

# Land, Growth, and the Public Interest:

## How Are We Shaping Our Communities' Futures?

**Lee R. Epstein**

**S**ome luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which, once you have it, you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.  
—Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*

Cities, small towns, and urbanizing counties are wrestling mightily with the blessing and the curse of metropolitan growth. What forms of urban growth best meet the needs and desires of local citizens and businesses? What patterns of development enhance the public treasury, make best use of local fiscal resources, and most efficiently serve the provision of such public services as sewer and water, parks, public safety, and transportation? How will growth affect the natural environment, as well as a sense of community, of “place”? How will the way communities are growing affect the urban centers of their regions? And how, for heaven’s sake, could we influence a change in direction, even if we wanted to? These are not easy questions to answer.

There are, however, local and regional impacts from development form and pattern that have been reported by a variety of reliable sources around the country. Concomitantly, there is a great buzz in both the popular and technical press about “neo-traditional” new-development activity, as well as about “sprawl.” Recent articles in as widely varying

publications as *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, the *Kansas City Star-Democrat*, *Builder* magazine, *Urban Land* magazine, *Planning* magazine, and the *Wall Street Journal* have all focused on these interrelated issues.

There is no uniform belief that all local jurisdictions should engage the same aims, whether these involve attracting, repelling, controlling, or better managing growth. At the same time, there is not yet common agreement that state and local systems for dealing with local growth have broken down.

But widely disparate voices are expressing discomfort over the current forms and patterns of metropolitan growth. There are clear indications of widespread unease with disintegrating urban systems and exploding metropolitan suburbs, from hard-nosed business executives in California's Silicon Valley concerned about traffic congestion, air pollution, and the loss of community; to farmers, ranchers, and timberland owners worried about the loss of livelihood and way of life; to town and county councils struggling to finance schools and public services for new suburbs while juggling the loss of economic opportunity within their urban areas; to number-crunching transportation engineers racing to meet burgeoning demand for mobility and access; to environmentalists decrying the impacts on local streams and rivers, groundwater, air quality, wetlands, and forests; to citizens troubled about the future of their own communities, the loss of open space, and changes in community character.

### **Carving Out a Future**

Each community needs to define its own path and try to carve out its future. Each local government must work within the political and legal parameters of its powers and try to honor the wishes of the invariably disparate voices of its citizenry. There is no one way to grow or to manage growth, and no out-of-town expert or in-town guru can or should be expected to breezily develop a plan for the future

without the consensus of the public.

Public consensus is important. The old model of community, master, or comprehensive planning left it pretty much up to the experts, including the planning commission and county or city council, to develop a 15- or 20-year plan, after which public hearings would be held, often on merely a pro forma basis. But the new model is much more participatory from the beginning.

There are, however, some universal principles for future growth that can be derived from the lessons of the past and from the experiences of other places around the United States. At the least, four objectives should inform planning for growth:

- Attain fiscal efficiency.
- Achieve environmental integrity.
- Work toward sustainable economic development.
- Maintain or enhance the civic community as a place.

### **Fiscal Efficiency**

With public treasuries ever more constrained, local governments understand the need to be fiscally efficient. While there is no absolute accord on this point, the weight of academic and empirical evidence nationwide is that the pattern of metropolitan growth usually referred to as "sprawl" rarely pays its own way, let alone provides for an improved tax base. (The term "sprawl" usually refers to scattered, low-density, single-use residential development patterns that move farther and farther outward, sometimes in a leapfrog manner, from already urbanized areas.)

Dozens of suburban or exurban jurisdictions have in recent years analyzed their fiscal health with respect to various growth patterns. So have jurisdictions that encompass both town and country and even some states, such as New Jersey and Maryland. The usual result is a picture of vast inefficiency when it comes to sprawl. Well-done "snapshot" studies in places like Loudoun County, Virginia

(in suburban Washington, D.C.), have demonstrated, for example, that providing government services to farmland is much less expensive than to residential land, with the former costing 50 cents for every dollar taken in and the latter costing \$1.55.

In another recent metropolitan Washington analysis, officials in Prince William County, Virginia, have estimated that the average new house built there (on an average half-acre lot) consumes some \$1,600 more in services than it generates in tax revenue. While big new houses on large lots sometimes yield a higher tax return per unit, the numbers of houses on smaller lots often can overcome that advantage, especially if the houses are closer to existing infrastructure and public services. One study in the late 1980s estimated that the property tax yield of land in two- to three-acre lots can be up to nine times *lower* than that of the same area in quarter-acre lots, depending, of course, upon location.

Of course, arguments can be made that this means local governments must fiercely compete with each other for "good" tax ratables, like solid commercial or industrial uses that will balance with those uses customarily more needy, such as middle-income housing. But such intraregional competition also can be self-defeating in the long run, as the losing jurisdictions experience further and faster decline, damaging the regional image and inevitably demanding ever-greater assistance and support from sister and state governments. Such circumstances also can seriously damage regional entities like sewer and water authorities and transportation agencies.

Overall, the evidence indicates that more compact, mixed-use, land-conserving patterns of development are more efficient for the provision of public services and for the conservation of the public treasury.

### **Environmental Integrity**

The use of land, and the pattern of development and growth, are directly re-

lated to the quality of the local and regional environment. Achieving environmental integrity means obtaining settlement forms and accommodating growth so as to minimize environmental harm.

