

Sprawl and Growth Management

*Extension to Communities
College of Design*

Development sprawl is commanding increased attention among contemporary planning issues. Although it goes by many names—urban sprawl, suburban sprawl, rural sprawl—this type of unmanaged growth is one expression of the growth and development patterns that have transformed the American landscape over the last fifty years.

Though it has been with us for a very long time, sprawl has become especially noticeable in the past ten to fifteen years. A robust economy coupled with technological innovations has provided the basis for a nationwide sprawl into the countryside. Explosive suburban growth has made sprawl a topic of both everyday conversation and heated political debate. Small and large communities alike are searching for sustainable approaches to development that avoid the worst consequences of sprawl without stifling development opportunities.

Defining Sprawl

The dictionary defines sprawl as “to spread out in an awkward or uneven way, especially so as to take up more space than is necessary.” Applying this concept to land development patterns, sprawl specifically refers to uneven pockets of development that go beyond the reach of existing municipal services and create a patchwork of urbanization in the countryside. Such development often appears awkward and misplaced and is land-intensive; i.e., it takes up more space than needed.

For years planners have argued over the merits of different definitions of sprawl. The president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation defines sprawl as “low-density development on the edges of cities and towns that is poorly planned, land consumptive, automobile dependent [and] designed without regard to its surroundings.” The Transit Cooperative Research Program refers to sprawl as “development that expands in an unlimited and noncontiguous (leapfrog) way outward from the solidly built-up core of a metropolitan area and almost totally reliant upon the automobile.” Within this publication, we will make do with the general definitions given above.

Will Rogers’ famous comment on the weather—“Everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it”—could apply equally to sprawl. This is true

because growth is generally realized through many different projects. Individually, one person’s sprawl may be another person’s beloved “move up” to a new home or new job. The nature of sprawl strongly reflects the psychology of the individual. It proceeds at a “just one more won’t matter” rate that is difficult to address at the time approval for each project is given. Additionally, the costs of sprawl are perceived to be physical or monetary (not psychological, social, or personal) and as problems of a community, or even the entire society (not its individuals).

How Does Iowa Compare to More Urban States with Respect to Sprawl?

Iowa’s growth patterns are both similar to and different from those in states with larger urban populations. A state such as Iowa, which has had little or no growth in population over the past fifty years, will not have the same condition or rate of sprawl as states such as Florida, California, and New York.

In fact, when one looks at Iowa’s low overall growth figures, it is hard to believe that the state could have a sprawl problem. In Iowa, the urban growth that *has* occurred has been the result of population shifts from the agricultural countryside into the urban and suburban areas that serve as the state’s commercial and employment centers. This has led to rapidly growing cities and suburbs that create many of the same problems confronted by cities and towns in the more populous and rapidly growing states. Indeed, in Iowa, sprawl may become a more difficult problem precisely because our urban centers are surrounded by a relatively depopulated countryside, an inviting situation for unmanaged land development.

Patterns of sprawl in the United States have been remarkably uniform from coast to coast. Common factors are at work almost everywhere, one of the most obvious being transportation. Modern highways and vehicles make it easy to travel 10, 20, or 50 miles from home to work. The growth-inducing power of the expanding interstate highway system is a legend among students of urban planning. Recognizing this force at work in the absence of a national planning system, some planners claim that the interstate highway system itself is a planning system.

The explosion in communications technology over the past thirty years also has been a major factor in sprawl, as has the deterioration of city centers.

What Is Wrong with Allowing Growth to Occur Naturally?

Unfortunately, sprawl does seem to be a “natural” response to the factors that promote it. The image of the idyllic suburban or rural residential life has become a mainstay of the American Dream. It is difficult to argue (particularly with a proud new homeowner) about the negative impacts of any single house or small development. Only when the consequences of sprawl are examined as a whole do doubts arise about whether it should be treated as a natural phenomenon.

The combined costs of residential and commercial sprawl are staggering: they are direct and indirect, dramatic and subtle, immediate and long-term, economic and psychological, social and societal.

Direct costs are easy to identify: increased expenses to expand utilities, transportation infrastructure, schools, and so on. More difficult to discern are the indirect costs. These arise as negative consequences of residential development and include its impact and influence on agricultural operations, the natural environment, wildlife habitats, and the continued vitality of older urban centers, which typically lose population and commerce to new sprawling developments.

In many cities across the country one may analyze the concentric circles of urban decline as one would the rings of a tree. As sprawl proceeds, inner urban and older suburban rings become less vital and economically competitive. Although there are many examples of successful inner-city rejuvenation, it is clear that it becomes more difficult and expensive when sprawl acts as a continuing drain on limited resources.

