringes where taxes are low, traffic is light and the view is green, only find the situation changing the moment they doze on the house. It typically is not until later that taxpayers realize their services are not what they might have expected. Still taxes go up every year, but the money goes not to enhancing existing communities, but to helping the way for new development, which in turn increases the local setting. Many fast-growing counties fail not only to raise property taxes, but also to levy taxes and fees for the required infrastructure. It may be the dashed expectations of low taxes and high services as much as the tax burden itself that causes the furor.

Inner Suburban and Central City Decay. Meanwhile, taxpayers elsewhere in the metropolitan region are truly getting the short end of the stick, argues Myron Orfield, a Minnesota state legislator who has become a leading expert in the area.

The urban decline long associated with the "inner city" has not stopped at the city limits. The outward flow of middle-class residents to the suburban frontier has left behind a decaying older suburbs. Many of these were the working-class suburbs that developed in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. These areas may be in even worse trouble than older neighborhoods in the cities, because their small ranch houses and poorly built apartment complexes are not as appealing to renovators as newer housing stock.

Image and the Local Economy. The argument made by environmentalists, and now even some businessmen, is that the sprawl phenomenon tends to spread the negatives of poorly managed growth—e.g., congestion, water and air pollution—over farther while sucking the life out of existing areas. The theory is that at some point, in our fairly mobile economy a metro area can become perceived as a place where the negatives outweigh the positives, to the local economy's detriment.

The Jobs, Labor and Housing Mismatch. As many local governments have come to realize, new subdivisions are not just for tax revenue, but they cost more in infrastructure, schools and services than they deliver to local coffers. Increasingly local governments are counting commercial development and jobs, and buying up barriers to all but the most exclusive new housing. This presents a quandary. The inner suburbs on the fringes in many cases are getting a large share of a metropolitan region's jobs, but not to the workers going with them. Only executives can afford to live near the office. This creates several negative spin-offs.

The phenomenon is one reason the suburb-to-suburb commute has become so common, and so mind-bogglingly difficult in many places. When workers can't afford housing in the city by their employers. Worsening traffic becomes a problem, because the jobs and workers are so dispersed. It's difficult to provide a mass transit system or even a road network, that can transport commuters without making every commute one that involves endless traffic jams. And in a suburban employment centers have bogged down with traffic, bosses have decided to move their offices farther out, where traffic is still light.

At the jobs move farther away, what's a volunteer neither
1. The next time a developer proposes a major subdivision in your area, ask local government officials to tally the costs to provide infrastructure, schools and services and to determine the anticipated tax revenues. You may be surprised to learn that the local government does not do this basic cost accounting. Some localities assess impact fees, but do those fees actually go toward the full costs of each development? Get reactions to your findings from the developer, local officials and neighbors of the proposed development.

2. To illustrate the mismatch between where low-wage jobs are and where the workers are, profile a retail or fast-food worker who commutes from the central city to the suburbs. Shadow your subject to and from work. Why does your subject endure this? Figure out her real wages per hour: From her actual wages, subtract the costs of commuting, daycare and other work-related expenses; then divide the remainder by the time it takes to get to and from work and complete a shift.

3. Track the trends in taxes paid per homeowner in your fast-developing suburbs. Compare actual tax bills of several residents from five years ago to the present. Then add in any sales or gas taxes that have been levied since then, and any increases in water, sewer, garbage fees. Try to determine how much of the money is going to support new development, and how much to improving services. Try to compare service levels of your homeowners from the same earlier tax bill to the present: are schools more or less crowded, have police and fire protection improved, are there more recreational programs, does the library have more books. The results ought to provide lively interviews with taxpayers and local officials.

4. The next time a large employer makes the decision to relocate to newly developing suburbs, interview the decision-making executive(s) about the choice. How the survey: where their workers are commuting to and from and are they aware of how the move will affect workers’ commuting times? What makes them believe traffic problems won’t follow them to their new locale? Why not move downtown, or to a transit station? Where do the executives live? Are they moving the office closer to their own homes? Follow up with interviews with employees.

5. Profile an inner-ring, post-war suburb that has gone through a demographic transition. Who lives there now? How many of the original settlers and their children are still there? Interview residents who remain, as well as newcomers. Where did the old residents move? One usually finds that they moved outward in the same direction that is, a southside suburb’s residents tend to move farther south. What has become of the housing stock, the churches, and the schools over time? How do median incomes, numbers of students on free or reduced lunch compare with the past? How likely is a resurgence of the area?

**STORY IDEAS**

Go On To Next File: "URBAN SPRAWL B"
WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE
CHAPTER 5

OTHER VIEWS ON SMART GROWTH

George Will
From Newsweek, Feb. 15, 1999—Al Gore Has a New Worry: ‘Smart growth’ to cure ‘suburban sprawl’ is the newest rationale for government growth

“Seventy-five percent more families live in suburbs than in cities because they like using the freedom conferred by the automobile to make their habits in low-density suburban communities. Professors of growth management acknowledge that while many Americans profess to dislike sprawl, the alternatives may not go down easily. The ULI recognized this in its 1998 “Smart Growth” report: “Building housing at higher densities may prove to be the most important tactic in achieving the goal of more compact development, but higher density housing may be the toughest sell in both marketing and policy terms.” Developers throughout the country have met intense resistance from local jurisdictions to multi-family housing, infill development and even small-lot subdivisions.

Rather than isolated subdivisions, office parks and shopping centers, they call for traditional urban neighborhoods that embrace all those elements. The ideal density and mix of development as much as possible by filling in already developed areas, from vacant lots to underused parking lots, mining land uses such as shopping, offices, rental and for-sale housing, building walkable nodules of density to make transit service viable, a careful phasing in of new infrastructure according to a community-supported development plan, and requiring new development in the exurbs to truly pay for itself.

