



Fact Sheet 3.4

Some Negative Effects of Urban Sprawl



Photo by: Larry Korhnik

Urban sprawl is characterized by unmanaged, widespread, linear growth. It is not only unattractive to most people, it is also not sustainable.

As urban populations grow and more people want privacy and greenspace, development will inevitably creep beyond city limits, creating wildland-urban interface. If the development occurs without consideration for infrastructure, commercial needs, efficient transportation options, or quality of life, it can degrade rather than enhance the community. Without considering the potential consequences of new development and effectively planning to reduce negative effects, communities end up with urban sprawl. Urban sprawl has been defined as “low density development beyond the edge of service and employment, which separates where people live from where they shop, work, recreate and educate thus requiring cars to move between zones” (1000 Friends of Florida 2005).

Despite the attraction and the benefits of everyone having a lawn, trees, and a big house, people are beginning to recognize the negative consequences of this land development pattern. The negative effects that sprawl can have on a community, its people, and its resources help demonstrate why land-use planning is so important.

Ecological Effects of Urban Sprawl

Development plans that promote sprawl have a number of consequences for local ecosystems (Luther 2005). Many hold true for any development in the wildland-urban interface.

- Destruction of wildlife habitat.
- Introduction of non-native invasive plants and animals into natural areas.
- Increased human and pet exposure to diseases such as rabies and Lyme disease.
- Increased risks of water pollution from oil and gasoline washing off paved surfaces and from pesticides, lawn fertilizers, and other chemicals.
- Increased potential for flooding and soil erosion due to impervious surfaces such as concrete or pavement.
- Decrease in groundwater for wells and irrigation caused by abundance of impervious surfaces.
- Increased risk to life and property from wildfires.



Photo by: Reed Saxon, Associate Press

Traffic is one side-effect of sprawl.

Social and Economic Effects of Urban Sprawl

Urban sprawl can also negatively affect social and economic conditions in communities in several ways (Luther 2005).

- Increased community costs for maintaining roads, school bus routes, sewers, and other services needed when businesses and residences are spread out.
- Ongoing increases in property taxes to meet growing need for services, which may pressure rural landowners to sell to developers.
- Increased need for automobiles; increased noise, traffic, pollution; reduced potential for bicycling and walking.
- Isolation of the young, poor, and elderly who cannot drive or lack access to cars.
- Increased cost and difficulty of providing public transportation.
- Increased time needed for transportation reduces time available to spend with family and friends or contributing to the community.
- Loss of agricultural and forestry jobs, and traditional land practices.
- Reduction of rural character or community sense of place.
- Increased ordinances that regulate logging, noise, or odors.

Research has shown that providing public infrastructure and services for sprawling, low-density subdivisions costs significantly more than providing for the same number of houses in urban areas (1000 Friends of Florida 2005). One study found that compact growth with a high-density mixture of residential and commercial development consumed 45 percent less land; and cost 25 percent less for roads, 15

percent less for utilities, 5 percent less for housing, and 2 percent less for other public expenditures than sprawling development (Burchell and Listokin 1996). In the interface the choice is not whether or not to allow growth but rather whether to choose planned or uncontrolled growth. With population growth and interface development increasing rapidly in the South, the negative effects of urban sprawl need to be carefully considered and mitigated through effective land-use planning strategies.



Photo by: South Florida Water Management District

Sprawl often depletes the sense of place or uniqueness of communities it occurs in.

References

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