

# Public Choices and the Dynamics of **Sprawl**

League of Women Voters Education Campaign on Sprawl



Edited by Robert G. Shibley and Bradshaw Hovey  
The Urban Design Project, University at Buffalo  
State University of New York

The Urban Design Project  
School of Architecture and Planning



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*The State University of New York*

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## Introduction

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As a pattern of urban development and as a pattern of public behavior, sprawl does, indeed, affect us all. It fragments our communities, saps the strength of our economy, and degrades our environment. It is well past time for us, as a community and as a society, to reconsider the public choices we made that led to sprawl.

For the past two years, the League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara has taken the lead in that process. Its Education Campaign on Urban Sprawl has brought home to thousands of Western New Yorkers a better understanding of the real social, economic, and environmental costs of sprawl.

Part of that educational campaign was a televised panel discussion about the costs of sprawl. First aired in November 2001, it brought together national, state, and local experts on sprawl to examine the many facets of this critical issue.

This publication was adapted from that broadcast and is presented with the hope of bringing this important discussion to an even larger number of Western New Yorkers. It includes an edited transcript of that panel session, suggested questions for discussion, and selections for further readings on sprawl.

The League of Women Voters is nonpartisan and does not support or oppose candidates for public office or political parties. However, it does seek to influence public policy through education and advocacy. In that regard, the League's Education Campaign on Urban Sprawl has been a great success. The campaign won the American Planning Association 2002 national award for public education.



**The pattern of development we call “sprawl” has transformed our cities.**

Thanks are owed to Western New York Public Broadcasting for co-sponsoring the panel discussion and to the HSBC In The Community Foundation, Inc., for their financial support. If you would like more information about the League of Women Voters Education Campaign on Urban Sprawl, call 884-3550 or visit their website at [www.lwvbn.org](http://www.lwvbn.org).

Public education must eventually lead to public action. The better informed we are as a community, the more beneficial will be our public choices in creating a better future for us all.

**Robert G. Shibley and Bradshaw Hovey**  
Editors, *The Urban Design Project*



**Sprawl means that we spend even more time in our cars.**

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## Panelists

**Robert Bullard** is an author, lecturer, and nationally recognized expert on sprawl and environmental justice. He served on President Clinton's transition team in the national resources and environmental cluster. Currently, he is Blair Professor of Sociology and Director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.

**Kevin Gaughan** is an attorney and a nationally recognized expert on the subject of regional governance. He founded the Chautauqua Conferences on Regionalism in 1997. He organized "A Canal Conversation" on the future of Buffalo's Erie Canal harbor. He is also a proponent of the reconstitution of a regional planning body for Erie and Niagara counties.

**Hal Morse** is the executive director of the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council. He previously served as manager of the West Valley Demonstration Project, Director of Planning for Cattaraugus County, and as a transportation planner in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**Mary Lou Rath** represents the 60th District in the New York State Senate. She is also the Chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Local Government and has worked on the development of "smart growth" legislation for New York.

**Robert Shibley**, moderator of the panel, is Director of The Urban Design Project and Professor of Architecture at the School of Architecture and Planning at The University at Buffalo. He also serves as director of the Downtown Buffalo 2002! strategic plan review and implementation campaign. Professor Shibley is widely published and nationally recognized in the fields of urban design, planning and architecture.



# social

## The Social Costs of Sprawl

**URBAN SPRAWL.** You know it when you see it. Older neighborhoods in decline or for sale. A downtown that's deteriorating. Strip mall after strip mall. Congested traffic and nightmare commutes. Residential subdivisions springing up in the middle of farmland farther from the city center.

Sprawl is uncontrolled, unplanned, low-density suburban development that spreads at the edges of existing communities. As we sprawl, we consume farmland and wildlife habitat. Our homes become separated from shops, schools, services and employment, which leads to a greater dependence on the automobile. Free time is lost in longer commutes while more money is spent on gas, tolls and vehicle maintenance. Real estate values decline, but property taxes continue to skyrocket in order to subsidize increasing infrastructure.

Sprawl costs our cities and counties millions of dollars for new water and sewer lines, new schools and new police and fire substations. These costs are not fully covered by the taxes paid by the new users and they create higher taxes for existing residents. And while population in our area has been decreasing, we continue to consume land. This consumption brings with it a number of economic, environmental and social costs that affect us all.

Some social costs of sprawl are the isolation of the poor and elderly who can no longer drive or who don't have a car, diminished community time, segregation by economic status and uneven distribution of affordable housing.



