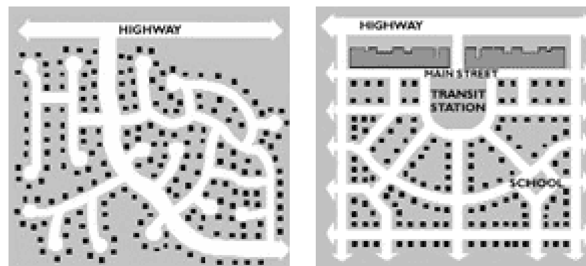
Urban Sprawl

Know sprawl when you see it!

Isolated housing subdivisions
More highways and roads
Traffic congestion
Strip malls and large chain stores
More land for fewer people

Perhaps you've noticed your community is getting a little bigger. Road construction seems to be everywhere and traffic is more heavy than it used to be; new strip malls and "big box" stores are popping up; and land on the outskirts of your town is being cleared for new housing subdivisions. Your community could be experiencing urban sprawl, an issue that has affected cities and towns across the country as well as the Great Lakes region.

Urban sprawl can be generally defined as wide-spread, low-density development that consists primarily of strip commercial developments, such as malls and large office buildings, and housing subdivisions connected by new, wide roads and boulevards. The subdivisions are set apart from other development and built within a specific price range, and people are dependent on their cars to get them from one place to another. With sprawl, fewer people occupy more land and as the people spread out, so do the buildings, roads and houses. Urban sprawl is difficult to define but people usually know it when they see it. The following maps describe what an urban sprawl suburb might look like (left) compared to the land use plan of a town that avoids sprawl (right).



Maps by Gail Dennis, Michigan Land Use Institute
Source: "The Next American Metropolis," by Peter Calthorpe.

Graphics: Urban sprawl layout (left) compared to an anti-sprawl urban design (right)

The Great Lakes region is losing its rich farmland and other greenfields to urban sprawl at an alarming rate, and the environment and the residents are paying the price. Many cities of the Great Lakes region, such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, are seeing their businesses and residents move to the suburbs, forever destroying open spaces and leaving behind cities of abandoned buildings with fewer tax payers.

2 | What are the causes of urban sprawl?

What causes sprawl?

Money from the government
The "American Dream"
Increased car manufacturing
Economic growth

After World War II, people started moving from the cities into the countryside. The GI Bill, road building projects, and increased car manufacturing all contributed greatly to this shift, and living in "suburbia" signified a better quality of life. Land was cheap and there was plenty of it, and government incentives and subsidies helped families realize their dream. Today, subsidies from the federal and state governments, such as for highway construction and commercial development, continue to promote sprawl and its effects.

The lack of effective land use planning allowed this move to the countryside to occur virtually uncontrolled. All Great Lakes states *allow* local governments to create comprehesnsive plans to guide growth and to create local laws (called zoning ordinances) to decide what types of development can happen where. However, none of the Great Lakes states actually *require* local land use planning.

In all of the Great Lakes states, land use planning happens at the smallest level of government (e.g., town, township, city), so the state has very little say in how land gets developed, except when it involves spending state tax dollars, such as for major highway projects. When local land use plans are developed, often they are inconsistent with the zoning ordinances and do not consider the impacts on surrounding areas and nearby communities. In practice, zoning ordinances and building codes, not land use plans, govern most land development decisions. The problem with this is that zoning tells "where" and "what type" of development can take place, but it does not consider questions of "how" and "when" development should take place. Most zoning ordinances separate different types of land uses, establish minimum distances between houses, minimum setbacks from roads, minimum parking space requirements, minimum road widths, and so on so that the only type of development that can occur is sprawl. In this way, the lack of land use planning and the reliance on zoning ordinances has promoted sprawl.

With little or no land use planning to protect greenfields, farm fields and rural countrysides and ecologically important habitats such as wetlands have been carved up. More roads were needed to connect the new development to downtown, which invited more development on the outskirts and the cycle continues today. As more people and businesses move out to former greenfields, fewer taxpayers are supporting older towns and cities, leaving them to deteriorate.

3 | What are the effects of urban sprawl? (Part I)

According to a 1998 Sierra Club report, cities in six of the Great Lakes states account for six of the top 20 sprawl threatened cities (over one million residents) in the United States: Cincinnati, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland and Pittsburgh. In Chicago, for example, the population increased only 9% from 1990 to 1996, but land area development has increased more than 40% in that same time period. In Michigan, over 100,000 acres of farmland are lost to urban sprawl every year. And the amount of time Cincinnati drivers were stuck in traffic jams increased 200% from 1982 to 1994.

