

Mired in the Inertia of Sprawl:

AN EXPLORATION OF DRIVING FORCES OF
SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

Hamilton County, Ohio



HAMILTON COUNTY

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An Exploration of Driving Forces of Suburban Development Patterns

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Mired in the Inertia of Sprawl: **An exploration of driving forces of suburban development patterns**

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DIVERGENT VIEWS – SUBURBANIZATION OR SPRAWL? (Automobile Utopia or Auto-dependent Wasteland)

How many of you are proponents of sprawl? To many, urban sprawl is anathema. For the majority in this country, however, it's still the American Dream. To most urban experts the phenomenon of sprawl is a problem without a solution. The absence of any local government remedy is due primarily to the momentum of impelling external forces (root causes) in national and state systems that subsidize and perpetuate sprawl.

Nationally, sprawl in the Cincinnati region was recently ranked fourth worst (this varies depending on how it's measured and who does the measuring). During the past 50 years, we've been urbanizing land at a rate four times faster than our rate of population growth. This 4 to 1 ratio (5 to 1 in recent decades) is the entrenched development pattern that we refer to as sprawl – our pejorative word for the place where most families in our region choose to reside.

Opponents to sprawl describe it as the ugly chaos of “laissez faire urbanization”. Robert Davis, chairman of the Congress for New Urbanism, says: “sprawl is a fifty-year-long experiment in wretched excess that endorses the disposability of the built environment – an insatiable consumption apparatus, draining life from cities, devouring open space, siphoning precious time off to automobile travel, separating people from one another, and leaving a trail of washed-up neighborhoods and shopping centers in its wake.”

Even more critical is the view offered by Howard Kunstler. In “*Home from Nowhere*”, he condemns the sprawling communities we have built. He says with great passion, “We drive up and down the gruesome, tragic suburban boulevards of commerce, and we're overwhelmed at the fantastic, awesome, stupefying ugliness of absolutely everything in sight as though the whole thing had been designed by some diabolical force bent on making human beings miserable.”

Interestingly, one person's sprawl is another's utopia. The public in this region and throughout the country continues to choose the sprawling suburban landscape as the ideal. The suburban spatial order -- with an abundance of privatized open space in the form of front and back yards -- is exactly what most suburban residents want. That's why they live there!

Ironically, many people opposed to sprawl love their suburban neighborhoods. Many who are opposed to sprawl are even more opposed to density! The incongruity of popular opposition to

both sprawl and density pretty well summarizes the impossible challenge for community planning at the local level today.

MANAGEMENT OF GROWTH IN OUR REGION

(The Multitude of Local Players)

Many planning organizations in our region are engaged in addressing the development pattern we call sprawl and the social and economic problems associated with it. Consider the multitude of growth management players we have in the public sector in our region:

- ∞ The Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana Regional Council of Governments
- ∞ The 13 County Planning Commissions in our region
- ∞ The planning commissions and committees in the 222 local government jurisdictions in our region
- ∞ The 49 local planning commissions in Hamilton County
- ∞ The 45 local zoning commissions in Hamilton County
- ∞ The 600 to 700 planning and zoning commissioners in Hamilton County

- ∞ And consider the civic sector efforts in community planning, such as:
 - ∞ Citizens for Civic Renewal
 - ∞ Sustainable Cincinnati
 - ∞ The Green Umbrella (Regional Greenspace Alliance)
 - ∞ Smart Growth Coalition
 - ∞ Catholic Social Action Commission
 - ∞ First Suburbs Consortium

This is a lot of public and civic sector capital (human and financial) being invested in planning and growth management. With this tremendous investment, it is reasonable to ask, “Why can’t we manage suburban growth”? Why does sprawl continue when so many local organizations and resources are focused on the problem?

Important answers to this question are provided by exploring seven countervailing forces that largely negate local planning and growth management efforts. These forces also show that suburban sprawl came about (and is perpetuated) primarily by state and federal policies – especially the market-distorting policies of transportation and housing subsidies. Recognition of these forces helps identify the root causes of sprawl and provides understanding as to why community planning at the local level is mired in the inertia of sprawl’s persistent forces.

So, let’s take a brief look at each of the seven forces.

THE DRIVING FORCES OF SPRAWL

1. THE FORCE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

(Auto-Utopia – Promoted By Detroit, Hollywood, Washington, Wall Street and Madison Avenue)

An obvious major driving force of sprawl is the automobile. The incredible strength of this force results from the concepts of automobile utopia promoted -- as David Rusk would say -- by Detroit, Hollywood, Washington, Wall Street and Madison Avenue. At the 1939 World's Fair, the most popular exhibition was General Motor's "World of Tomorrow", featuring an enormous model of an auto-utopia called "City of the Future".