The fact that many city centers are being reborn indicates their continuing importance. The suburban fringe may be attractive for residential use, but it simply cannot provide many of the necessary ingredients to economic, cultural, and social life that only older, established cities offer.

Growth Management Strategies

Wider recognition of the costs and negative impact of sprawl has generated greater interest in methods to control it. Even as local agencies practice traditional planning and zoning, they are growing more aware that ignoring the indirect effects of sprawling growth can have serious consequences for the quality of community life. Increased awareness has led to increased consideration of comprehensive growth management.

Growth management attempts to address a wide range of issues and incorporate them into a consensus on the shape of the community's future. Such factors as the

timing of infrastructure development and financing, the proper balance of development with environmental protection, and the provision of incentives for certain types of development are blended together to ensure that individual land-use decisions foster, rather than harm, a community's goals.

Growth management systems emphasize control over urban growth and the types of land use that are permitted. Urban growth is controlled by many factors, perhaps the most important of which is the community's policy on providing urban services. Typically such a policy is set forth in the designation of urban service areas or growth boundaries. Some regulatory growth management strategies require public services such as water and sewer, roads, and schools to be in place before new development is approved.

Comprehensive growth management systems also require that local governments classify land in terms of natural resource value and make development decisions consistent with the classification. Effects on adjoining communities, upper limits on growth (such as maximum population caps or desired jobs/housing ratios), and policies designed to provide affordable housing are also common considerations in growth management systems.

Attempts to regulate the economic and social factors inherent in land development have met with significant criticism. Critics of growth management laws argue that they are artificial and not market-driven, that they adversely affect economic development, and that they prevent consumers from attaining the products or lifestyle that they desire.

Where Have Growth Management Strategies Been Tried?

State and local governments have long been wrestling with sprawl and what to do about it. Oregon and Florida were early pioneers in the “smart growth” movement. Other states, such as Colorado and Maine, have attempted similar programs with less success. Recently, statewide programs have been launched in Washington, Maryland, New Jersey, Tennessee, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

Traditionally, most states have taken a relaxed approach to managing growth, not wanting to interfere with economic development or the local powers of cities. Only with the recent rise in awareness of the consequences of continued sprawl have states shown increased interest in adopting comprehensive growth management policies. At present, sixteen states have specific incentives-based growth management laws designed to provide financial and other incentives for the management of growth and the preservation of open space. Iowa has not enacted any comprehensive growth management legislation.

Other states, including Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, have amended their planning statutes to address specific issues of land-use planning and its effect on growth and farmland conversion (see Extension publication on farmland preservation). Controls imposed on state and local governments, and the extent to which they protect valuable land resources from development, vary from state to state. Three state programs are reviewed in the next section.

Washington

Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA), passed in 1990, strengthened in 1991, and amended in 1997, articulates a precise public interest goal of the conservation and wise use of state lands. The statute mandates the use of urban growth boundaries that create a mapped line separating potential urban lands from rural land and within which growth is contained for a certain period of time. The statute also identifies thirteen policy goals that must be addressed when planning, including reducing sprawl. Comprehensive planning is mandatory for counties of a certain size, depending on population or growth rate. Plans must address certain elements, including housing, capital facilities, and transportation.

In the Puget Sound area, development is divided into regional "urban form concepts," which include major urban centers, activity centers, employment areas, and residential neighborhoods. As part of the act, it is proposed that \$12 billion be spent to construct and expand a mass transit system to channel growth within these specified centers and other corridors.

Since enacting the law in 1991, most of Washington's counties have developed inventories of important agricultural land, and several have implemented farmland protection practices, such as agricultural protection zoning, purchase of agricultural conservation easements, and transfer of development rights.

Oregon

Oregon has one of the nation's strongest growth management laws. As a result of the 1973 Land Conservation and Development Act, every county in Oregon has implemented agricultural protection zoning, affecting more than 16 million acres of agricultural land. The act is considered one of the most advanced, state-administered, land-use planning systems in the U.S. Guided by a state agency, the Department of Land Conservation and Development and its governing commission, the state has adopted nineteen planning goals along other regulations affecting land-use planning. In addition to requiring the establishment of urban growth boundaries, localities must also satisfy the following requirements.

- All cities and counties are required to have comprehensive plans.
- The state department reviews all plans for consistency with statewide planning goals.

