

# *Sprawl a national land use concern*

In January, NPR commentator John Nielsen observed that in the last election there were, nationwide, several hundred initiatives related to controlling urban sprawl, and that this was clearly the local issue of the year. He was referring mostly to greenbelt and public transportation proposals. A Rutgers University study showed that sprawl costs taxpayers over 20 times what it provides in financial gain to speculators.

Among many major groups promoting "smart growth" are the Sierra club and organizations affiliated with the Smart Growth Network (SGC), such as the SCN (Sustainable Communities Network), which asserts that "Local ordinances and tax structures provide the carrot and stick to guide development and other activities that may impact the community."

Commenting about the White House proposal announced in January, Sierra Club Director Carl Pope said: "If we didn't subsidize sprawl, we wouldn't have sprawl. Low-density, habitat-gobbling, traffic-creating growth doesn't pay for itself. It only happens because both the federal government and the states subsidize it."

As reported in USA Today, "The 'smart growth' proposal announced by V.P. Al Gore signals a dramatic shift in federal policy that for more than 60 years has promoted growth rather than controlled it. The plan would use \$1 billion in tax credits and grants to help communities protect open space and farmland to put the brakes on runaway suburban growth. It comes on top of the record \$6.1 billion for mass transit proposed in the 2000 budget.

"Under Gore's 'Better America Bonds' proposal, communities could use the money from bond sales to set aside green space, clean up toxic-waste sites, protect water quality and clean up or create urban parks. The proposal would give money to communities that work together on smart-growth plans and allow more federal transportation dollars to be used to reduce gridlock, expand mass transit and encourage regional planning."

Commented Al Gore in his Jan. 12 speech: "Too frequently, a gallon of gas is used up just purchasing a gallon of milk. Too often, if a parent wants to read a child a bedtime story, they call on a cell phone while they're stuck in a traffic jam, and try to explain why they can't be home in time for the child to go to sleep."

Urban sprawl hitting such cities as Atlanta, Little Rock, St. Louis, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago and Seattle is the fastest-growing threat to the environment, according to the Sierra Club, which cited problems with lost open space and increased air and water pollution. Recently, major environmental organizations like the Sierra Club have made suburban sprawl a top national priority.

As sprawl displaces wildlife habitat, wildlife attempting to survive in a suburban/urban environment becomes a problem. In Washington, DC, falcons and hawks have taken up residence on and around city office towers, and beavers

have taken up residence around the Tidal Basin, felling cherry trees and cedars. Tired of overgrown herds of white tailed deer, the Minneapolis suburb of Eden Prairie hired a biologist marksman to kill up to 150 deer. In the Chicago suburb of Lemont, there has increasingly been a problem with coyote attacks on small animals, including pet dogs and cats.

In Atlanta, according to U.S. News, three conservation groups are suing the city in an effort to halt \$700 million in new road projects which, they say, violate federal clear-air and transportation laws. Gov. Roy Barnes unveiled legislation that would create a megatransportation agency to take control of Atlanta's roads and mass-transit projects.

The moves come after years of grousing by urban planners, business leaders, and environmentalists, who say that rapid development has sparked unacceptable levels of traffic congestion and smog. Last year, the city lost access to \$600 million in federal highway funds for failing to comply with the federal Clean Air Act.

Is the urban sprawl initiative announced by the Clinton administration in January really needed?, asked a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Pro and Con article.

Yes, said James P. Barrett, environmental economist at the Economic Policy Institute, Washington.

"Ask people who drive an hour or two to work each day how they deal with the traffic, and they're likely to reply: "It's the price we pay for living in paradise."

"It's a paradise that includes bigger homes, larger lot sizes and superior schools at bargain prices. That's because suburban homeowners pay only a fraction of the costs of living in the suburbs. The rest of us have to pay for their choice of location.

"As roadways, schools and other infrastructure get pushed beyond reasonable capacity, suburban residents are increasingly turning to the government for relief. Multimillion-dollar road and highway extensions, new schools and increased expansion of sewer and water lines are among the multitude of projects that are often undertaken to keep up with the population pressures.

"But who pays? The city, county and state pay for new schools, the state pays for road and sewer expansion and the federal government pitches in for highways and bridges -- and it all comes from our taxes.

"We also pay a heavy price in the form of increased air and noise pollution, habitat destruction and the paving over of pristine acres. Once this new capacity is in place, an increasing number of people perceive that the quality of life in our expanding suburbs more than offsets greater commute times and attendant aggravations, and the process starts anew.