GM's "City of the Future" is what we live in today. Indeed, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers, who viewed the congestion of the city as a profound evil would have looked at today's decentralization – our dispersed and multi-centered region -- as an improvement too good to be imagined.

The car's dominance in America was practically assured by the dismantling of urban rail transit systems (often by the automobile and oil companies that bought them). Today, continued auto dominance is even more assured by suburbia's established low density – enabled by the automobile and now dependent on it. The rooted development pattern makes public transit use infeasible.

2. THE FORCE OF CHEAP MOBILITY

(The National Defense Highway Act Of 1956)

Another icon or driving force is Washington, or more specifically, federal policies resulting in cheap mobility. The National Defense Highway Act of 1956 created the interstate highway system for quick inter-city and inter-coastal mobility, and to deliberately disperse industry into the countryside – theoretically making it less vulnerable to nuclear attack. Our 42,800 mile interstate system – often proclaimed the largest public works program since the pyramids -- has been our national priority for the last 50 years. Although recognized as the backbone of the American economy, a gargantuan side effect has been sprawling suburbanization with all of its negative consequences.

On the heels of this 50 year investment in development dispersal, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) now provides a record \$218 billion in federal funding for transportation through 2005. Many expect this new money to be used to construct more highways. Metropolitan regions will attempt to relieve congestion on current beltways by constructing an "outer beltway". The recently completed Michael A. Fox Highway (SR 120), connecting I-75 with the city of Hamilton, Ohio is seen by many as being the first segment of a future "outer beltway". The highly subsidized beltways will continue to pull office parks, retail and residences from the central cities and central counties.

3. THE FORCE OF CHEAP MONEY (The Federal Housing Administration Guaranteed Mortgage)

After World War II, the Federal Housing Administration created the third suburbanization driver – cheap money, or the guaranteed mortgage. This financial instrument built the American suburbs with low down-payment, long term, fixed interest mortgages, essentially without risk to banks. This American suburbanization force is unique on our planet and it skews the marketplace in favor of sprawl.

Our pioneer ethic of building disposable communities and moving on to virgin land is in the blood of Americans. At some point, we have to recognize that we're no longer pioneers on a frontier and that growth resulting from current national and state policies is often a costly shell game that involves moving people and jobs from older communities to new communities within the same metropolitan area.

FHA's guaranteed mortgage, for the first time, put the single-family detached suburban house within the budget of most middle-class and even working-class families. Buying a new suburban house often became cheaper than renting an apartment in the city. As a result American homeownership raised from 44 percent in 1940 to the record 67 percent of today – fueling the suburban home building industry. So proponents of the last century's suburbanization say that the negative effects of sprawl are just part of the price we're paying for creating the world's first mass upper-middle class.

4. THE FORCE OF CHEAP ENERGY (Government Policy on Taxation)

The force of cheap energy -- subsidized energy for transportation and housing – is another federal policy that drives American development patterns. This federal policy masks the high operating costs of suburbia. Artificially cheap energy is perhaps the greatest obstacle to curbing sprawl and achieving smart growth in the United States.

In our American culture, cheap energy allows us to live the suburban life, with large air-conditioned homes, multiple vehicles, and long commutes to our jobs. Cheap energy also enables gigantic refrigerators and freezers in our kitchens, eliminating the need for daily shopping – a ritual found in vibrant neighborhoods.

In contrast, the European experience—with heavy taxation of gasoline and high rates for electric power and furnace fuels—makes it necessary to live in compact development patterns and in smaller houses and apartments with small cupboards and small refrigerators. Residents are, by necessity, a short walk to local food markets. The European result -- quaint villages and vibrant market places that we fly thousands of miles to visit.

Some American cities are beginning to understand this – the importance of vibrant pedestrian neighborhoods. Portland's Mayor, Vera Katz, says, "if you get up Sunday morning and find

out that you do not have orange juice, and you have to get into the car to get it, we haven't done our job." This is not, of course, an orange juice issue! It's about issues of sprawl, mobility, air quality, vibrant neighborhoods and quality of life. How many of your neighborhoods pass the "Sunday morning orange juice test"?

5. THE FORCE OF CHEAP COMMUNICATION (The Internet)

A relatively new and evolving driver of suburbanization is the internet and digital electronics. This force will continually make it possible for cities to become more and more dispersed since office work will increasingly travel rather than office workers. The irrelevance of geography will continue to drive the trend toward rural and decentralized workplaces.

Whereas the automobile contributed to decentralization of activities (one works in one place, sleeps in another, and shops in a third), the Internet allows for all of these activities to take place in one room – and the room no longer needs to be in an urban area.