Smart growth advocates ask to answer a simple question: How can cities and suburbs grow in population while avoiding the negative consequences both of sprawl and poorly planned density? Here Comes the Neighborhood: The New Urbanists

New urbanists have captured the imaginations of local officials and developers, and increasing numbers of homebuyers, by designing neighborhoods with pocket parks and narrower streets. Groups that open diversity onto back alleys, front porches to encourage interaction and “granny flats” behind the houses to add diversity and provide rental income to homeowners. Adherents also reject decades in favor of sidewalk-lined streets that interconnect to make walking easier and allow for multiple driving routes.

The sprawl development pattern is so firmly entrenched in the American economy and mindset that it can be difficult to see anything but the inevitable. Indeed, for many years the civic activists, academics and environmentalists who clamored for an alternative were pronounced by local officials and developers as either anti-growth or anti-capitalist. But, growing concern over the negative associated with sprawl in recent years has led even some chambers of commerce and many developers to call for new approaches to managing growth. They have joined a growing chorus advocating “smart growth.”

Nebulous as the term is, smart growth has become a rather large tent. Not only do the Sierra Club, American Farmland Trust and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency endorse the approach, but even the Urban Land Institute (ULI)—a national association of developers—and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) have issued position papers touting their own versions of smart growth.

Although different groups emphasize various aspects, all begin by protesting that they are not asking for “no growth” or even “slow growth,” but for “better-planned growth.” Most end up calling for what amounts to a return to traditional, town-based development that relies less on car travel. The stress is in existing central cities and inner suburbs over undeveloped areas, accommodating new development as much as possible by filling in already developed areas, from vacant lots to underused parking lots, mining land uses such as shopping, offices, rental and for-sale housing, building walkable nodules of density to make transit service viable, a careful phasing in of new infrastructure according to a community-supported development plan, and requiring new development in the exurbs to truly pay for itself.

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of uses for neighborhoods, they say, can be found in the streetcar suburbs of the 1920s or before, which were built around parks or squares, contained a mix of houses and small commercial buildings, and were within walking distance of a shopping district. For large urban centers, their reference is Main Street before the malls: downtowns that saw life after dark thanks to apartments over shops that induced walking with wide sidewalks, street trees, and a variety of lighting fixtures, where buildings adjacent to sidewalks formed an “outdoor room” rather than lurking across baring areas of asphalt. While they do not single story box common to suburban architecture, new urbanists also eschew massive high-rises, preferring lower buildings that evoke a more “human scale.”

The new urbanists adhere to a charter that proclaims: “Neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible open spaces; and neighborhood institutions, urban places should be financed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology and building practices.” The Congreso para el Nuevo Urbanismo (CNU), the group’s official organization, in 2000 had over 5,000 members, including architects, planners, landscape architects, developers, activists, elected officials and others. The group’s influence was beginning to be felt on the local level, where some city councils were adopting new urbanist-inspired development codes; to the federal level, with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development re-developing housing projects according to new urbanist principles under a program known as HOPE VI.

Perhaps best known among the leading new urbanists are architect-planners Andres Duany (pronounced DWAH-nee) and his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, of Miami and Peter Calthorpe of San Francisco. Duany and Raker-Zyberk began designing what they called traditional neighborhood developments (TNDs) in the 1980s. They gained notoriety when their firm designed Seaside, Florida, for developer Robert Davis on 30 acres he owned on the Gulf of Mexico. Although it is not actual development, Seaside became a model for urban designers because it resurrected and added its own twist to the lost art of town building that had been common in the Southeast. Its Disneyesque overtones made it an apt backdrop for the too-perfect title of the protagonist of the film “The Truman Show” and it inspired Disney’s own foray into new urbanist development, the new neighborhood of Celebration, Florida. For Duany, the neighborhood is the essential building block of cities and metropolitan regions. In talks around the county, he emphasizes that the ideal neighborhood is roughly 160 acres wide, with a distinct center, such as a square or civic plaza that is no more than a fifteen-minute walk from any part and that should be served by mass transit. He began advocating what he called pedestrian networks, and later, transit-oriented development (TOD). An alternative to outward sprawl along highways, Calthorpe advocates using mass transit lines—primarily rail—as the skeleton upon which metro areas grow by focusing development in towns like nodes around stations. To make mass transit convenient and comfortable, the nodes have to be compact and walkable, he says. “No one likes to arrive at work without a car. If they cannot walk comfortably from transit to their destination or run a mid-day errand on foot, it’s impossible,” he writes in his 2003 book, “The Next American Metropolis.” “To demand that they be built with every facility within walking distance, allowing trips to be combined, is to demand that the neighborhood be built around a train stop. The most successful ones contain housing for all phases of life and for various income levels, as well as shops and services to meet residents’ daily needs. Cities, he says, should grow by adding one contiguous neighborhood at a time.

New urbanists put too much faith in the ability of the physical design of cities to cure social ills and restore community.

Top Criticisms of New Urbanism

Responses by James Howard Kunstler, new urbanist and author of “Home from Nowhere”

1. While they may be more aesthetically pleasing than others may, new urbanist developments on the fringes of metropolitan areas still despoil rural land and require automobile use. These "greenfield" projects are just sprawl by another name.

