

FORUM

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Sprawl: Local government can't control it

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Nobody likes the word "sprawl."

Perhaps the use of "sprawl" is too accurate a description of what is happening to our land. It makes us uneasy. It may force us to ask, "Have we lost control over the type of communities we live in"?

We see a continual movement of people and development outward from the central city. Unplanned growth so often has a negative impact on existing homes and businesses. Formerly stable, quiet neighborhoods suddenly find their streets congested due to new highways and interchanges built to move people and jobs farther and farther from the urban core.

The results of sprawl are becoming harder to ignore. Many of Cleveland's economic troubles stem from the flow of people, businesses and industries to the suburbs. Rural areas are transformed by housing developments and industrial parks, often to the dismay of long-time residents. Rivers become polluted by chemical runoff from the increased traffic, additional paved parking lots and expanses of grass.

Local government control, something we Americans always have valued and taken pride in, isn't working as well as it used to. In fact, the phrase is beginning to sound like an oxymoron. Local officials are more likely to feel helpless than in control since they have little say about how adjacent cities develop and grow.

Local governments are forced to compete for tax dollars with neighboring towns because there are few incentives to work together for the good of the entire region, to find win-win solutions to economic development.

No one is in control.

Ohio's most powerful drivers of sprawl can be found as the state level. Constitutionally earmarked funds for

highway building and maintenance stand in stark contrast to the lack of public money for buses and trains. Ohio invests tax dollars heavily in new community development, but gives little funding to older communities for preservation and renewal projects.

In 2000, the League of Women Voters of Cuyahoga County published a report, "Land Use and Transportation Policy in Cuyahoga County: A Close Relationship." In this report, the League developed the following strategies to help citizens gain some control over land use in their communities:

- More weight needs to be given to the common good when considering land-use solutions. Our private property rights are important, but rights always have come with responsibilities. Achieving a proper balance between the common good and private rights will help sustain and stabilize our communities, thereby protecting our property.
- Better state policies and laws could discourage sprawl by leveling the playing field among urban, suburban and rural areas. The 1982 Enterprise Zones legislation is an excellent program that initially pinpointed 55 "depressed areas" for tax abatement to promote job creation and economic development. But in 1989 the original language of the law was watered down so that any "undeveloped areas" can receive the abatements. There are now 321 Enterprise Zones, which means the original good legislation has turned into a gravy train (pork gravy).
- The state should support comprehensive regional planning. State government could give incentive grants to counties that plan cooperatively with each other. It could give grants to cities to clean up old industrial sites and to assemble property for future

development, leveling the playing field by making it financially attractive for developers to build within Cleveland instead of on easily assessable, less expensive farm land.

Indeed, the key to more effective local control can be found in Columbus. What Ohio needs are state policy incentives to make people want to live in Cleveland (and other Ohio cities experiencing the exact same pressures) and continue farming in rural areas. The state must work to create beautiful parks and preserve natural areas.

If you want enlightened public policy, tell your state legislators and Gov. Bob Taft that saving our land and our cities are top priorities for you. Then keep an eye on what the General Assembly does. Democracy works from the bottom up.

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