

# Sprawl is the enemy; victory might need a march in reverse

SPRAWL - the word even sounds ugly. Webster's definition is "to spread out carelessly or awkwardly," and it might have added inefficiently and expensively. And that is exactly what is happening as development takes place in the suburbs of Rhode Island and throughout the country

"The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island," the well documented and useful study done for Grow Smart Rhode Island best defines it as low-density, large-lot, and scattered pattern of development that is characterized as an inefficient development pattern. The study also claims that over the next 20 years in Rhode Island, should this form of development continue, there will be a cost to the state's taxpayers of \$1.5 billion for redundant infrastructure.

Growth management, smart growth, managing growth or call it what you will, there is now a recognition throughout the nation, from the Vice President on down, that sprawling development is wasting land, is expensive, is ugly, is wasteful of resources, is inefficient, contributes to pollution, devours farms and open space and is too car-dependent, so something needs to be done.

We are still a growing country. The 2000 census will likely show that we have added 25 million residents over the past 10 years; thus, we do need to provide land for houses and other needs for this added population. The question is where will they be located and how will such development take place.

The "where" is market driven. Jobs are

the major incentive for people movement, and here the major growth regions are the South and the West. Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, for example, located just east of Los Angeles have doubled their population in the last 20 years, and projections are that they will double again in another 20 years. It is this type of explosive growth that has caused four in 10 residents of California to fear that the state will be a worse place in which to live in another two decades.

In this respect Rhode Island is fortunate in that we do not have this type of growth. In fact the 2000 census may reveal that we have registered a population loss over the last 10 years. Yet we have movement within the state, with our cities losing population and our suburbs gaining this population.

Washington County registered an 18 percent gain in population from 1980 to 1990 while the other four counties in the state gained close to five percent, the state average, while four of our eight cities lost population. That trend continues: from 1990 to 1997, while Providence and Newport Counties lost population and Bristol and Kent Counties stayed the same, Washington County experienced a nine percent gain. Also, all eight cities in the state lost population.

In an effort to stem this rapid, for Rhode

Island, growth, several communities in our southern county have instituted or will institute impact fees, have capped building permits or declared moratoriums, increased lot size and have looked for other measures

to stem growth. But is this smart growth or an attempt at no growth, as many developers claim?

The "how" of this new development, an overriding concern for these and many other communities, is preserving open space as all of this new development takes place. One proven way to conserve open land is to have cluster zoning where houses are placed close together and open space preserved.

A good example of this is North Farm in Bristol, the state's oldest condominium complex. This attractive, water-view, 80 acre site of which 30 acres is wetland, has 300 units on the buildable remaining 50 acres, or a density of six units per acre, higher than the housing density of Providence. Yet by clustering these units, less than 50 percent of that 50 acres is used for housing. Thus, a five acre arboretum is preserved and two other five acres plots remain open, and amenities such as swimming pool, tennis courts, community center, community gardens and bicycle path, as well as roads, occupy the rest of the site.

Yet the question is, how many communities in Washington County and the rest of

the state allow such developments? The problem is that too few do.

Is clustering the only solution? Of course not. Randall Arendt's new book, *Growing Greener: Putting Conservation into Local Plans and Ordinances* suggests we should build our subdivisions backwards, i.e., start with what to conserve and build houses and roads on the remainder of the land rather than the other way around, as is currently done.

In the same manner, sprawl could be addressed by working backwards also: Since people are leaving cities to move to suburbs, why not improve cities so that people will want to live there and thus reduce pressure on diminishing land outside our cities.

This is exactly the thrust of the Grow Smart Rhode Island report and that of the Environmental Protection Agency. In their "New England Smart Growth Challenge Grant Program," EPA has set aside \$300,000 for communities to come up with programs to encourage infill development and redevelopment to stem the urban population exodus.

Maintaining the character of rural areas and revitalizing cities will not be easy, but if people are informed, can recognize the problems and are willing to put a greater emphasis on community needs, Rhode Island can be a model of grow smart planning and implementation.

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## Commentary

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