Researcher: Sprawl doesn’t hurt cities

Expert finds no link to poverty, crime or school decline

By HAYE E. Nasser

The nation's sprawling development may not be as bad for society as many担心。 Despite widespread belief that sprawling growth causes poverty, crime and school decline, a recent study finds no evidence of a link between sprawl and these issues. The study, conducted by a team of researchers, analyzed data from various cities and found that areas with higher rates of sprawl do not necessarily have higher rates of poverty, crime or declining school performance. The researchers argue that the notion of sprawl as a negative factor has been overstated, and that other factors, such as economic conditions and policy decisions, may have a greater impact on these outcomes. They also suggest that policies aimed at promoting more compact development may not be the best solution, as they could lead to other negative consequences. Overall, the study provides a more nuanced view of the impacts of sprawl on society, and challenges some of the commonly held beliefs about this topic.
One-size-fits-all won't control urban sprawl

Our View

Local attempts to rein in growth superior to federal programs.

Anyone with a teen-ager and a couch knows that sprawl matters. It matters even more so when the sprawling entity is not just one person but millions, aggregated into vast, unplanned communities.

Such sprawl absorbs farmland, clogs highways, jams schools and siphons economic energy from city centers.

Urban sprawl — roughly defined as "low-density, auto-dependent development" — isn't new, except for the way it has gained political fashion. Even Vice President Al Gore, seeking traction with important suburban voting blocs, has a plan to help control it.

Political opportunism aside, sprawl is an ever-worsening dilemma. By some estimates, the United States is losing 50 acres of farmland an hour to development, an area the size of Connecticut and Rhode Island every 10 years.

Another measure: Even though public school enrollment in Maine fell by 27,000 students between 1970 and 1995, the state spent $338 million on new school construction in fast-growing towns. The problem is so acute that 240 sprawl-control initiatives appeared on ballots last November. More than 70% passed.

Outside Washington, where the solutions matter most, some anti-sprawl ideas are big and noble. New Jersey approved a gas tax worth $1 billion over 10 years, to be used to preserve open space. Others are small and potentially petty. Voters in Ventura County, Calif., gave themselves the right to veto zoning changes, allowing them to lock out others.

But either way, the nature of sprawl requires custom-fit solutions, best conceived locally. In Peninsula Township, Mich., for instance, voters approved a plan to buy development rights from farmers. In Lancaster County, Pa., a similar program has been supplemented by voluntary growth boundaries. In Portland, Ore., mandatory growth boundaries are the rule.

When sprawl reaches across jurisdictions, broader approaches are required. Around Atlanta, arguably the most sprawled-out metropolitan area in the nation, local leaders concede transportation decisions to a 10-county superagency. Maryland is one of 12 states with comprehensive development plans.

We're not alone:

In this layering of responsibility, the feds must rank a distant third. Gore's idea of tax credits for land-preservation bonds is one of several ideas kicking around the nation's capital. But federal influence is hard to determine.

Just last month, Congress' General Accounting Office reported that it could not find solid data to support the assumption that federal policies have a measurable impact on sprawl.

But it isn't all bad news. Among other things, it is among the best evidence we have that the American Dream — single-family home ownership — is being achieved by more and more people. Sprawl is an engine of prosperity and an amplifier of satisfying cultural values: family, home, community.

But the costs are punishing: polluted air, slow commutes and energized city centers. Against that, the solution cannot simply be to continue accommodating unplanned growth. Rather, like the teen-ager on the couch, the smart solution is to manage and direct it.

Washington can help

Our program will provide tax credits, funding.

By Al Gore

In too many places across America, the beauty of local vistas has been degraded by decades of unplanned and ill-coordinated development. Plan well, and you have a community that nurtures commerce and private life. Plan badly, and you have what so many of us suffer from firsthand: gridlock, sprawl and that uniquely modern evil of all-too-little time.

This kind of sprawl... means working families must sink thousands of dollars into extra commuting costs. It means that people leaving welfare and eager to work have no way to get to where their new job is and still pick up a child in day care. It means that resources are siphoned away from older neighborhood to build ever-more distant new amenities in new communities. It means... air and water quality go down, and taxes go up. We can do better...

I am proud to take the first big step in this effort by launching our new Livability Agenda for the 21st Century... We are proposing $700 million in new tax credits for state and local bonds to build more livable communities.

Excerpts from Vice President Al Gore's Jan. 11 speech on the administration's Livable Communities for the 21st Century program.
The natural beauty of the coastal environment is a major draw for both tourists and new residents. However, unless environmentally sound planning is incorporated into coastal development schemes, some of the very qualities that draw people to the coast will be lost beyond repair.

In the past two decades the North Carolina coast has experienced a huge increase in population. This population increase has led to major changes in the landscape, from sparsely populated rural character to densely populated urbanized development.

The population increases and associated land use changes have caused water quality problems including algal blooms, fish kills, and closing of shellfishing areas due to high levels of fecal bacteria. This not only leads to ecological damage to our water resources, but economic loss to commercial fishermen and their dependents as well.

These water quality problems are caused by inputs of pollution from the changing landscape. The pollutants include nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizers, bacteria from manure deposited by dogs, cats, and other domestic or wild animals, pesticides and herbicides, metals from industrial or commercial areas, and other toxicants.

Because of sewage treatment improvements in recent years, most coastal pollution now enters our waterways by being washed in from the landscape during rainstorms, called non-point source pollution. The U.S. EPA currently considers non-point source runoff to be the biggest threat to our water quality.

There are several ways to reduce non-point source pollution. Some of these include establishment of streamside vegetated buffer zones, construction of properly functioning wet detention ponds, installation of biofilters to treat runoff, and preservation and construction of wetlands. However, the greatest gains in water pollution prevention for developing areas can be achieved by proper advance planning for environmentally-friendly growth.

The increased amount of water rushing into a stream after a rainstorm also causes erosion of stream banks and the adjoining properties. The flooding that commonly occurs in urbanized lowland coastal areas is largely caused by loss of natural wetlands coupled with large increases in impervious surface coverage.

The way to combat these problems is to anticipate them and plan development in advance. The overall goal in such planning should be to minimize the amount of impervious surface coverage of an area while maximizing the amount of "green" space, preferably landscape left in its natural vegetation. There are a number of ways to achieve this.

Shopping area parking lots are often designed for maximum holiday shopping traffic, while large paved areas lie unused during much of the year. Outlying parking areas can be left in grass or covered with "semi-pervious" materials that allow percolation of water while still providing a solid substrate to support an automobile. In less-used areas, sidewalks can be placed on one side of the street only instead of both sides.

Instead of large paved cul-de-sacs on dead end roads, T-shaped turnarounds can be used, or traffic circles with vegetated areas in the middle. Instead of developing wetlands, these important pollution filters should be preserved and can even be incorporated into runoff treatment schemes. Vegetated buffer zones consisting of native plants should be left along streams and runoff ditches to reduce inputs of nitrogen, phosphorus, sediments, and bacteria.

There are many other proven techniques that planners, elected officials, and developers can utilize to preserve water quality in developing areas, so that the beauty and ecological function of natural areas will be maintained for future generations.

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