6. THE FORCE OF HOME-RULE GOVERNMENT (Tax Base Competition)

The force of home-rule government provokes tax base competition and often precludes regional cooperation for economic development. Instead, our fragmented local governments are motivated politically to act parochially. Each pays attention to the welfare of its own resident voters, not to that of the region as a whole. As a result, our balkanized county sometimes functions as if the 49 political jurisdictions contain 49 separate economies – each competing for local businesses. Ingrained balkanization of our local political system brings us into the 21st century saddled with 19th century jurisdictional baggage that is woefully obsolete.

Home rule is an important value in Ohio and local autonomy carries many benefits, but communities are beginning to realize that they really are not in control of their own destiny. Instead, they are buffeted by regional, state and national forces, beyond local control.

In a home rule environment, where local property tax base and fiscal health is dependent on local growth, low-density development is imperative, and affordable housing cannot be supported. Mandating large lot size becomes the only way to ensure that expensive housing will be built. The result is sprawl, or unnecessary outward movement. The growth of new units on the metropolitan fringe begins to exceed the growth of new regional households and the core of the region becomes seriously underutilized.

Myron Orfield, in *Metropolitics*, concludes that as long as basic local services are dependent on local property wealth, the metropolitan problems associated with exclusive zoning, socioeconomic polarization, and sprawling land use cannot be mitigated—that tax-base sharing is fundamental to regional competitiveness in our global economy.

7. THE FORCE OF WEAK LEGISLATION (Ohio's Antiquated Planning Laws)

A final driving force is Ohio's weak planning legislation, compounded by the division of our region into three states. Coordinating legislative reform in bureaucracies of three states adds complexity and barriers to every possible growth management reform. Every region in the country that has made significant progress in growth management has had the support of enlightened state enabling legislation – with appropriate carrots and sticks.

Ohio's planning legislation is one of the most antiquated and weakest in the nation. The importance and urgency of improving our state legislation has been confirmed by a parade of planning experts that have recently studied our region. This includes David Rusk, William Hudnut, Michael Gallis, Neal Peirce, and Myron Orfield. All have advised that no sustainable advances in growth management will occur in this region until state legislation is updated.

THE NEED AND POTENTIAL FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

These behemoth federal and state policies continue to drive the suburban character of our region and overpower the multitude of local and regional planning initiatives.

Post 1950 development forces, mostly from national and state policies, have locked us in a pattern of growth that creates congestion, pollution, flooding, separation of jobs from workers, urban disinvestments, disposable towns, declining schools, meaner streets, human disease and injury, and rising taxes.

It appears to many that a change is now needed. It is time to overhaul the American dream. It's time to end our fifty-year-long national experiment in subsidized suburbanization. It's time for state and federal planning to get in sync with today's culture.

Peter Calthorpe, in *The Next American Metropolis*, says, “we continue to build post-World War II suburbs as if families were large and had only one breadwinner, as if the jobs were all downtown, as if land and energy were endless, and as if another lane on the freeway would end traffic congestion.”

The forces that drive and perpetuate sprawl remain very strong -- especially post WWII federal policies. The resulting entrenched development pattern creates an awesome challenge for community planning in the 21st Century. Any sustainable change will surely require a hard row against powerful currents of culture and history.

Solutions, such as clustered employment, improved transit, mixed land use, higher density development, and higher gasoline taxes, all require political, and therefore public support, that is currently weak. The solutions also require a long-term future orientation (uncommon in government) and a realization that results must be measured in generations rather than years or terms of elected office.

So, you may want to heed the advice of urban expert Anthony Downs: "... get a comfortable air-conditioned car with a radio, a tape deck and CD player, a hands-free telephone, a fax machine, even a microwave oven, and commute with someone you really like!"

As the forces of sprawl continue, community planners will continue to address the outcomes and symptoms through zoning and subdivision tools of local governments. And, we will continue to plan for community change. In Hamilton County, a foundation for essential reform is being built through our comprehensive master plan known as Community COMPASS. However, we could have the best functioning local planning and implementation system in the world, and sprawl would continue to increase.

Local planning and zoning efforts in the battle against sprawl are like the MASH unit (Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals) in the Korean War, taking in casualties. The casualties -- the results of sprawl -- that we continuously address, include traffic congestion, air and water pollution, the outflow of middle-class, declining schools, lost employment, evaporating tax base, growing crime, concentrated poverty and social needs, escalating tax rates, greater fiscal disparity, and declining health of communities.

Responding to these casualties is an important role for local planning organizations. However, the local planning organizations (our "community MASH units"), while desperately trying to repair sprawl induced damage, simply cannot stop the casualties from coming in. The external forces that subsidize and drive sprawl are so powerful that they are resistant to local planning remedies. We cannot expect our "community MASH units" to end the war; they just repair the injuries. What's needed is larger systemic change at regional, state and federal levels.

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