Kunstler: I believe it’s necessary to think of the first crop of New Urbanist greenfield projects as “transitional forms.” They are being built in a culture that barely tolerates any distance from the supposed “market ideal” of a conventional housing pool with all that implies. Projects like Kentlands (designed by Duany in Gaithersburg, Maryland) faced practical obstacles of the most formidable kind, in obtaining permits, getting financing, and overcoming the slowly habits and practices of the construction trade. In virtually every case, the original plans were savagely compromised. The result: the 1990s Traditional Neighborhood Development, a weird hybrid that chiefly demonstrates that it is possible to build a better everyday environment in new construction than what has been the suburban norm in decades past. Designers like Duh and Calitcoll have had to endure tremendous disappointment and even embarrassment as a consequence. I would describe this whole period of New Urbanist work as a demonstration project, a hint of what’s to come (if we’re lucky).

2. New urbanists put too much faith in the ability of the physical design of cities to cure social ills and restore community.

Kunstler: Many New Urbanists are simply brave Realists who don’t pretend to be able to solve all the abiding problems of human character by way of physical design. Rather than pretending to “cure poverty,” for instance, the New Urbanists accept the fact that some people will always have less money or power than other people—but that nonetheless accommodate and must be made for them in the human ecology. Personally, I think the idea that porches and proximity make people more convivial with their neighbors is fallacious. My experience is just the opposite—that people con-
GROWTH MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

CHAPTER 6

Growth Boundaries and Metro Government: The Portland Experience

No other major metropolitan area in the country has practiced growth management for as long as Portland, Oregon. Because of its status as something of a national laboratory for smart growth principles, it has become both a cause celebre for proponents and a whipping boy for doubters.

The Portland experiment began in 1973, when then-Gov. Tom McCall, a Republican, worked to pass statewide planning and growth management laws. Their greatest support...that line, urban services such as water and sewer were not to be extended and zoning would be very large-lot agricultural.

Portland's UGB encompasses 24 cities and parts of three counties, about 200,000 acres in all, with a population of about 1.3 million. The boundary is set and maintained by the nation's only directly elected metro-wide government, known as Metro. Metro is governed by a seven-member council elected by districts and an executive, elected at large, who sets the overall planning goals for the region and consents with member governments to allocate resources, affordable housing and other aspects of urban growth among themselves.

At the same time the growth boundary was implemented, the city of Portland adopted a series of dramatic measures designed to keep the urban focus on its downtown. The city invested heavily in streetcar improvements and offered incentives for employers and retailers to locate downtown. The encore use of mass transit and smart zoning, the city put a cap on the amount of parking downtown. Portland tore out a freeway, alongside its waterfront and turned it into a park. City and state leaders decided to forego federal funds for a commuter freeway and instead won the right to use the money to build a light rail line. Light rail—so-called because it tends to carry fewer passengers per hour than its rapid rail cousin—operates like a streetcar in the downtown and is based on its own right-of-way in less developed areas.

The combination of light rail and investment in downtown produced dramatic results. Portland is one of very few American cities that can claim a vibrant, 24-hour downtown that remains the center of economic and cultural activity for the region. The central business district has drawn $300 million in new jobs, and over 40 percent of downtown workers commute by transit, far above the national average.

The UGB, first established in the late 1970s, was designed to accommodate 20 years of growth. But when the time came to expand it in the late 1990s, the notion of holding the line against suburban sprawl was so popular that Metro decided to expand by only a few thousand acres. In 1997, Metro adopted a 40-year plan that projected a one million-person increase in population by 2040 but called for only a 6 percent increase in the boundary.

Many observers maintain that the UGB has held as long as it has because Oregon endured a prolonged recession through the 1980s, and the region had little growth to absorb. In the 1990s, Portland has grown rapidly, attracting jobs and residents from surrounding California in the middle of the decade and establishing itself as its own right as a high-tech employment center, dubbed Silicon Forest. Instead, executives with companies such as Nike, Hewlett-Packard and Intel say they chose Portland precisely because of the high quality urban life and well-preserved natural landscape that come with its growth management practices.

Critics often note that the development in suburban areas outside the city of Portland is initiated by the auto-centric sprawl on the fringes of other metro areas. Metro planners would agree, but their 2000 Plan calls for something different. It identifies several areas that are expected to absorb a large share of the region's growth. Development is to focus along a much-expanded light rail system.

And here controversy arises. While polls show most metro residents support holding the UGB line, many neighborhood boards have balked at the increased densities they also absorb. In another attack for Metro plan, voters in 1998 declined to approve funding for a north-south light rail line, despite similar support. Arrests at通车, homeowners have the authority to continue to grow. The regional Home Builders Association, despite claims that the boundaries have made developable land more scarce and thus more expensive, the National Home Builders Association in 2001 proclaimed Portland the fifth most affordable area in the country. UGB supporters, such as the advocacy group 10,000 Friends of Oregon, have做过 their own studies concluding that developing affordability has not meant more done with demand keeping the addition of new housing than with the boundary, they note that similar rates of price increases are in fast-growing Denver and Atlanta, rather than have real constraints on their sprawl.

As planning advocates nationwide watch to see how Portland copes with its challenges, several states are emulating the Portland model to limit urban sprawl, whether by limiting the extension of services or through a greenbelt of preserved land around the city.

Contacts:
Portland Metro, 503-797-1700; Web site: www.metro.gov.
Oregon Dept. of Land Conservation & Development, Salem; 503-373-0060; Web site: www.lcd.state.or.us.

Maryland’s Smart Growth Programs

In Maryland, Gov. Parris Glendening, a Democrat, has taken a different approach from that of Portland. In his efforts to contain sprawl, he decided to use state money to improve existing cities, preserve the rural landscape and protect the environment.

