Defining Sprawl and Smart Growth

While a glossary of useful terms has been provided, it is also valuable to look more closely at two key words that the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council will likely spend time discussing: sprawl and smart growth.

SPRAWL

As with many terms in specific industries, some words have various meanings. In the field of land use and planning, no other word spurs more controversy and confusion than "sprawl." While the word is used often, it means many different things to many different individuals and groups of people. Although there are plenty of guesses as to its true meaning, no single definition exists. Below is a compilation from various sources of the meaning of "sprawl," drawn from the May 1999 issue of *Planning and Zoning News* (17[7]: 11). This may not be a complete rendering of *all* the potential meanings of the word, but is provided to help form a common understanding of the word and how it is commonly used.

> **Sprawl:** n. the act or state of sprawling.
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> **Sprawl:** v. to spread awkwardly or without a regular pattern; to take up more space than necessary. Webster's *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd, 1983.

> **Sprawl** is a low-density land use pattern that is automobile dependent, energy and land consumptive, and requires a very high ratio of road surface to development served. MSPO, *Patterns on the Land*, Trends Future Project, final report, September 1995.

> **Sprawl** is low-density development that unfolds from the edges of cities and towns. It is poorly planned, land consumptive, automobile-oriented, and designed without regard to its surrounding. Richard Moe, National Trust for Historic Preservation, from *Communities at Risk: the Consequences of Sprawl,* October 1993.

> **Sprawl:** The uncontrolled growth of urban development into previously rural areas. Sprawl usually refers to a mixture of land uses occurring in an unplanned pattern; it is generally identified with the outward suburban growth of cities that occurred after World War II. The popularity of the single-family, suburban subdivision and the greater use of automobiles on improved roadway systems were key contributors to this form of development. Other factors related to urban sprawl included the extension of municipal utilities (i.e., sewer and water systems): changes in industrial building design favoring one-story structures near highways over older inner city multi-story buildings; and government programs,

such as Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration mortgages, that supported suburban growth.

Urban sprawl has been strongly criticized as an unattractive and inefficient use of land and resources, causing excessive infrastructure costs related to extending utilities to remote areas. It has also been accused of eliminating environmentally important open space while leapfrogging developable parcels. Suburban jurisdictions were often administratively unprepared for growth pressures, and have suffered costly long-term effects of poor growth control, such as undersized utility systems that now need replacement. Sprawl has also been accused of debilitating central cities by helping outlying developments, such as shopping centers, compete with downtowns for the same market. Marilyn Spigel Schultz and Vivian Loeb Kasen, *Encyclopedia of Community Planning and Environmental Management*, 1984.

Sprawl: The growth of a metropolitan area through the process of scattered development of miscellaneous types of land use in isolated locations on the fringe, followed by the gradual filling-in of the intervening spaces with similar uses. Ideally, urban growth should take place around urban areas and be channeled in an orderly manner that will produce an economically efficient and personally satisfying environment for all people. This requires that new development be channeled to areas which can be served efficiently by reasonable extensions of existing utility and transportation services, and can provide a wide range of housing, and job opportunities. The pattern of development as it goes beyond the areas of logical development to isolated locations on the urban fringe produces a leap-frogging, chickenpox pattern around the edges of urban areas, a pattern which is aptly characterized as urban sprawl. *The Language of Open Space: A Glossary*, 1975.

Leapfrog Sprawl: is energy inefficient (if the area is dependent on a central city with employment and shopping), but is often efficient for other resources IF it clusters around available facilities in existing nodes of concentrated development at the periphery.

Continuous Sprawl: if contiguous to existing development and is caused by significant increases in population it is a "logical corollary to a growing community," but if it is merely population redistribution without population and employment growth it siphons off the economic vitality of the central city.

Low-Density Sprawl: Less efficient than continuous sprawl, does not concentrate around nodes of concentrated development, is usually market-driven and is very expensive to provide public services to.

By Eric Kelly, President, American Planning Association and Dean of the College of Architecture and Planning at Ball State University, from an address at the January 1998, MSU Land Use Forum.

