

Sprawl

What it is, why it's bad and what YOU can do about it.



When people look around and comment on infrastructure problems, tax rates, quality of life, empty buildings or a lack of vibrancy in any city, they often look for overly simplistic answers to complex problems. It's just human nature to say "someone should fill that building" or "someone should fix that sewer system" without looking at the root cause that created the extended tax supported infrastructure, segmented people in a community or created an over abundance of property types. When you look closely at many community problems (not all, but many) they can be attributed to one culprit: sprawl.

So, what is sprawl? Sprawl is defined as a growth pattern that decreases population density within a community. Essentially, planning (or lack thereof) that encourages building residential or commercial property in areas not originally used as residential or commercial property at a rate that outpaces your community population growth. Every community has a population density number that reflects the amount of individuals per square mile, and when that number starts going down a community is sprawling. When the number goes up, a community is creating density. If a community loses population AND continues to develop ground in new, non-commercial or residential areas, sprawl kicks into high gear.

What are the effects of sprawl? There are several negative impacts, but for brevity's sake we will simply focus on the top few.

- **Higher taxes**-Think about it this way; if you had ten people that were responsible for infrastructure costs that equaled \$1,000 per year, each person would be responsible for \$100 in infrastructure costs. If you doubled your infrastructure costs (generally by developing more ground) but kept your population the same, each individual would be responsible for \$200 in infrastructure costs. If your population were cut in half (from 10 to 5) and your infrastructure costs doubled (still remaining at the \$2,000 level) each individual would be responsible for \$400 in infrastructure costs. As you extend services outwards and your population either stays the same, decreases or simply doesn't keep up with the pace of development, tax payers incur higher taxes to pay for infrastructure and services.

- **Empty Buildings**- This is simple... If the supply of commercial and residential properties increases at a pace greater than the population can sustain, you have empty buildings. Because these buildings are empty, over time they can become dilapidated and cause other

problems from decreased community pride and aesthetics to crime and decreased property valuations.

- **Increased Fuel Consumption**- The more "sprawled out" a city becomes, the more fuel consumed. Longer travel distances equal higher consumption.

- **Environmental Impacts**- Increased travel leads to increased CO2 in our atmosphere. Newer developments use more energy consumptive materials and have a shorter life span than many older buildings, simply because many newer buildings were designed to have a useful life span of only 25 or 30 years.

- **Less vibrant communities**- The less density a community possesses, the more disconnected the population becomes. 30 years ago, most individuals could identify virtually all of their neighbors by name and people in neighborhoods were at least acquaintances. Can the same be said today? When populations are dense, events, pedestrian traffic and unique shopping opportunities often increase simply through word of mouth.



"We've got to keep growing" was a mantra heard in Detroit as population declines and sprawl led to an unsustainable community. With a fraction of the population it once had, you can now fit the cities of San Francisco, Boston and Manhattan Island in the city boundaries of Detroit.

But, what can WE do about it? That's the ultimate question, because identifying problems does not mean a lot if you don't have realistic solutions. Here are a few simple solutions that could make big impacts.

-Plan- Emporia Main Street helped create the Community Initiated Development overlay district as a plan to encourage utilizing a pre-existing commercial corridor. This plan included standardized set-backs, materials used and a mixed use emphasis to create density. Have you seen areas where buildings have no continuity? It's because there was no plan.

-Offer incentives to buildings and businesses in pre-existing areas, and don't offer incentives to those located in a sprawl inducing area.- If businesses want to come to our community, great! If they can locate in pre-existing commercial areas, even better... Those are the types of businesses that generally can justify incentives without creating the negative impacts associated with sprawl.

-Adaptively reuse buildings.- Encourage individuals to keep up their buildings, whether commercial or residential, by informing them of existing programs aimed at preservation and maintenance. Some buildings are beyond repair, but the more we can keep viable, the more efficient our initial building investments become.

- Get involved politically- Let our leaders know the dangers of sprawl and alternatives to decreasing density. This is a problem that effects all of us, so all of us must get involved in the solution.



Development theories are complex, but they have a profound impact on how our communities grow and develop, our tax rates, business diversity and community pride. For those of you that want to learn more about sprawl and population density, below are a series of links designed to aid you in your education of this topic. A more educated public leads to smarter decision making in our communities. Check out the

links below:

[Smart Growth Policies and Planning](#)

- [Comprehensive Planning](#)

- [Environmental Impacts of Sprawl](#)

- [The Health Effects of Sprawl](#)

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[Maryland is now using Smart Growth Techniques- This Satellite Imagery may explain why...](#)

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[Costs Associated with Sprawl](#)

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