Direct impacts on the environment occur as ecologically valuable open land—well-managed farms, forests, and wetlands—are converted into urban and suburban uses, usually fragmenting and displacing their former environmental functions. A manicured, fertilized, and treated (high-input) lawn is a poor substitute for a forest, ecologically. Indeed, sprawl patterns of development can produce *from five to seven times* the sediment and phosphorus that a forest can. Sprawl maintains substantially less of the filtering capacity and habitat value than the former use.

Sprawl also produces nearly *twice* as much nitrogen and sediment as do compact forms of development. Even farming, if managed well and not of the high-input variety, compares favorably to many types of urbanized landscapes. The direct loss of wetlands, while slowing in recent years, still is of great concern, given the natural (and free) filtration, flood mitigation, and other values inherent in such lands.

The amount and nature of the stormwater runoff from sprawling development patterns can significantly affect local streams, rivers, and other receiving water bodies. As noted, pollutant inputs can be substantial, and both volume and velocity changes in streams can be extremely detrimental. From a transportation perspective, sprawl only can be efficiently served by extensive road systems dedicated largely to private automobiles. Such a pattern of curlicue, disconnected roads emptying onto feeder arterials virtually guarantees more vehicle-miles of travel and more vehicle-trips than does a finely grained network that includes transit.

Sprawl residential patterns also mandate commercial land use patterns that are auto-dependent, which means huge parking lots. These characteristics in

turn lead to higher levels of unhealthy air pollution and to the deposition of air pollutants into waterways.

In one recent planning exercise, for example, the development costs and thus the profitability, as well as the relative pollution outputs, of clustered versus conventional sprawl development in a 500-acre rural setting were compared. The conventional plan cost more than twice as much to build and produced just under twice as much phosphorus and nitrogen, two key nutrients whose overabundance is helping to choke water bodies.

The key is to understand that in many metropolitan areas around the country, growth is a given. On a per capita basis, however, accommodating that growth in urban and suburban infill and other compact patterns appears to be as environmentally sound as it is economically efficient. To achieve environmental integrity, it will be an increasingly important goal to try to limit the degree of overall imperviousness in watersheds that are currently largely undeveloped. It also is essential that our communities begin to favor more compact, mixed-use settlement patterns.

## **Sustainable Economic Development**

One of the great clichés of the 1990s appears to be the word “sustainable,” used as an adjective to describe almost anything. The best short definition appears to be “not diminishing what comes after.”

All growth is not equal. That which comes at the expense of great gobs of pollution, the substantial depletion of valuable and irreplaceable resources, or the diminishment of something else of long-term value to a community or a society (e.g., such city institutions as great universities and museums, or continuing economic opportunity in cities and towns) would appear to be unsustainable. On the other hand, growth and economic development that actually adds long-term value or

yields great economic benefits at low social and environmental costs—and that can support the continuing addition of value over the long term—would appear to meet the definition of sustainability.

Some communities around the country are experimenting, for instance, with eco-industrial parks, in which the waste outputs of one industrial plant can be used as process or product inputs in another plant next door. Sustainable economic development also could mean the promotion and expansion of low-impact tourism and recreational opportunities: hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, and canoe trails; catch-and-release fishing tournaments; and nature observation tours of birds, whales, and the like, together with the tourist infrastructure necessary to serve these pursuits: bed-and-breakfast houses, seasonal house rentals, restaurants, local museums, and shops.

Additionally, the term could apply to traditional natural resource-dependent industries, such as farming, forestry, and fishing, when these are conducted sustainably. Or it could even be used to define compact, infill-type urban development, such as projects that can enhance ridership on local transit systems and boost Main Street or downtown economies.

Difficult to identify and even more difficult to attract, sustainable economic development should at least be the goal of communities wrestling with growth pressures or in the midst of uncertainty with respect to growth directions.

### **The Civic Community as Place**

This is probably the hardest concept to describe, but at its core, it is really what land use and urban planning were supposed to have been about at their inception in the early part of this century. Such terms as “compatibility,” “harmony,” “social strength,” “community cohesiveness,” “community character,” “civic pride,” and “wholeness” all per-

tain to the maintenance or enhancement of a place.

Communities nationwide are losing their character, their sense of place, the traditional landscapes and landmarks that help yield a geographic and social identity. Some such losses are inevitable. As historic structures succumb to age, those land uses that arise from development and urban expansion and from the influences of modern society—from McDonalds outlets to the regional mall—invade the culture of even the tiniest and most remote of villages.

But the near-total homogenization of community character nationwide is not inevitable. Local governments and citizens do have the ability to set development standards and to protect important, recognized and recognizable, cultural and historic resources. They can choose to conserve, in an equitable fashion, parts of the landscape that help define “place” and that still are important economically, such as disappearing farmland or historic monuments. They can decide that it is important to safeguard local and regional environmental resources. In a word, they can choose to be conservative.

In and of itself, growth is not bad or good. As noted, local governments must direct their own paths toward a future that represents improvements in the quality of life of their citizens. Where and how growth occurs are among the most important decisions that communities must make. Evidence from across the country strongly suggests that all growth is not equal, that sprawl-type growth patterns are both damaging and inefficient.

The future—fiscal and environmental stability, a solid and enduring local economy, and a community that proudly maintains its unique sense of place—depends on making tough but wise choices based on these principles. **PM**

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