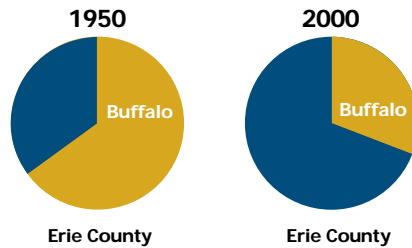
ROBERT G. SHIBLEY: Sprawl is a familiar and pervasive condition of American life. We live with it every day, around the nation, and here in the Buffalo Niagara region. How did sprawl happen? What are its impacts on our lives? What could – or should – we do about it?

When it comes to sprawl, we need only recall the immortal words of the comic strip character Pogo: “We have met the enemy and they are us.” Urban sprawl is not the result of forces of nature. Sprawl

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**Sprawl means that the city has emptied out and the suburbs have filled up.**

Population of Buffalo as a Proportion of Erie County, 1950-2000



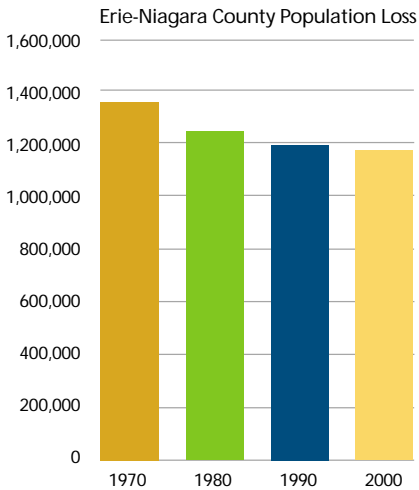
is a direct result of a combination of public policy, private sector action, and personal behavior. In short, it is the result of public choices. We – the public – made sprawl, and we – the public – can change it if we so choose.

But first, we need to understand better why sprawl happens and what the motivations behind it are. Dr. Robert D. Bullard has written extensively on the connection between environmental injustice and sprawl. Why does sprawl keep happening?

DR. ROBERT D. BULLARD: I think the main reason is that we are living in a state of denial. We see sprawl as someone else's problem to deal with. Yet we contribute to sprawl ourselves by supporting a kind of “doughnut” pattern of metropolitan development. We subsidize people and businesses to move out of central cities and leave a hole in the middle. We talk about how the American dream is to live in a suburb. Fulfilling the dream also means abandoning our central cities, and there are huge costs for everyone in that. Ross Perot used to talk about “a giant sucking sound.” Well, that's the sound of sprawl, sucking the money out of our pocket books.

SEN. MARY LOU RATH: A big part of what we are paying for is infrastructure – roads, sewers, and water systems. First we had development on the outskirts of the city, in the first ring of suburbs. Then that growth moved to a second ring of suburbs. Now there's growth in a third ring of suburbs. A lot of agricultural land has been used up and a lot more is “in play” for development. But the biggest problem is that every time growth moves out we have to pay for more infrastructure and that translates into higher taxes for everyone.

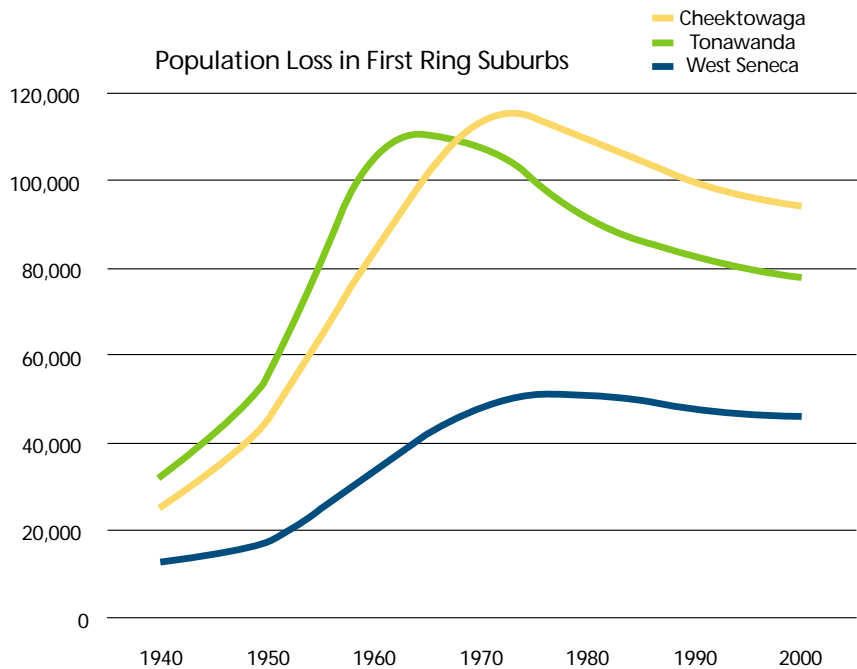




**KEVIN GAUGHAN:** I think one of the under-appreciated social costs of sprawl is the damage it does to our sense of place. The Buffalo Niagara region provides a unique and unforgettable sense of place for its residents and for visitors. Buffalo is a remarkable city with a heritage of great architecture and fiercely family-oriented neighborhoods. But that sense of place is put in grave danger by the increasingly unequal distribution of resources between central city and far-flung suburb. It is likewise undermined by the soulless quality of so much of the suburban development that we see. We have what you might call a real poetry of place. But it will take much wiser and more equitable policies to sustain that poetry and to organize our growth and make it more sustainable.