"Why should we spend hundreds of millions of dollars," asks Glendening, "to build new schools, and new sewers and new roads to accommodate sprawl, instead of spending less money to hold communities together that are being abandoned? The answer is..." The governor’s Smart Growth Legislation creates a Rural Legacy Program which uses money from state sales and bond sales to protect farmland, forests and other important natural areas either by outright purchase or purchase of the development rights to the land. In addition, it also provides a Job Creation Tax Credit to employers who locate more than 25 jobs in priority funding areas. Also New Work programs provide grants of $3,000 or more to buyers near an employer’s workplace, provides the employer with a gift certificate for matching the state’s grant. Smart Growth measures also obligate the state to focus its own operations and investments in priority areas.

An innovative approach that has been emulated in some way by other states, including Colorado and Georgia, Maryland’s Smart Growth program nonetheless is not as strong as it might be, critics complain. Understanding its ability to deter sprawl, the program does not affect funding for...
...is not mandatory, but is intended as a policy guide. Under state law arising from a 1980s New Jersey Supreme Court decision, every municipality also must provide its fair share of affordable housing according to a regional plan.

To illustrate obstacles to the “smart growth” approach, tell the tale of how a new cul-de-sac subdivision on the rural fringes came to be there. If the plan must identify urban growth boundaries for each municipality within the county and identify planned growth areas and rural areas within the county, the coordinating committee has until January 5, 2000, to submit their plans.

Contact: Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, 1-800-888-8532.

WASHINGTON. In 1990 the state passed the Growth Management Act (GMA), aimed at preserving the state’s environment and quality of life. Retained after Oregon’s “The act requires local governments to draw urban growth boundaries beyond which new areas must not sprawl. Washington is one of only three states with such a requirement, along with Oregon, and New Jersey. Local governments that fail to make such plans lose eligibility for state infrastructure grants and loans.

Contact: Friends of Washington, a watchdog group established to monitor the law’s implementation at (206) 343-0683; web site: www.1000friends.org.

COLORADO. In 1995, Governor Roy Romer (Democrat) began a Smart Growth Initiative, an effort by his administration to address traffic congestion, sprawl, and air and water quality concerns in Colorado. In April 1999, the Colorado Legislature failed to pass several measures aimed at managing growth. The “Responsible Growth Act” would have encouraged development in areas that already have public services and services, allow local communities to designate urban growth areas and limit new development only to the designated areas, and all cities and counties in Colorado. An effort is underway to put growth management on the ballot for 2000.

Contact: Smart Growth Action Center, (303) 866-2353; Web site: www.smartgrowth.org.

FINDING IDEAS

1. Is there support for “smart growth” in your area? Take the pulse of your community on growth issues. Are things about right, out of hand in people’s minds?

2. To illustrate obstacles to the “smart growth” approach, tell the tale of how a new cul-de-sac subdivision on the rural fringes came to be there. If the landowner sells? Choices are: local government had to reassess agricultural land for it; why did they do it? Are taxpayers inordinately subsidizing such development by paying for roads to extend water and sewer services to the subdivision? Is the former landowner, the developer, the county, or city planning staff, elected officials, residents of the subdivision. Why are they there, and how far from them that they were calling sprawl?

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4. Examine a typical cul-de-sac subdivision through the eyes of a new urbanist. It would be helpful to have a chairman or urban designer who practices new urbanism to offer his critique; a good reporter could contrast... oversized front lawns, etc. Be prepared to show examples of the traditional neighborhood design new urbanists prefer.

5. The acceptance of new urbanist development in your community. Has anyone tried it; what were the results? Talk to real estate experts in your area and nationally about what their view of the market for traditional-style neighborhoods. What sort of buyer loves them? Can they have local government officials heard of new urbanism, appraised or discussed such developments? Do housing advocates them, or make them difficult or impossible? Often, the proposed densities and kinds of housing types brings out opponents from nearby single-family subdivisions. How about lending institutions? Are they wary of these unconventional projects?

6. To illustrate obstacles to the “smart growth” approach, tell the tale of how a new cul-de-sac subdivision on the rural fringes came to be there. If the landowner sells? Choices are: local government had to reassess agricultural land for it; why did they do it? Are taxpayers inordinately subsidizing such development by paying for roads to extend water and sewer services to the subdivision? Is the former landowner, the developer, the county, or city planning staff, elected officials, residents of the subdivision. Why are they there, and how far from them that they were calling sprawl?

7. Rethinking parking lots. Smart growth advocates say parking lots should go off buildings, which should be brought up to the level of land use; this creates a more pleasant streetscape, and makes use transit to get to shops. Most local jurisdictions, and the banks that finance such projects, have...ENCOUNTERED, and whether they would do it again. Interview other developers who work on the fringes about why they don’t do in-town projects. Get reactions from local officials, chamber of Commerce experts, and bankers to those different ideas about parking lots. What about setting limits on the amount of parking included to encourage walking and alternative modes; most lots aren’t full even on the busiest Christmas shopping day. Get reactions from local officials, merchants, and bankers to those different ideas about parking lots. Has any jurisdiction in your area required parking lots to be behind buildings or set limits on parking in areas served by transit? With what results?

10. Rethinking “edge city.” Most large metro areas have suburban concentrations of commercial activity—usually at the intersection of major highways—which have been called edge cities. What would take to make these areas more walkable, bikeable, transit-accessible? The edges of edge cities are intersections of...atrium style, to fit in with the surrounding buildings. Get reactions from local officials, merchants, and bankers to those different ideas about parking lots. Has any jurisdiction in your area required parking lots to be behind buildings or set limits on parking in areas served by transit? With what results?