Sprawl is "the jive-plastic commuter tract-home wastelands, the Potemkin Village shopping plazas with their vast parking lagoons, the Lego-block hotel complexes, the 'gourmet mansardic' junk-food joints, the Orwellian office 'parks' featuring buildings sheathed in the same reflective glass as the sunglasses worn by chain-gang guards, the particle-board garden apartments rising up in every meadow and cornfield, the freeway loops around every big and little city with their clusters of discount merchant marts, the whole destructive, wasteful, toxic, agoraphobia-inducing spectacle that politicians proudly call 'growth.'" From *The Geography of Nowhere* by James Howard Kunstler, 1993.

Scatter Development is a form of what is commonly referred to as "urban sprawl". Specifically speaking it is characterized by either widely scattered homes on large acreages or by residential subdivisions separated by a half-mile or more from other residential development. *Living on the Edge: The Costs and Risks of Scatter Development* by A. Ann Sorensen and J. Dixon Esseks, American Farmland Trust, March 1998.

In the Transportation Research Board-National Research Council's report *Costs of Sprawl—Revisited* (1998), authors characterize sprawl in two ways: residential (low-density scattered residential development) and nonresidential (scattered commercial and industrial development with a floor-area ratio less than 0.2). The report (p. 124) also presents a working definition of sprawl that identifies its characteristics based on a review of many research findings.

1. Low residential density (usually far more residential than nonresidential).
2. Unlimited outward extension of new development.
3. Spatial segregation of different types of land uses through zoning regulations.
4. Leapfrog development.
5. No centralized ownership of land or coordinated planning of development.
6. All transportation dominated by privately owned motor vehicles.
7. Fragmentation of governance authority over land uses between many local governments.
8. Great variances in the fiscal capacity of local governments because the revenue-raising capabilities of each are strongly tied to the property values and economic activities occurring within their own borders.
9. Widespread commercial strip development along major roadways.
10. Major reliance upon the filtering or "trickle-down" process to provide housing for low-income households.

The report also examines (p. 1–2) the difficult relationships between the public's desire for sprawl and its outcomes.

> Sprawl occurs, in part, because local governments in the United States encourage this form of development via zoning and subdivision ordinances which, in turn, reflect the desires of a large share of their citizenry. This type of development is favored by the general public because it (among other factors):
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> 1. dilutes congestion while accommodating unlimited use of the automobile;
> 2. distances new development from the fiscal and social problems of older core areas;
> 3. provides a heterogeneous economic mix;
> 4. fosters neighborhoods in which housing will appreciate;
> 5. fosters neighborhoods in which schools provide both education and appropriate socialization for youth; and
> 6. requires lower property taxes to pay for local and school district operating expenses than locations closer in.
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> If sprawl is so desirable, why should the citizens of the United States accept anything else? The answer is that they no longer can pay for the infrastructure necessary to develop farther and farther out in metropolitan areas (p. 3).
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> Dually supporting and underutilizing two systems of infrastructure—one that is being abandoned in and around central cities and close-in suburbs, and one that is not yet fully used in rural areas just beginning to be developed—is causing governments to forgo the maintenance of much infrastructure and the provision of anything other than growth-related infrastructure. The United States, in other words, is funding road infrastructure by:
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> 1. not funding all infrastructure;
> 2. not fully funding developmental infrastructure;
> 3. not repairing or replacing most types of infrastructure; and
> 4. not taking advantage of the technological improvements in rehabilitation, repair, and provision of infrastructure that could be passed on to taxpayers as savings.
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> In sum, most of the American public is not unhappy with the current pattern of development in metropolitan areas—it simply can no longer afford it. Thus, the primary concern about sprawl development, at a time when the average American is satisfied with its outcome, is cost. And costs need to be measured not just in terms of capital improvement, but also in terms of resource depletion. Land in the United States is being consumed at triple the rate of household formation; automobile use is growing twice as fast as the population; and prime agricultural land, forests, and fragile lands encompassing natural habitats are decreasing at comparable reciprocal rates (p. 4).