**SHIBLEY:** Are we ready to make the hard choices that can make that happen? Senator Rath, you have spent a great deal of time on "smart growth" legislation in Albany. Are we making any progress?

**RATH:** I think the issue is in front of the people, clearly. This is true certainly in New York State, and from what I've seen, all over the country. But ordinary people don't quite know what to make of it yet. They don't know yet what a public policy response to sprawl will mean for what they personally want to do. They don't know what impact it will have on where they want to live, where they want their children to go to school, what kind of services they expect, whether they want to get in the car and drive to shopping or whether they want to walk, or whether they want to ride a bicycle. We talk about the "American Dream," but the values behind the American Dream have changed and it's not yet clear how those values will affect the movement for "smart growth."



The geographic extent of the urbanized area has more than doubled while the population has declined.

Urbanized Area in Erie and Niagara Counties, 1960



BULLARD: I think most people will say, "It's my right to sprawl." And if you say that somebody has to pay for it, they will answer, "Well, I'm not going to pay for it." Yet the reality is that we all pay in higher taxes, lack of mobility, gridlock on the freeways, degraded air quality, loss of green space, and in terms of us being separated and apart, both spatially and economically as well as racially. Until we own up to the fact that there are some changes we must make, I don't think those costs will change.

For one thing, we have to make sure that our cities are healthy. One of the key tasks there is to make sure that our schools are of good quality, and not just those in the suburbs. This is one of the key drivers for people leaving the cities – that they don't have confidence in the quality of public schools. Yet a lot of the work on "smart growth" isn't dealing with the quality of schools. That has to change.

GAUGHAN: Dr. Bullard's comment illustrates so well what a complex issue this is. Sprawl has an impact on so many areas of public policy, which suggests, I think, the kind of response that is required. We need to talk about an inclusive and collaborative process for planning a sustainable future for the entire Buffalo Niagara region. And that needs to examine all the policies we have in place that relate to sprawl.

As Senator Rath noted, the American Dream is changing. In the decades following the Second World War, the dream was defined in terms of moving away from the city and out into the suburban spaces. The city was a place that represented crime and grime. It was the place you didn't want to be. That era has ended. But the policies that supported it are still in place. Until we change them, our development will be unsustainable.

Urbanized Area in Erie and Niagara Counties, 1990



My shorthand definition of sprawl is development without growth. That might not work in Atlanta where there has been lots of growth. But it works for a Buffalonian. In 1950 we had a little more than a million people living in Erie and Niagara Counties. In 1990 the population was about the same but the total land area that could be called "urbanized" had grown by 132 percent. We had grown and then declined in population, but the amount of land we occupied had more than doubled. That's not sustainable. What's more, it's destructive of the city that is going to carry us into the 21st century.

For me, "smart growth" must be based on a strong, inclusive, citizen-led reform effort. To be sure, the state must also change the policies that have supported sprawl, and it must spend its money in ways that support sustainable growth. But changes in public policy aren't going to happen until citizens raise their own voices – for example, in support of Sen. Rath's bill.

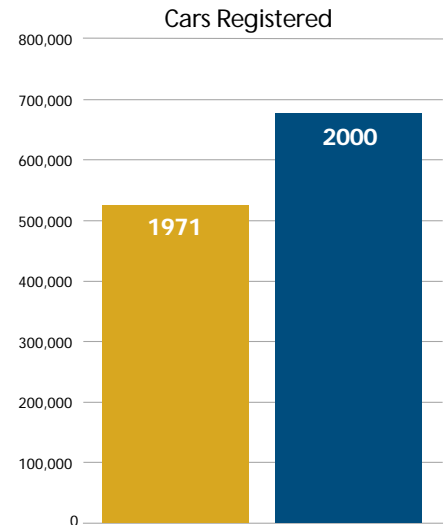
**SHIBLEY:** If sprawl is a problem and I live in the suburbs, should I feel bad?

**BULLARD:** No. That's not what we're saying. We're not dumping on the suburbs and we're not pinning all of the problems of cities on sprawl. Instead, we need to talk about collaboration among rural areas, the exurbs, the suburbs and the cities. All of these areas have things in common, things that draw us together. Transportation is one of those issues. If we don't have a good regional transportation plan or program, and sprawl is the dominant development pattern, we're going to have problems. This goes for regions that are rapidly growing, like Atlanta, and it also goes for a region like Buffalo, where you have lost population but still have sprawl.