...
wrote the book "Edge Cities," about his belief that this con-
version is the future of these areas.
9. Conservation subdivisions. The notion of trading
smaller lots for a commonly held natural preserve or pic-
tureque farm would seem to be appealing to many.
However, many developers have struggled mightily to get
approval to do this from local governments, or from neigh-
bors who believe the smaller lots will hurt their property
values. Still, some have been successful. What's the experi-
ence in your area? Track the next such proposal and see
how it fares. If there is an existing conservation subdivision
in your area, profile it to see how it's working, whether
common use of the area works, how residents like it, what
has really happened to neighboring property values.
10. Profile a maverick developer. Follow a developer
who is trying to use smart growth or new urbanist prin-
ciples in his work as he moves through the approval
process. Go with her to the developer's offices, the emotional
meaning hearing, the conversation with the bank, the banker
(or try to get interviews after the fact). Why is she
doing this? Does she expect the development to be more
profitable? What's the outcome for this project?
11. Why are apartments the objects of fear and
loathing? Even as the buildings face the need to call them
"apartment homes," as though apartments could be some-
thing else. Apartment projects are so realistic that some
jurisdictions have imposed mandatory fees on them. A 1999
poll by the National Association of Home Builders found
that 78 percent of respondents opposed to multi-family apart-
ment buildings in their neighborhoods. It hasn't always
been this way. Some opponents of apartments argue that as
complexes have gotten bigger, and as tax laws have changed
to make it financially more rewarding to let them go to pot,
they have tended to attract lower-income residents and
crime. Even " upscale" complexes are often opposed, how-
ever, by neighbors who say they will overrun the schools
and lower property values. See if you can sort out
fact and myth where apartments are concerned.
12. "Reverse mover" profile. We're all familiar with
the flight of residents from close-in areas to the fringes.
Increasingly, though, cities are seeing movement of thosetired
who are trying to use smart growth or new urbanist prin-
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crime. Even " upscale" complexes are often opposed, how-
ever, by neighbors who say they will overrun the schools
and lower property values. See if you can sort out
fact and myth where apartments are concerned.
14. Revitalization and gentrification. One per-
son's gentrification is another person's displacement of
low-income residents. In some communities, existing resi-
dents' opposition to gentrification is in itself an obstacle to
the urban revitalization touted by smart growthers. Tell this
story by profiling one or more neighborhoods that are
going or have gone through this. Interview those who have
come and new residents and those who found their rental
housing gouging landlord. Discuss the tensions, but don't
depict this as the only or likely outcome. What's the
future of your subject neighborhoods, and what is the
likely future, in an all-white enclave, or one of the region's
few integrated neighborhoods?
15. Where agendas collide: The politics of growth
management. Who is arguing for growth management
legislation in your area? Who opposes them? Why? Who are
the key players and what are the key interests at stake?
Make an example of an important suburban county com-
missioner or city councilor. When he or she was pressing
for money to run for office, the real estate interests
were most likely to come through. But to get votes, they
probably had to promise to block this or that development
project opposed by angry homeowners. The remaining
farmers are split between those who want to contain the
suburbanites and those who want to sell the farm and cash in.
Can these conflicting interests be reconciled?
CAUSES OF SPRAWL

The debate over the causes of sprawl usually finds participants breaking into two camps: those who believe sprawl occurs because “it’s what the market demands,” and those who contend it has become the norm thanks to government policies that support and subsidize suburban growth. As in most such controversies, there likely is some truth to both arguments.

Decisions about how land is used in most cases fall to local governments, but the federal government has had a large, if unseen, hand in shaping development patterns. Whether consciously or not—and it seems it has been both—suburbanization has been the de facto policy of the federal government, at least since the post-Depression era of the 1930s. States and local governments followed suit, with zoning and design codes that enshrined low-density sprawl as the model for development.

THE FEDERAL ROLE

Housing. It arguably began when the Roosevelt Administration created the Federal Housing Administration under the National Housing Act of 1934. The FHA was charged with expanding home ownership among middle class Americans by guaranteeing low-interest mortgages. From the beginning, FHA policies were designed to lure families out of rental homes in the Depression-battered cities and into new single-family homes in the suburbs. FHA underwriting criteria overwhelmingly favored those environments. In its early days, FHA also practiced “redlining,” putting different poorer city neighborhoods, especially those with high minority populations, which were regarded as a bad business risk.

The subvention process was accelerated after World War II, when the “GI Bill of Rights” allowed the Veterans Administration to offer low-cost loans to millions of former service men and women. By the 1960s, the FHA and VA were making their customers—mostly white working and middle class families—an irresistible offer. FHA was requiring only a 5 percent down payment for a stability new home in the suburbs, while the VA offered none at all. Within a decade following World War II, FHA and VA were insuring half the mortgages in the country.

The post-war era also saw the rise of federally created corporations to support the secondary mortgage market, known as Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and Ginnie Mae. These government-sponsored enterprises dramatically expanded the availability of mortgage money for single family homes, which by their nature were most likely to be built on cheap, available land in the suburbs.

The federal treasury also has subsidized home ownership through the tax deduction for mortgage interest. In fiscal 1999, the tax break for homeowners cost the government $54 billion, making it the sixth-largest expenditure after Social Security, federal salaries, Medicare, interest on the national debt and Medicaid assistance. The deduction for mortgage interest rewards purchases of the largest, most expansive homes with the greatest tax savings. In 1995, households with an income greater than $100,000—about 5 percent of the population—received nearly 40 percent of the federal homeowner subsidy.

Urban Policy. Even when they sought to help the cities, federal policies often had the opposite effect. The federal aid programs known as urban renewal was enacted in 1949 and expanded into the 1960s, providing billions of dollars to clear “slums” and redevelop aging cities. As well-intended as it may have been at the federal level, its local implementation often hurt the long-term attractiveness of the central cities. “It institutionalized as national policy the wholesale clearance of the built environment rather than its repair,” writes Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in his 1998 book, “Changing Places.”