Why is sprawl bad?

More pollution
Loss of wildlife habitats
Traffic jams
Farmland loss
Increased taxes
Increased school costs
Deteriorated downtown areas
Loss of community

Sprawl can damage ecological systems and their natural functions, such as wildlife habitats and wetlands. Housing subdivisions, commercial developments, and the roads that connect them all divide a landscape, which results in habitat fragmentation. This fragmentation forces wildlife to either find another place to live or compete with each for a smaller amount of land. Urban sprawl is also threatening wetlands, an important key to healthy ecosystems. In addition to being home to a number of critical wildlife and plant species, wetlands improve water quality by filtering out sediments and other pollutants, protect the shorelines of rivers and lakes from erosion, and help control and reduce flooding. However, since 1800, over two-thirds of Great Lakes wetlands have been lost or severely damaged, and land development continues to destroy wetlands today.

See also: Habitats of the Great Lakes Region

Pollution is also a cost of urban sprawl. Most sprawling towns are built for cars and force us to drive more frequently and for longer periods of time. And increased use of cars leads to more air and noise pollution as well traffic jams. As for water pollution, lands covered with highways, buildings, and parking lots increases runoff, polluting our streams, lakes, and watersheds. As a result, our access to clean and safe drinking water becomes threatened, and our aquatic plant and animal life suffer.

Urban sprawl is also destroying our farmlands at an alarming rate. Between 1981 and 1992 the Great Lakes basin lost more than 4.5 million acres of farmland, an area nearly the size of Lake Ontario. This loss of farmland decreases our access to an affordable food supply and sacrifices open lands to development and, eventually, more pollution. According the the American

Farmland Trust, of the top 20 threatened farmland regions in the U.S., five of them are in the Great Lakes region -- Southern Wisconsin and Northern Illinois Drift Plain, the Eastern Ohio Till Plain, the Ontario Plain and Finger Lakes region, the Southwestern Michigan Fruit and Truck Belt, and the Western Michigan Fruit and Truck Belt.

Sprawl inevitably raises taxes. New urban infrastructure such as roads and sewer and water lines is expensive, and taxes help pay for the expense of establishing suburban communities. But as is often the case, taxpayers from a broader geographic area help pay for new development, so people who do not live in these suburban communities are often burdened with higher taxes as well. One hidden cost of sprawl is the construction of new schools. As communities spread out, new suburban schools must be constructed, often leaving urban schools under-utilized and poorly funded. Between 1970 and 1990, Minneapolis-St. Paul spent tax dollars building 78 new suburban schools, while closing over 150 schools in fine condition within the city limits.

Many cities in the Great Lakes region, such as Detroit, are suffering from the abandonment of businesses and residents, and their downtown areas have fallen into a state of decay. The sense of community afforded by urban areas is lost, and suburban communities often don't provide a substitute, because they are isolated from one another and from community gathering places, such as the town square, grocery store, shopping, and work areas. Citizens remaining in the city are often too poor to move elsewhere, and jobs are scarce because many businesses have moved to the suburbs. These indirect costs are important because they affect the environment, the economy, and the quality of life for both the urban and suburban residents of a city.

Another problem of deserted downtown areas is brownfields -- potentially contaminated areas on which a deserted building, such as an old industrial facility, still stands. Whatever business or operation polluted the land has now moved on, and no one wants to claim responsibility for the cleanup; the area remains deserted, continuing to pollute the soil and, potentially, the water supply. An indirect cost of brownfields is the development of greenfields. Instead of cleaning up land that has already been developed, developers target undeveloped open space for new development, resulting in more sprawl.

Graphic: Michigan farmland for sale. Copyright Michigan Land Use Institute, photography by Patrick Owen; Detroit brownfields site.