"Closer to cities, high housing prices reflect the increased land scarcity and the benefits of living closer to work,

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shopping and cultural centers. In the suburbs, however, where land is abundant and residents don't have to pay for the costs they impose on everyone else, housing is more affordable.

"The Clinton's administration's recent anti-sprawl initiatives are promising. Increased funding to preserve undeveloped land, to build parks in urban areas and to improve air quality are a good start, but they still don't address the fundamental cause of urban sprawl: the provision of a high quality of life at subsidized prices.

"Maryland recently passed the governor's 'Smart Growth Initiative,' which among other things, assesses development fees for new construction based on where the growth takes place. The farther you are from existing infrastructure, the more developers--and consequently home buyers--will have to pay to at least partly offset the higher costs they are imposing on other state residents."

No, the administration's campaign is likely to make the problem worse, said David A. Ridenour, VP. of the National Center for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC.

"People in low-density areas consume fewer government services than those in urban areas. They also pay a tax imposed explicitly for the construction of infrastructure that many urban dwellers don't--state and federal gas taxes."

However, aggressive driving is worst in places where sprawling development and poor mass transit planning force drivers into their cars, says a group of environmental activist groups in an Associated Press release. A survey released in March by the Surface Transportation Policy Project, a group backed by 200 environmental groups, including several Sierra Club chapters, found that the Riverside/San Bernardino, Calif. region had the highest number of aggressive driving deaths in 1996, an average of 13.4 deaths per 100,000 people.

Boston was best, with only 2.1 aggressive driving deaths per 100,000 people. A community like Boston, the Surface Transportation Policy Project believes, has a lower rate because it offers commuters options like the subway, commuter trains and an extensive sidewalk network.

The Riverside/San Bernardino area, by contrast, is near Los Angeles, a region with few mass transit options, overcrowded freeways and a tradition of driving vast distances, the project says.

In the United States cities are shrinking. Eighteen of the 25 largest cities at midcentury had lost population by 1990, according to the Wisconsin State Journal. The mass movement of middle class families from old cities to suburbs, which grew by 75 million in the same period, has been joined in the 1990s by a further exodus to small towns and rural areas--partly by retirees fleeing the problems and costs of the cities and partly because computer-reliant businesses have discovered plentiful and inexpensive labor supplies in the boondocks. In congressional and presidential elections, the suburbs now outvote the cities and rural areas combined, and suburban politicians now dominate state legislatures and fill many governors' offices. And yet, urbanologists like David Rusk and Kenneth Jackson have demonstrated with careful studies that while suburbs may profit in the short term by stealing people and jobs from the center city, over the decades the prosperity of the metropolitan area depends directly on the economic health of its core. Indianapolis Mayor Steve Goldsmith put it in blunt terms, when he spoke of the "ever-widening concentric circles" of poverty, crime, dependency and joblessness threatening the future of the cities--and their suburbs.

In 1997 a group of mayors from metropolitan Chicago met in "summit" presided over by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, as reported in the Christian Science Monitor. His Honor told suburban leaders that it was time for

communities across Chicagoland to stop quarreling and start addressing regional challenges together. Across the nation, cities like Chicago are marching back to prosperity, while their closest suburbs are showing signs of decay. Civic leaders are warming up to the notion that problems like crime, congestion, pollution, shrinking budgets and changing labor markets might benefit from a regional focus. "Over the last 25 years, it has become clear that cities of all sizes can't function as isolated economic entities," says Carl Abbott, an urbanologist at Portland State Univ. in Ore.

One of the best examples of this changing climate can be found in Maryland, where last year legislators passed the nation's first "smart growth" law. The legislation seeks to prevent expansion beyond existing suburbs by restricting the bulk of state infrastructure spending and tax incentives to areas that are already developed. Maryland is one of several states, including Oregon, Washington, Florida, Georgia, and New Jersey, that have adopted some form of growth control legislation.

New Jersey, Maryland, Florida and a handful of other states are also trying to improve how they manage growth by seeking to direct new development away from rural areas to areas that already have roads and water and sewer lines, according to the New York Times. What is driving the movement against suburban sprawl in many communities is concern about the impact of new development on already congested roadways and overcrowded schools. What is more, development, once seen as a way to expand the property tax base, is now viewed as more costly, as local officials are forced to raise tax rates because new fire stations and elementary schools and more police officers are needed.