David Rusk, a former mayor of Albuquerque and writer on American cities, echoed many other critics of urban renewal in his 1999 book “Inside Game, Outside Game:”

“Unfortunately the era of urban renewal coincided with the era of international-style architecture: giant glass and steel single-purpose boxes, sometimes perched on stilts, surrounded by concrete and asphalt, filled with plants but no people. The typical, chaotic, busy street life that historically defined U.S. cities was displaced out of countless urban renewal areas. Sometimes the traditional grid patterns of city streets disappeared as urban renewal areas and suburban office campuses. In the many cities I have visited, I have found few urban renewal areas of the 1950s and 1960s to be interesting. Many of the most vital downtown areas of the 1950s that had the good sense to escape the federal bulldozer of the 1960s.”

The program also proved to be racially divisive. Watching the displacement of black residents in city after city, some cynics began complaining that urban renewal really meant “Negro removal.” Indeed, in many areas, mostly black neighborhoods were raised or split apart to make way for interstate highways, stadiums, parking garages and other civic projects. When housing was replaced, it frequently was in high-rise complexes and where only the poorest black residents were concentrated, rather than in more of the independent projects typically existed in the new distinct neighborhoods. Some argue that the crime associated with these projects helped fuel the exodus of middle class residents—white and black.

Transportation. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 arguably did more to reshape American cities than anything except the popularization of the automobile itself. It was passed in the various early days of the Cold War under a war-time president, who championed it as a way to move troops and matériel for the nation’s defense. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had fantasized about a national interstate highway system since before World War II, when it took him nearly two months to lead a convoy from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco. As Stephen B. Goodale writes in “Getting There,” he had ample support from the already powerful lobby of Highway, automotive and oil interests.

With revenue from a national tax on motor fuel, the Act guaranteed the federal government would pay 90 percent of Freeway construction if states and localities would provide the rest. The availability of such easy money quickly spurred states to craft grand, grandiose, freeway plans for every city of size. Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed at the time that only a handful of cities in the Northeast could claim to have need for metropolitan communiting highways, but that a Democratic Congress dominated by Southern and Western representatives had seen to it that 72 percent of the funding went to relatively undubbed areas. From 1966 to 1996, over half of the $92 billion in (1998 dollars) that went to construct what were called interstate highways actually went to build over 22,000 miles of freeways within metropolitan areas. The transit agencies needed to improve mobility in already developed cities, meanwhile, risked deterioration of the subsidies paid for highways in underdeveloped areas. These roads, of course, opened millions of acres of land at the ever-expanding urban fringe to development. This was an unheard-of level of subsidy to private landowners and developers who has not been duplicated outside the country. Although envisioned as a way to ease the commute into the city, freeways made possible a restlessness of population and jobs ever farther from the urban core.

The Government’s Own Assessment. In April, 1999 the U.S. General Accounting Office released a report requested by Congress on the federal government’s role in promoting sprawl titled “Extent of Federal Influence on Sprawl Under the Federal Aid Highway Act.” GAO researchers reviewed the existing reports and studies on the topic and interviewed experts and concluded that one had definitely documented the federal contribution to the phenomenon, although “indefinite evidence exists” to support it. “The shortage of quantitative evidence does not mean that federal programs and policies do not have an impact on urban sprawl,” writes the GAO. “It simply means that the level of federal influence is difficult to determine.”

THE LOCAL AND STATE ROLE

If freeways literally separated the suburbs from the city, zoning and design codes that enshrined low-density sprawl as the model for development.
under zoning laws, those uses are connected only by the automobile. As writer James Howard Kunstler has noted, the effect of single-family zoning has been to outlaw tradition- old town and cities, Neighborhood shopping districts with in walking distances of homes usually consist of small, Apartment errors are illegal in most places. Building setbacks and parking requirements mandate that buildings stand apart from one another across areas of asphalt, in effect creating a grid that stretches across the American suburbs. Although they are very clear about what developers may not do, zoning codes rarely articulate a vision of how communities ought to turn out.

We discuss in Chapter 1, the practice of “exclusionary zoning”—imposing large lot and house size require- ments—to encourage high-value housing at the expense of the lower middle class and low income would be residents. In some cases, local governments have required large lots as a way to prevent sprawl and pre- serve the open landscape. This had unforeseen consequences of requiring more driving without keeping rural character intact, writes Kunstler in “The Geography of Nowhere.” “It ruined the landscape in larger chunks. A two- to five-acre minimum lot requirement meant houses were being plopped down in the middle of every cow pasture. The spaces left between the houses weren’t used for anything. They were too big to mow and too small to plow.”

As more and more Americans moved to the suburbs following World War II, retailers naturally felt obliged to do likewise. The first enclosed shopping mall opened in 1956, the year the national highway bill passed, in a subur- 

B Which role did federal interstate funding play in shaping your area? What would your area have looked like without the interstates? Would a different road plan have been implemented? Would streetcar and inter-urban rail lines have survived? What was traffic like before the freeway system? Where was development occurring at that time?

1. Federal housing policy has changed in the Clinton era to favor demolishing housing projects where poverty is concentrated and replacing them with mixed-income housing. The idea is to dispense pockets of poverty that have been tried in your area, with what success? What displaced residents go? Are they finding a place in the urban core, or have they found a place in the suburbs, and if so, with what effect on areas there are enough low- and middle-income people to replace the lost public housing?