Two years later, in the Transportation Research Board-National Research Council's report, *Costs of Sprawl—2000*, the definition of sprawl was redefined to be

> "spread-out development that consumes significant amounts of natural and man-made resources, including land and public works infrastructure of various types. Sprawl also adds to overall travel costs due to increasing use of the automobile to

> access work and residence locations more widely spaced due to the sprawl phenomenon. Furthermore, sprawl appears to deconcentrate centers and takes away from the multiplicity of purpose that neighborhoods once delivered. Yet sprawl has benefits. It offers access to less-expensive housing and opportunities for homeownership at the periphery of metropolitan areas. It provides congestion management in automobile-dominated metropolitan areas by creating the suburban-to-suburban trip and by better equalizing the percentages of the commuting population involved in reverse and forward commutes. Those against sprawl decry its resource consumption, contribution to urban ills, and the public's distaste for it. Those who are comfortable with sprawl cite its ability to deliver homeownership, the potential for real estate investment gains, and life style satisfaction. The interesting aspect of the sprawl phenomenon is that its critics and proponents are probably both right, yet each side is absolutely unwilling to acknowledge the merits of the other's view." (Preface, n.p.)

SMART GROWTH

Smart growth is another term used to describe a type or group of planning efforts. Smart Growth is considered by many as an alternative growth pattern to sprawl that encourages and supports growth while enhancing local quality of life. It, too, can have different meanings for different people and take a variety of shapes in different communities; however, there are several common principles that are generally accepted practices of smart growth initiatives.

The Urban Land Institute explains that smart growth means development that accommodates growth in economically viable, environmentally responsible, and collaboratively determined ways. It calls for building communities that are more hospitable, productive, and fiscally and environmentally responsible than most of the communities that have been developed in the last century. Smart growth seeks to identify a common ground where developers, environmentalists, public officials, citizens, and others can all find acceptable ways to accommodate growth (Porter 2002).

Smart growth recognizes connections between development and quality of life by leveraging new growth to improve the community. In general, smart growth invests time, attention, and resources in restoring community and vitality to center cities and older suburbs. New smart growth is more town-centered; transit and pedestrian oriented; has a greater mix of housing, commercial, and retail uses; and preserves open space and many other environmental amenities. It is important to note that there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution. Successful communities do tend to have one thing in common—a vision of where they want to go and of what things they value in their community—and their plans for development reflect these values (Smart Growth Network 2003. Click on *Overview*).

The ten common smart growth principles provided by the Smart Growth Network follow (2003, click on *Principles*).

- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices—Providing quality housing for people of all income levels is an integral component in any smart growth strategy.

- **Create walkable neighborhoods**—Walkable communities are desirable places to live, work, learn, worship, and play, and therefore a key component of smart growth.
- **Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration**—Growth can create great places to live, work, and play — if it responds to a community's own sense of how and where it wants to grow.
- **Foster distinctive, attractive places with a strong sense of place**—Smart growth encourages communities to craft a vision and set standards for development and construction which respond to community values of architectural beauty and distinctiveness, as well as expanded choices in housing and transportation.
- **Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective**—For a community to be successful in implementing smart growth, it must be embraced by the private sector.
- **Mix land uses**—Smart growth supports the integration of mixed land uses into communities as a critical component of achieving better places to live.
- **Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas**—Open space preservation supports smart growth goals by bolstering local economies, preserving critical environmental areas, improving our communities quality of life, and guiding new growth into existing communities.
- **Provide a variety of transportation choices**—Providing people with more choices in housing, shopping, communities, and transportation is a key aim of smart growth.
- **Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities**—Smart growth directs development towards existing communities already served by infrastructure, seeking to utilize the resources that existing neighborhoods offer, and conserve open space and irreplaceable natural resources on the urban fringe.
- **Take advantage of compact building design**—Smart growth provides a means for communities to incorporate more compact building design as an alternative to conventional, land consumptive development.

SPRAWL AND SMART GROWTH

The Federal Highway Administration has created a "position" paper on both topics. We include excerpts here as another perspective on, and balanced approach to, thinking about both sprawl and smart growth.

> **"Smart Growth" and FHWA: What does "Smart Growth" mean to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)?**
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> FHWA believes that "smart growth" is a concept best supported by a set of policies and programs intended to protect and preserve valuable natural and cultural resources. "Smart growth" also encourages economic development in targeted locations. While transportation is not specifically mentioned in that

working definition, it is important to note that transportation affects land use just like affordable housing, good schools, and low crime rates.

