

III. WHAT IS SPRAWL AND DO WE HAVE IT?



Sprawl is the decentralized, low-density settlement pattern characteristic of suburban growth in the last fifty years. In addition to the residential growth that consumes land at a faster rate than population growth, commercial and industrial development is attracted to the new infrastructure and consumer populations that residential sprawl creates.

Critics of sprawl argue that it has detrimental effects on the environment, on public finances, and on social cohesion. It is wasteful because it draws people, employment, and resources away from cities, abandoning the costly infrastructure investments that society has already made and expending new funds

on suburban infrastructure. Populations in central cities can become more isolated as jobs move to the suburbs and urban municipal governments are left with a dwindling tax base to pay for more social services.

Few people actively choose a suburban home because of the characteristics criticized by opponents of sprawl. Instead, they base their decisions on what they see as positive attributes: larger houses or more land, sometimes for less money than in the cities; perception of greater safety; better school systems; the desire for a small-town or rural setting; a cleaner environment; and the perceived importance of open space. Growth expands into rural areas, creating the “ex-urban” environment of suburban-style housing on rural roads or in isolated subdivisions surrounded by farms or forests.

The dynamics of sprawl development, however, mean that many of the original attractions of suburban living are increasingly threatened as open space and rural lands are developed, small towns are overwhelmed by malls and commercial strips, water quality and quantity is threatened, schools become overcrowded and education costs increase. In the pursuit of tax revenues to pay for the increasing cost of services, municipalities compete for development, especially commercial and industrial development. Land use regulations continue to promote the same kind of development that causes concern in the first place.

Sprawl in the Northern Middlesex Region

Although our region still has a true urban community, village centers in many of the towns, and rural roads in some areas, many parts of our region are characterized by sprawl -- and it continues to spread. Indicators of sprawl development in the Northern Middlesex region include the following:

- # land consumed for development at a far higher rate than the rate of population growth
- # decentralization of employment centers
- # dispersal of residences
- # increasing average number of vehicle miles traveled per capita

- # commercial strip development along arterial roads
- # urban and town center disinvestment and abandonment of older industrial structures
- # underutilization of existing infrastructure in urban areas while extending infrastructure farther into suburban areas
- # diminishing availability of open space
- # increasing levels of runoff and nonpoint source pollution of waterways

Consequences of sprawl

Transportation and traffic. Low-density residential settlement promotes and virtually requires high automobile use. This translates into more roads, more air pollution, and higher household costs for transportation. On average, middle-income households spend about 20 percent of their income on buying and maintaining vehicles (more than they spend on food and slightly less than they spend on housing). The combination of many low-density residential areas and multiple employment centers in suburban locations makes it impossible to create efficient fixed-route public transportation systems, exacerbates auto-dependency, and creates multiple areas of traffic congestion.

Infrastructure and services. Sprawl development results in higher per household costs for extending water and sewer services to new developments. When cities become less dense, existing urban infrastructure is used less efficiently. Real estate taxes from residential growth do not cover the costs of additional services, including education. Business growth usually generates more taxes than it uses in services, but its service demands and effects tend to be specific, particularly for roads.

Affordable housing. Low-density, single-family home development on relatively large lots does not provide the diversity of housing options needed by people of different economic backgrounds or people in different stages of their lives. Affordable rental housing for families is in especially short supply. Suburban jurisdictions which accept affordable housing prefer elderly housing and home-ownership assistance programs. Sprawl encourages the concentration of affordable and subsidized housing in cities.

Social and economic isolation of urban centers. Both population and employment have left cities to relocate in the suburbs. The sprawl pattern of development makes it difficult for low-income city residents to have access to suburban jobs.

Environment. Sprawl consumes large amounts of undeveloped or unbuilt land. It destroys and breaks up wildlife and plant habitat. It alters natural hydrological systems by replacing planted areas with hard surfaces that increase the amount and velocity of stormwater runoff to streams and rivers, exacerbating flooding and pollution.

Cultural and Historic Character. Sprawl development detracts from the unique character of local places by replacing or overshadowing structures from earlier historic periods. Typical regional landscapes, whether in farms or forests, reveal the topographic and biological character of an area, and they are often replaced with repetitive subdivisions and commercial development lacking in any local design or environmental character.