2. Federal transportation policy changed substan- tially in the early 1990s with the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, better known as ISTEA (pronounced “ice tea”). The key changes were allowing formerly dedicated highway money to be spent on other modes, requiring a greater degree of public involvement in planning, and greater consideration of environmental impacts. The 2008 update of that law known as TA- LG retained the same policies, but with a lot more money for fast-growing states. How have these laws affected your area?

3. The role of REITs. In the 1990s, Real Estate Investment Trusts traded on Wall Street have done as much to shape our hometowns as anything else. To determine the magnitude of their influence, talk with local economists, real estate experts and government officials to learn what types of products they have built in your area, what areas they are favoring and why.

STORY IDEAS

1. What role did federal interstate funding play in shaping your area? What would your area have looked like without the interstates? Would a different road plan have been implemented? Would streetcar and inter-urban rail lines have survived? What was traffic like before the freeway system? Where was development occurring at that time?

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5. Would development happen differently in your area without zoning? Take a trip to Houston, the largest city in the country without zoning, and compare development there with what happens at home. Any difference?
Since this guidebook was begun in early 1999, the issues surrounding suburban sprawl have consumed more and more air time and barrel-rolls of ink in the press. Barring an economic crisis, which would overshadow every other issue and render rapid growth an issue for another time, sprawl and what to do about it will be ever-present issues in the coming election year.

These issues touch a number of political hot buttons, a fact candidates of all parties can’t fail to notice. Vice President Al Gore certainly has, and he already is working to carve out a niche among suburbanites who fear their quality of life is threatened by sprawl. Other presidential candidates are carefully weighing their positions. It’s a particularly tough spot for Republicans, whose voters are in the affected suburbs, but many of whose major contributors are corporations that thrive on suburban development.

It’s not just bipartisan issue; it’s a multi-party issue. Minnesota’s independent governor, Jesse Ventura, has become an aggressive promoter of “smart growth,” promising to push tax shifts to promote redevelopment and discourage development in new-open land and rail lines over highways. In Colorado, conservative Republican Gov. Bill Owens was expected to jettison former Democratic Gov. Roy Romer’s Smart Growth Initiative and launch major highway expansions. But since taking office, Owens has endorsed a combined rail and highway approach, proposed stronger growth controls, promoted tax sharing among communities and supported land conservation easements.

Quality of life concerns are gaining attention nationwide. Proposals for growth boundaries or growth-controlling green belts abound. In Arizona, a statewide poll in May 1999 found 73 percent of voters want cities and counties to set growth boundaries. In July, Phoenix did just that, establishing an “infrastructure limit line” beyond which streets and sewers in new developments won’t be extended without special approval from the City Council. In Georgia, meanwhile, Governor Roy Barnes in August proposed that his powerful new transportation authority also take on the challenge of preserving open space and establishing green belts. In many regions, living closer in appears to be hot again, and there’s strong evidence that urban living is popular among newly minted young professionals and retiring baby boomers. But while there is much lip service paid to the rejuvenation of cities and curtailing sprawl, the metropolitan fringe in most areas is where the action is, as power centers and super stores follow subdivision after subdivision into the countryside.
This is a turning point for American society in many ways. The new information-based economy is still emerging, the Internet and wireless technologies are changing the way we do business and will change the way we live. But cultural changes come hard. In urban preference surveys, for example, residents almost always choose the look of new urbanistic, no-traditional neighborhoods over their own suburban locales. When it comes time to buy a house, however, every impulse still says to look for a large yard with the largest house the budget can buy. The trade-offs the choice implies—the social, economic and environmental drawbacks addressed in this guidebook—are not clearly understood.

Tough-minded, responsible journalism must help inform this ongoing debate. These can be difficult issues to cover, with strong emotions and conflicting claims on all sides. Journalists will have to probe hard to determine whether proposed solutions are worse than the cure. It's work worth doing, because stripped of the dizzying terminology of planning, the stories about sprawl are about the concerns closest to our audiences' hearts. How to keep their home places livable—and maybe even make them better.
CHAPTER 9

SOURCES

1. Organizations, Individuals and Web sites

American Land Institute. Henry Richmond, director (Portland, OR) - 503-226-9462. Richmond helped write Oregon planning laws on trads growth management nation.

American Lung Association: Find your state chapter by calling 1-800-586-4072. ALA provides information and research on air quality and lung disease. Web site: www.lungusa.org


Centers for Disease Control, Air Pollution and Respiratory Branch, Dr. David Hammell, M.D. - 770-488-7313. CDC provides information on air quality asthma and other lung diseases. Web site: www.cdc.org. Mailing address (for David Hammell): 4710 Buford Highway Mail Stop S38, Atlanta, GA 30328, FAX: 770-488-3507. Phone/mailing address for CDC: 404-639-3534 or 800-311-3435, 1600 Clifton Rd. Atlanta, GA 30333.

Emory University, Dept of Environmental and Occupational Health, Dr. Howard Frumkin, M.D. - 404-727-3697. The Dept. of Environmental and Occupational Health is part of the Rollins School of Public Health (RSPH) at Emory University. RSPH's mission is to acquire, disseminate, and apply knowledge to promote health and prevent disease in human populations. Web site: www.emory.edu. Mailing address: The Emory Clinic, Rollins School of Public Health, 1518 Clifton Road, Atlanta, GA 30322. FAX: 404-271-8747.

Gordon, Peter, professor, School of Policy, Planning and Development, University of Southern California - 213-740-1467. Takes the "pro sprawl" position in debates. Web site: www-ref.usc.edu/pgrp.htm. Mailing address: School of Policy Planning and Development, USC, 363, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0266, FAX: 213-740-1801.


