

SPRAWL

A Factsheet from Austin Energy's Green Building Program

The Sierra Club defines sprawl as "low density, automobile-dependent development beyond the edge of service and employment areas." Sprawl is a uniquely American pattern of growth that began after World War II. In fact, sprawl is supported by existing "federal policies—such as transportation spending bills, home mortgage deductions, and federal tax laws—{which} continue to encourage sprawl and reward people who settle in areas far from populated centers with existing services." (Sierra Club report, *Sprawl: The Dark Side of the American Dream*). One alternative to sprawl is Smart Growth. Smart Growth encourages urban density and suburban convenience by carefully choosing how far and where development will occur. This type of managed growth ensures a strong city as well as strong tax roles to maintain the level of service that urban and suburban dwellers receive.

Sprawl is a National Issue

"Texas lost more prime and unique farmland than any other state, nearly a half million acres from 1982 to 1992," (Sierra Club, website: www.sierraclub.org). The Sierra Club reports that "every hour of every day, America loses 45.6 acres of its highest quality farmlands to subdivisions, shopping centers, strip malls, (and) roadway—400,000 acres a year succumbing to development." Other statistics are equally alarming, "in just two years, the state (of Vermont) lost 10 percent of its farmland." The American Farmland Trust (AFT) "reports that an astounding 70 percent of prime or unique farmland is now in the path of rapid development." And since 1960, federal figures show "the outward sprawl of American metropolitan areas has consumed 1.5 million acres of farmland each year". (The Washington Post, 3 Sep 98, p A17, by Judith Havemann, and USA Today, 9 Sep 98, p 3A, by Haya El Nasser.)

But sprawl is about more than just farmland consumption, its main impact is on the long-term viability of cities, the suburbs which rely on them, and quality of life issues for people who live in or near them like commuting time and public safety. A recent Sierra Club report turned a national spotlight on the top 20 population centers where sprawl is threatening the community's quality of life and accelerating at a faster rate than cities of comparable size. Not surprisingly, Austin figured prominently in the report. (*Sprawl: The Dark Side of the American Dream*.)

Sprawl in Austin

Austin is number two on the Sierra Club's list of "Five Most Sprawl-Threatened Medium Cities" because of growth statistics like, "Over 1,000 people per month on average have moved to the Austin area since 1990," "...the (Austin) region nearly doubled in the 1980's and expanded another 160 percent again from 1990 to 1996," and "From 1982 to 1992, the amount of open space lost to development increased by over 35 percent." And perhaps the most astounding statistic about Austin, "traffic on Interstate 35 has grown 754 percent since 1960."

Sprawl and the City

When doing your windshield shopping for a new home, it can seem very appealing to buy in the newest development-- you know, the one just a little bit past the last one. Although the latest houses have an attractive price tag and with wide, newly paved streets, they may not reflect the actual impact of placing homes so far from an urban center on environmentally sensitive land.

A rapidly growing city can quickly outgrow the number of trash trucks, police cars, and other services it provides its citizens in return for their tax dollars and municipal fees. When that happens everyone suffers, from the long-time city dweller to the new resident, although the change is less perceived by those who have just recently moved to town.

Sprawl and Safety

Building so far from fire, police, and ambulance services poses increased risk to residents in their homes, and lengthened commute times increase the risk of automobile accidents. The American Farmland Trust study of three Chicago sprawl sites found that police response times were an average of 6.4 times longer when compared to in-town response times. Keep in mind that the "probability of a response-related arrest decreases rapidly during the first five minutes (from 35 percent to 15 percent) and a citizen in trouble is less likely to get help and have their assailant arrested." Ambulance response times in all three sites of the AFT Chicago study "exceed(ed) the recommended maximum for EMS response time of four to six minutes."

COMMUNITY

Get Involved

Austin is leading the way with sprawl-busting measures. The Austin City Council recently "began to consider the concept of smart growth and launched a series of initiatives to direct development east of MoPac Blvd (Loop 1) and away from drinking water sources to the west.

Other states are also combating sprawl in unique ways, such as Maryland's \$3,000 incentive for buying a home near where you work (Sierra Club report, *Sprawl: The Dark Side of the American Dream*). Some smart growth changes are even being adopted by the mortgage lending industry, some are offering Location Efficient Mortgages, which use the logic that spending less money on driving costs equals more income available to pay the mortgage and a larger qualifying amount (Sierra Club Transportation Subcommittee Report, Convenient Cities, website: www.sierraclub.org/transportation/transportation/cars/Cities/htm).

The Sierra Club report had several solutions to sprawl, among them:

- **Agricultural zoning** (which) allows development only on lots of a minimum size and restricts land uses such as large subdivisions that are incompatible with farming,
- **Clustering**, (which) allows the same number of lots on a given parcel of land, but requires that they be clustered on one portion of the parcel. Sensitive areas, buffers and open space are situated on the remaining land.
- **Conservation easements** (which) are created when landowners donate the development right to their land to organizations such as the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. Landowners receive income, property and estate tax relief. Land trusts may also purchase development rights.
- **Tax-based sharing** (which) seeks to reduce the difference in the relative financial health of local governments in a region and thereby reduce the competition for new development. Typically, the communities pool a portion of the growth in the commercial, industrial, and residential property-tax base and then redistribute it based on an agreed-upon formula.
- **Transit-oriented development guidelines** (which) seek to strengthen ridership on public transit by encouraging or requiring more compact mixed-use development around transit stops.
- **Encouraging or requiring local comprehensive plans** that are consistent with state (or neighborhood) goals, channeling funds to existing urban areas, and empowering municipalities and regions to use a variety of growth management techniques.

This last solution, encouraging local comprehensive plans, such as the one that has been successfully implemented in Austin's Dawson Neighborhood located south of Oltorf, north of Ben White, west of South First, and east of Congress Avenue. Their neighborhood plan was adopted by the Austin City Council this past August and will serve as a guiding document for any development in that neighborhood.

RESOURCES

Books

Once There Were Green Fields: How Urban Sprawl is Undermining America's Environment, Economy, and Social Fabric – by F. Kaid Benfield.

Changing Places: Rebuilding Community in the Age of Sprawl – by Richard Moe and Carter Wilkie.

Websites

www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/report98

www.pioneerplanet.com/archive/sprawl/

www.velocity.net/~jutman/urban.htm