4 | Solutions to Sprawl

Solutions to sprawl

Protect farmers and greenfields
Revitalize your downtown
Work with your neighbors
A new way of thinking

States and communities are beginning to realize the effects of sprawl, and many are in the early stages of developing and implementing plans to curb it. The city of Portland, Oregon, is one the best examples of efficient land-use planning in the United States. In the late 1970s, Portland's government drew an invisible circle around the city limits, restricting any development beyond that line. Therefore, the city grew up instead of out, retaining both the downtown life inside of the city and the farmlands and open spaces outside of the city. Developers were prompted to use space more efficiently, and rather than leaving abandoned buildings to decay, these buildings are often cleaned up and turned, once again, into housing, office, or commercial spaces. Portland does have its share of growth-related problems, such as high rents and traffic congestion, but it's an excellent example of what a city can do to stem urban sprawl.

Protect farmers and greenfields

Without farmland there would be no food, and without greenfields, our landscape would be a never-ending chain of strip malls, big box stores, and sudivisions connected by

pavement. With farmland and other greenfields rapidly disappearing, some organizations and states are beginning to fight for protection. Organizations such as the "1000 Friend" chapters (see More Information) and other grassroot efforts bring together citizens with a variety of backgrounds and interests, such as farmers, environmentalists, ruralists, and urbanists. By forming a coalition, thier concerns about land-use practices are better represented and create a stronger impact on local governments. Some state governments have also created programs to protect open spaces and farmland, such as the Growing Greener and Growing Smarter programs in Pennsylvania. The Growing Greener program will invest more than $650 million in land protection, and provide grants to organizations who have ideas on how to protect Pennsylvania's natural resources, while the Growing Smarter program encourages effective land-use planning while respecting the rights of property owners.

Revitalize your downtown

While many of the large cities around the Great Lakes region are struggling with depressed downtown areas, some cities are discovering ways to make their downtown more desirable. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has been able to clean up some of its brownfields and entice businesses and people back to the city. The mayor, John O. Norquist, is well known for his efforts to promote urban revitalization within Milwaukee by increasing job growth, simplifying zoning laws, lowering city taxes, and creating a safer city in which to live. He also supports deconstructing a partially built highway that would cut right through an old community, and his leadership helped build a river walk along both sides of the Milwaukee River, providing public gathering places and beauty.

Graphics: Michigan Farm; Milwaukee River Walk (photo courtesy of IJC-Milwaukee)

Work with your neighbors

Land-use decisions are best made when looking at the entire region, rather than just a small portion of it. Development not only affects your community, but those to the north, south, east, and west of you. Communities may be created within political boundaries, but ecosystems, rivers, wildlife habitats, and the air you breathe don't follow these boundaries, so by including other communities in planning development, more responsible and efficient growth can result.

The Great Lakes region provides some examples of regional cooperation. The First Suburbs Consortium of Northeastern Ohio is a group of 10 Cleveland suburbs who decided that working together, instead of separately, would provide better solutions to Cleveland's growth and sprawl problems. The Consortium has brought together more than 200 city and state leaders in the fight against sprawl, and Columbus, Dayton, and Toledo now all have First Suburbs organizations as well. The Grand Valley Metro Council is another good example of regional cooperation, bringing together over 30 townships in the Grand Rapids, Mich., area in order to promote anti-sprawl land-use issues. And the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council includes more than 180 townships across seven counties, and helps the city plan and manage the increasing population and growing economies of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

A new way of thinking

How can a city promote economic growth while preserving its open spaces and increasing the quality of life for its residents? This question has prompted new ways of thinking about growth and development, such as new urbanism and smart growth. New urbanism seeks to redesign towns so that they have a central downtown area, walkable neighborhoods, and public meeting spaces, while smart growth addresses these issues by redirecting public spending away from projects and programs that promote sprawl and toward those that revitalize cities and towns. Both ideas have critics and obstacles, and have yet to

be fully implemented into the Great Lakes region. But discussions have begun in this region, and organizations, such as the Michigan Land Use Institute, are already educating the residents and governments about these new ideas.

Creating better-planned communities would also promote more alternative means of transportation, such as bus, train, bike, or foot. By providing means of safe, reliable, and efficient alternatives to car transportation, cities can provide a better atmosphere in which to live, while also protecting the environment. Minneapolis is in the first stages of providing light rail transportation, and the city also has a program that promotes bicycle transit, called the Yellow Bike Coalition. Bikes are kept at local businesses and other public places, and anyone can check them out, like you would a library book, for the day and longer periods of time.

Graphics: Image of the Twin Cities--St. Paul is in the left foreground and Minneapolis is in the middle far background. (photo courtesy of Metropolitan Council).

http://www.great-lakes.net/teach/pollution/sprawl/sprawl_1.html