- The state has the authority to require local governments to revise plans to meet state requirements and can suspend local authority to issue building permits or approve land subdivisions.
- The state can withhold certain state tax revenues to local governments for failure to satisfy the planning regulations.
- A land-use board of appeals (LUBA) is created to reverse and remand decisions made by cities, counties, and regional planning agencies when they violate a local comprehensive plan or the state goals.

Tennessee

The most recent state to enter the growth management scene is Tennessee. In 1998, the state passed a strong growth management requirement for city and county plans. Not only does the law require local governments and the state to discourage unwise growth (by withholding financial assistance), but mandates a sophisticated local planning process to sidetrack sprawling development before it is proposed. By mid-2001, each Tennessee city and county will have to agree on an urban growth boundary to guide its development over the next twenty years. The plan must show a design for compact and contiguous, high-density development into planned growth areas while at the same time protect valuable agricultural, forest, recreational, and wildlife management areas.

Cities and counties must also agree on joint plans. Where agreement cannot be reached, there is an arbitration process designed to resolve the differences. Like some other states, if agreement cannot be reached, the state will terminate subsidies for highways, community development, and even tourism. The new law retains the ability to annex inside the growth boundaries, but makes it virtually impossible outside of them.

The Iowa Senate has tried to pass similar bills over the past few legislative sessions without success. Representatives of building and development interest groups have been strong enough to stave off any changes in law that would restrict growth in any way. The same was true in Tennessee, but the combined support of the Tennessee Farm Bureau, Tennessee Association of Counties, Sierra Club, and the Tennessee Municipal League planners was able to move the legislation to passage.

What Tools Exist for Local Governments in Iowa to Control or Manage Growth?

Although no comprehensive growth management strategies exist at the state level in Iowa, local governments can still use traditional planning and zoning powers to implement many of the goals typically achieved by such programs. Within their own boundaries and with progressive planning and land-use controls, communities can make the same decisions about infrastructure timing and development priority that are the essence of growth management.

Iowa law does allow for joint or regional cooperation through the use of agreements authorized by Chapter 28E of the *Code of Iowa*. This authority allows local governments to share in the exercise of land-use powers and/or provision of services. Additionally, nothing in state law prevents local governments from establishing tax-sharing arrangements, an economically-driven approach to making land-use and development decisions.

The major drawback stemming from the lack of statewide legislation in Iowa is the lack of policy control over a community's fringe areas. This is the area that by definition is under the greatest pressure from potential "leapfrog" development, so the lack of authority is critical.

Other states have comprehensive growth management statutes in place. In these states a number of creative tools are available to preserve agricultural land. For more information on these techniques, read the Extension pamphlet *Preserving Iowa's Farmland* (PM 1868b).

Will Growth Management Strategies Really Save Taxpayers Money?

The benefits of successful growth management are difficult to quantify. Few successful programs have existed long enough to obtain data on relative costs. Growth management programs openly attempt to address some of the most basic factors of our social and economic activity, so their effects, both positive and negative, are diffused throughout the economy and society. Consequently, it will always be difficult to issue a financial report card on growth control measures.

Debates over growth are more heated when the terms of the debate are primarily subjective. Therefore, one of the most important requirements for progress is the development of widely accepted and objective (e.g., financial) standards for use in policy discussions. As the fate of growth management is a matter of political decision, the availability of objective information to policy makers and citizens alike is crucial.

How Successful Are These Strategies Over Time?

With the exception of Oregon, relatively few comprehensive growth management systems have been in effect long enough to answer this question. Because growth management aims to provide a solution to a problem that is perceived to negatively affect the quality of life, one possible measure of success is to poll those living within growth management areas on quality of life. Where such programs have been strongly emphasized and have operated over a period of time, one would expect to find discernible opinions about the relative success of the undertaking.

This type of measurement, however, is based on a set of subjective criteria that make objective analysis difficult. "Quality of life" issues have not yet been reduced to

dollars and cents figures, but they do elicit strong responses from citizens, who ultimately reject or embrace growth management programs.

Increasing numbers of growth management programs are coming into existence nationwide. This increase suggests that people believe the programs work and supply a viable option for addressing sprawl. For example, in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area, there seems to be support of comprehensive growth management as a workable solution to sprawl, even while recognizing its negative elements.

Expanding public discussion of growth management problems and solutions will likely spur closer investigation by local and state legislators across the country. These discussions and investigations will generate new planning programs that will improve our understanding of the growth management process in the future. Particularly if the economy remains strong, effective growth management will remain an important issue. One of the chief questions that is likely to drive policy formation is whether a national (or regional) consensus on growth can be reached — a consensus that provides stability and predictability alike for citizens and planners, for country and city, for landscape and cityscape.

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