"Smart growth" means many different things to many different people and groups. Some people think that it means stopping or stunting all growth and development outside existing built up areas. Others feel that it means growing in a way that protects our natural and built environments and that maintains or revitalizes the urban core. Still others believe that it means clustered neo-traditional architecture in a suburban setting. There is no consensus on its meaning and there may never be one.

What does "smart growth" mean for transportation?

It can mean:

- Establishing state and local land use strategies to increase population and housing densities and make transit more viable,
- Managing and operating existing highway, transit, and other transportation modes to maintain or improve performance for each mode without adversely affecting neighborhoods or urban centers,
- Knitting transportation improvement projects and public/private investments so that they merge as seamlessly as possible into the community,
- Supporting the provision of mixed use development so that transit, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and ferry boats are viable options to driving,
- Accommodating the flow of freight throughout the country so that the economy can continue to grow.

It does not mean:

- ***Pitting transit or any other mode against highways***. We acknowledge the fact that it is impractical to completely build our way out of congestion in our most congested metropolitan areas. But that does not mean that we think that new roads and improvements to the existing road network should be eliminated in favor of transit projects only. It is not an issue of highways vs. transit. It is an issue of providing a balanced intermodal transportation system that allows for the efficient and economical movement of people and goods. In some areas that may mean more transit and in other areas it may entail significant roadway improvements. ***The point is that it is up to State and local officials to decide how best to address their unique set of circumstances and it is FHWA's role to help them once they have made that decision.***

What does "Sprawl" mean to FHWA?

Sprawl is a pejorative term in many circles. Some people call it unmanaged growth that consumes farmland, open spaces, and increases traffic congestion. Others call it progress and economic development. It is truly in the eye of the beholder. We may never get agreement on the definitions of sprawl or smart

growth. However, we do agree that issues such as jobs and tax bases fleeing the central city, and the "warehousing" of the poor in central cities should be addressed in a systematic and holistic manner—and that sound transportation is part of the answer.

What is FHWA's Position on "Smart Growth" and "Sprawl?"

The Federal Highway Administration strongly believes that land use decisions are state/local decisions and should remain that way. However, we do believe that there should be more coordination among the residents of a metropolitan region, State and local planning, zoning, and housing authorities, and environmental, and transportation officials. We also believe that there should be more dialogue between local decision makers and transportation professionals on the linkages between land use and transportation. Such dialogues would allow us to learn from each other and produce better land use/transportation outcomes.

In the past we have not always acknowledged the fact that transportation decisions influence land use decisions and vice versa. We want to move away from an outdated mindset that denies transportation's influence on local land use decisions. We intend to operate in a new frame of reference that allows us to cooperate with our federal partners such as EPA, HUD, and FTA so that we can provide as much assistance as possible in the areas of research, technical assistance, and training to local and State governments. At the same time we want to be mindful that the people of this country hold freedom of mobility as a cherished individual right and that our goal is to create an intermodal system that operates at peak efficiency.

Can FHWA Offer Any Solutions to the Lack of Coordination Among Land Use and Transportation Plans?

Many experts in the area of transportation and land use, such as Anthony Downs and Bruce Katz with the Brookings Institute, have advocated for the creation of a regional forum that allows the regional players from transportation, zoning and land use, housing, grassroots organizations, community health, schools, etc. to come together and work towards shared goals and visions. The prototype for this forum already exists in the form of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs). MPOs already have a board that is made up of elected officials from the surrounding jurisdictions of a metropolitan area, thus making it truly regional in nature. They also have links to environmental and business groups, grassroots organizations, State, local, and federal agencies on transportation and the environment to name a few.

But MPOs need more interaction with local zoning officials so that they are aware of upcoming transportation projects and can take them under consideration, and so that transportation officials are aware of zoning changes that may affect the future transportation network. Cooperative information sharing on a regional basis can produce a win-win situation for an entire metropolitan area by providing an integrated transportation and land use strategy, increased protection of our built and natural environments, increased mobility, economic independence and opportunity, and a healthy civic dialogue.

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