Texas Transportation Institute, David Schroik, research scientist (College Station, TX) - 409-845-7232. Compile biennial report on costs of traffic con gestion and ranking metro area. Web site: http://triflo.tamu.edu.


ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION


LAND USE, DEVELOPMENT AND URBAN DESIGN


Davi, Robert S., developer of Seaside, FL. (Santa Rosa Beach, FL.) - 850-231-2207. An avid New Urbanist who has been at the vanguard of the neo-traditional movement since before it was dubbed “urbanism.”


Draeger, James and Elizabeth Peter; Dyker, Dieter Peter; and Co. - 305-644-1023. Husband and wife team is among the leading lights of New Urbanism. Web site: www.diaarchitects.com. Mailing address: 1023 SW 25th Avenue, Miami, FL 33145. FAX: 305-644-1021.


Kutter, Dr. Howard, author of Geography of nowhere (Saratoga Springs, NY) - 518-501-2176. Known for incendiary statements as critic of sprawl and advocate for New Urbanism. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy Jim Brown, president - 800-526-3873. Experts on land policy including taxation, zoning, etc. Mailing address: 113

Brattle Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. FAX: 617-661-7235.

Robert Charles Leverett Co. - Christopher B. Leinberger, managing director - 505-988-7600. Reportant national real estate advisor advises long term investors to avoid sprawl. Mailing address: 712 Lincoln Avenue, Suite 501, Santa Fe, NM 87501 FAX: 505-988-7476.


Williams, John, chairman and CEO, Post Properties, Inc. - 404-946-8000. Former major suburban apartment builder now nationally active on smart growth and urban revitalization. Mailing address: One Riverside, 4401 Northside Parkway Suite 800, Atlanta, GA 30327-3657, FAX: 404-846-0011.


The Literature on the Impacts of Sprawl versus Managed Growth,” by Robert Burchell and David Lazorick. Burchell is an expert on infrastructure costs of sprawl. To order: Rutgers University New Jersey.


Recent Articles


“Finding the Limits of anti-sprawl plans: The struggle to contain sprawl around Portland, OR,” suggests that Smart Growth advocates may be in for a long, bumpy ride, by Candace Thomson, The Baltimore Sun, March 22, 1999.


Books


Hia, Tony. The Experience of Place. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. His take on a considered look at a variety of landscapes, from New York’s Central Park to the Great Plains, and points out why the ideology of some planning gurus is the wrong, while that of others liberates cities.


GLOSSARY

OF TERMS

Big box retailer: Large, stand-alone discount stores, such as Wal-Mart, Toys R Us and Office Max. Also known as “category killers.”

Brownfield development: The practice of reclaiming defunct industrial sites, many of which are tainted with toxic waste, for new development.

Commuter rail: Train service that usually operates only during rush hours and midday to take suburban commuters to jobs close in, and back again. Often shares tracks with freight trains.

Conservation easement: A legal mechanism whereby a government or non-profit organization purchases the rights to develop a piece of property from the owner in order to preserve it.

Conservation subdivision: A subdivision in which houses are clustered on smaller than average lots in order to preserve land for common use and enjoyment.

Edge city: A term coined by author Joel Garreau for suburban “down-towns” that began to spring up on the edges of metropolitan areas in the 1980s, usually at the intersection of a radial freeway and a bypass or beltway.

Greenfield development: Building in a previously undeveloped area, usually at the metropolitan fringe.

Impervious surface: Pavement and buildings that do not allow water to seep into the ground below, but instead cause water to run off into storm sewers or directly into streams.

Infill development: The practice of building on vacant lots or undeveloped parcels within the older parts of an urban area.

Light rail: The modern version of a streetcar or tram. As distinct from subway-style heavy rail, it usually runs above ground on tracks in the street, though sometimes on a separate right-of-way and carries fewer passengers per hour. Typically powered by overhead electric lines.

Location efficient mortgage: A program allowing banks to lend more money to home buyers who live on mass transit lines, on the theory that the option to do without an automobile creates more disposable income.

Mixed use: Development that combines two or more of the types of development: residential, commercial, office, industrial or institutional.

Nonpoint-source pollution: Pollution that comes, not from a large industrial source such as a factory, but from countless smaller sources. For water pollution, this usually refers to runoff of silt from construction sites, of pesticides from farms and lawns and automotive effluent from roadways.

Ozone (smog): A form of oxygen regarded as a serious pollutant under the national Clean Air Act. “Good” ozone occurs high in the atmosphere and blocks ultraviolet radiation, but at ground level it is hazardous to human lungs. It forms when volatile organic compounds combine with nitrogen oxides in the presence of sunlight.

Transfer of development rights (TDR): A legal mechanism allowing a developer who wants to build at higher-than-permitted densities to purchase or trade for permitted density from a landowner elsewhere in the jurisdiction, to keep overall density roughly equal.

Transit-oriented development (TOD): Dense development around mass transit stations that provides a range of destinations within walking distance, usually including multifamily homes, shops and workplaces.

Vehicle miles of travel (VMT): The total number of miles driven by all vehicles in a given area over a given period of time, often used by regional planners to gauge the overall growth in travel in a metro area.
David Goldberg covered transportation, environmental and land use issues associated with metropolitan growth for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution for six years. In 1997 he helped conceive and create, and then was lead writer for the newspaper’s Horizon section, a weekly examination of regional growth and development issues. A graduate of Dartmouth College and of Columbia University’s school of journalism, he joined the editorial board of the morning Atlanta Constitution in July 1999.
The Environmental Journalism Center is a program to provide journalists with information and resources to help them understand and cover environment and science issues. The Center is funded with grants by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Walton Jones Foundation and The Winslow Foundation.

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