

What is “Suburban Sprawl?”

“Sprawl” means different things to different people. Most commonly, it refers to development patterns that have:

- low density and lack of mixed-use projects
- lack of transportation options
- strict separation of residential vs. non-residential property
- job growth in newer suburbs, job decline in core areas

The decentralization of entry-level jobs in manufacturing, wholesale and retail means work is further from concentrations of low-skilled, unemployed workers. Since the suburbs lack affordable housing and public transit fails to reach many suburban jobs, sprawl effectively cuts central city residents off from regional labor markets. Besides separating jobs and housing, sprawl means:

- increased dependence on automobiles and longer average commuting times
 - greater concentrations of poverty in core areas
 - rapid consumption of open space in outlying areas
 - neglect of central city infrastructure and services
 - city budget strains in both core areas and suburbs, caused by a declining tax base in the core and rapid suburban growth at the edge
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What Causes Sprawl?

Instead of one single cause, urban experts cite numerous factors that combine to fuel sprawl. They include:

- some people's desire for large-lot/low-density housing
- white flight from urban areas with minority residents
- lack of regional planning or the lack of a coordinating agency with real power; cities competing for economic development instead of cooperating
- "redlining," or the practice of geographic discrimination against older areas by banks, other lenders and insurance companies
- crime and perceptions of crime
- declining quality of central city schools
- contaminated land or "brownfields" in core areas
- restrictive suburban zoning that effectively excludes multi-unit dwellings and mixed-use development
- federal capital gains tax rules that used to encourage people to buy ever-larger homes (not any more)
- the historically low price of gasoline
- large federal highway spending coupled with comparatively little funding for public transportation

What is “Smart Growth?”

Like “sprawl,” the phrase “smart growth” means different things to different people. The term was coined in 1997 by Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening as he won a law explicitly intended to curb sprawl. The Maryland law says, in essence, that people can build anywhere they like, but if they build outside designated “Priority Funding Areas,” (areas that already have infrastructure or are planned to get it) the state will not subsidize it.

Smart Growth seeks to:

- Protect natural resources and open space
- Revitalize and rebuild existing communities
- Coordinate development with infrastructure to improve efficiency and reduce future costs
- Cluster activity centers, workplaces and housing within walking distance of each other
- Support walking, cycling and transit as alternatives to driving
- Uses incentives to promote sensible growth
- Strengthen economic competitiveness through smarter use of infrastructure investments

Major Types of Smart Growth Initiatives

- State land-use laws that encourage development in areas that already have infrastructure, encourage developers to adhere to long-term planning goals, and/or encourage cities to adopt regional strategies. Maryland and 11 other states have adopted some version.
- Regional tax-base sharing among cities to deter job piracy and other tax-base competition and encourage regional cooperation (Twin Cities)
- Metropolitan (“Unigov”) systems to merge counties with cities and thereby deter regional in-fighting (Indianapolis-Marion County, Nashville-Davidson County)
- Rewriting criteria for state investment funds to give more preference to projects that revitalize blighted areas, promote public transit, or involve mixed-use (California)
- Bond referenda to pay for the public purchase of open space (dozens since mid-1990s); incentives to encourage private donations of land; state land preservation programs
- “Urban Growth Boundaries” or “greenbelts” around metro areas to set geographic limits on new development and encourage more intensive use of core areas and suburbs inside (Portland and other Oregon cities, by state law)

Local Smart Growth Actions:

- “In-fill” development projects on vacant or underutilized parcels of land in areas that already have infrastructure (think urban Rogaine)
- Reclamation and re-use of “brownfields,” or contaminated land sites (Chicago and other cities, especially older industrial suburbs)
- Affordable housing programs in the suburbs to make entry-level jobs more accessible to lower-income residents (as in Montgomery County, Maryland)
- “Transit-Oriented Development,” in which cities use subway stops and bus stations as hubs for mixed-use developments within a half-mile radius, including retail, housing and day care, etc., making it possible for residents to walk (or connect by a short bus ride) to their commute in the morning and run errands on foot on their way home.

How Smart Growth Could Benefit Union Members and Organized Labor

- help keep factory jobs in the core area, where they are more likely to be unionized
- defend the market share of unionized grocery store chains by helping restore population density in core areas
- shore up the tax base of older areas (where many union members live), deter service cuts, privatization and concessions against teachers and other public employees
- help keep hospitality work in the downtown or by the airport, where it is far more likely to be unionized
- create billions of dollars in publicly-funded construction work expanding transit systems, helping transit workers, improving air quality, giving commuters a choice
- create massive amounts of publicly-funded infrastructure work rehabilitating roads, sewers and other public systems
- promote private redevelopment construction activity in core areas, where it is most likely to be union
- help keep office buildings in core areas, making them easier for janitor and operating engineers organizing