Citizens for a Better Environment studied southeastern Wisconsin land-use trends since 1960 and found that

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land used for development nearly doubled while the population in the area grew only 3%, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Such sprawling development consumes open space, lengthens commutes and requires costly extension of municipal services, such as police and fire protection, to far-flung subdivisions, according to the report. The added miles logged by commuters -- a 64% increase between 1972 and 1991 -- also adds to the region's smog problems.

Redevelopment and limiting development would negate the need to build new schools, roads and other costly infrastructure, according to the report.

Conversely, housing demolitions are transforming much of Milwaukee's north side into a landscape of empty fields, reports the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Between 1990 and the beginning of 1998, one out of every six places to live -- apartments, flats and single-family houses -- was demolished in a 5-square-mile area in the heart of the north side, according to city records. A landlord says, "The standing joke is that in a few years you'll be able to start farming again on the north side."

The trillions spent to alleviate poverty instead have created a culture of despair, the American Legislative Exchange Council reports in its Legislative Issue brief on The Empowerment Agenda. Federal urban aid demolished inner city homes and businesses; excessive city regulations limit the number of jobs and create barriers to inner-city ownership and operation of businesses. Empowerment policies and programs -- welfare reform, home ownership, enterprise zones, educational choice, resident management, and opening entrepreneurial opportunities -- provide a ladder up and new hope for the disadvantaged and for the nation.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines brownfields as "abandoned, idled, or under-used

industrial and commercial sites where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination." Brownfields tend to be geographically concentrated, usually in older urban centers.

"Greenfields," in contrast, are unspoiled lands, generally on the outskirts of communities, that are far more tempting to developers.

The superfund program, established in 1980 and administered by the Environmental Protection Agency, addresses the nation's worst toxic waste dumps. Brownfields are less-polluted sites that are not likely to be included in the superfund program. There are tens of thousands of brownfield sites across the nation, often idle properties in inner-city areas once used for manufacturing and contaminated with chemical wastes. Examples include a 700-acre site of the U.S. Steel Ensley Works in Birmingham, Ala., and a half-acre parcel for a gas station and dry cleaning business in Normal, Ill.

Because the specter of expensive brownfields cleanups has steered development to the so-called "greenfields" of the suburbs, poor neighborhoods that badly need jobs are neglected because it's cheaper and easier to build elsewhere. This devours farm land, as well as tax dollars for roads, sewers and water mains. Workers are forced into longer commutes, creating more traffic congestion and air pollution, writes a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter.

The 1997-99 Wisconsin state budget included a new program: \$10 million in grants to communities, non-profit agencies and developers seeking to clean brownfields. It marked the first time the state had created a brownfield cleanup fund.

The brownfields problem touches every county in Wisconsin. The joint effort between lawmakers and environmental regulators to get these properties back into production began in 1994, but received a major boost late in 1995 when the Federal Environmental Protection Agency agreed to get out. The

EPA gave the Wis. Dept. of Natural Resources the authority for overseeing such clean-ups, helping to eliminate fear that the EPA would designate a site a federal Superfund site. The DNR restructured to create the Bureau of Remediation and Redevelopment, meaning property owners and would-be purchasers will find it easier to get help in reclaiming these sites.

In 1993, Wisconsin Act 453, known as the Land Recycling Law, was signed by Gov. Thompson. The law requires that polluted or contaminated land be cleaned to existing Wisconsin standards.

The Land Recycling Law created a number of incentives for purchasers and municipalities regarding brownfield sites. The Land Recycling Act was to make it safer for banks to invest in redevelopment of older, industrial urban areas. State officials estimate that public grants will leverage private capital.

Part of the 1997-99 Wisconsin state budget, the program expands liability protection for people who clean the properties, known as brownfields. The budget also included \$10 million in grants to help finance brownfield cleanups.

Sen. Brian Burke (D-Milw.), quoted in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, said, "The expanded liability protection is a big change in state policy. That's the single greatest land use initiative we've had in the Thompson administration," said Burke, a legislative expert on brownfields.

Of course, Georgists know another land use initiative that would help the private market rehabilitate and rebuild and recycle urban land: lower the mill rate on buildings and improvements and correspondingly increase the mill rate on community-created site values. This provides a redevelopment incentive where the infrastructure exists and alleviates the pressure for development on the urban fringe.

*(The author of this article, Nadine Stoner, Beloit, WI, acknowledges that many of the news reports cited above are quoted in this article.)*