In both types of places the key issue is leadership. Our ability to respond to sprawl depends on the extent to which communities – and especially their leaders – are willing to face the tough choices inherent in sprawl. Communities need leaders who are willing to stand up and say: we are going to manage sprawl; we are going to have development that is planned; we are going to do so in a way that is inclusive, fair, and equitable; and we're not going to take away anyone's property rights. It's not a matter of taking away the American Dream. It's a matter of making sure that dream can be fulfilled, and to do that without extracting subsidies from people who live in cities. That's the essence of "smart growth" to me.

**SHIBLEY:** But if that is going to happen, a lot of people are going to have to make different choices about where and how they live their lives.

**GAUGHAN:** I think we have to give people good reasons for making those choices. For me, the primary reason lies in a vibrant, exciting, job-creating central city. That's the core of the positive alternative to sprawl.





**Our investment in suburban development has been paralleled by disinvestment in our cities – this is Niagara Falls.**

Private developers also have to take part in providing that positive alternative. But in saying so, I'm not placing the blame for sprawl on developers. Developers respond to the marketplace. That's their job. They also respond to the public policy framework for development. That's our job – devising wise public policy to limit sprawl and encourage investment back into the city. City policy-makers and suburban policy-makers have an equal responsibility in this regard. We have to make it easier for developers to work in the city, and we have to make it easier for them to produce good development in the suburbs.

There's one other key issue. We have to reduce the market pressure that drives development to the suburbs in search of clean, developable sites. We need to work harder to resurrect the old industrial sites – the "brownfields" – that can provide development opportunities in the central city. Notwithstanding new technology that makes remediation less expensive, and efforts to reform the legal framework for the reuse of "brownfields," too many of these magnificent sites in Buffalo still go unused.

**SHIBLEY:** The Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council has some jurisdiction over many of these public policies. Are we ready at that level to face up to the public policy changes required to address the problem of sprawl?

**HAL MORSE:** Yes. I'm hopeful that we are. The GBNRTC is the designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for Erie and Niagara counties. We recently completed our "2025 Long Range Plan for Erie and Niagara Counties" to guide development and investment in transportation facilities for the next twenty years and more. The public's concern for sprawl, and all the costs we have identified, was strongly represented in the dialogue we had in developing that plan. Clearly, there was an awakening. People in Western New York are very concerned about these issues and I think they are ready to support changes in the way we invest public money in transportation. They're ready to level the playing field and make sure that all parts of our region are treated equally.

**RATH:** We should remember that some of the issues involved are very difficult for people. As chairman of the Local Government Committee, I work with a lot of local officials on issues like zoning. Local officials look at some of these issues from a very different angle. They often serve very different constituencies. They don't necessarily see things the way others do.

We are doing a lot more now to help those who serve on zoning boards and planning boards through training and education. There are a lot of tools that we can provide from the State. We have some important legislation. But if we're talking about interaction and collaborative planning, this is where it begins, with the local officials in every municipality.

**SHIBLEY:** What element in the dynamic of sprawl is really about racism? And what kind of public policy is ever going to get us through that?

**BULLARD:** There are a lot of policies that seem at first glance to be very fair and objective. But when we look a little deeper we see that both race and class factors drive those policies. A good example of that is in public transportation and regional



**Fine grained, neighborly shopping streets, like Elmwood Avenue, have become rarer as sprawl has advanced.**

transportation planning. Our tax dollars subsidize sprawl just by pumping so much money into highways and roads while not providing for public transportation that serves a whole region rather than just part of it. We see this in buses that don't go where they need to go to, or light rail that is not designed to get people where the jobs are, or just not funding public transportation to the level it should be.

These policies might seem neutral at first. But to a great extent, they are driven by considerations of race and class. Some people think: "We don't want those people out here. If we bring public transit, you're going to bring those poor people, you're going to bring crime." That's a reality that exists in people's minds. It exists even though there's no data, no documentation, and no evidence to support it. People believe it. And in so believing, they keep public transit from serving certain areas, and they keep transit from going into the deep suburbs, where the jobs are.

**SHIBLEY:** Did you find political obstacles for public transit in the "2025" planning process?

**MORSE:** The "2025" planning process actually helped explore some possible responses to the problems Dr. Bullard identified. The long-range transportation plan specifies some corridors where improved transit services would do the most to help improve accessibility to jobs. The distribution pattern of jobs in Western New York continues to evolve. So, the real planning challenge is not just to provide service for the patterns we can see now. We need to plan service for the patterns that are only just emerging.



**Now "inner ring" suburbs have begun to suffer the fate of the city.**

#### Questions for Discussion

What kind of place do you want to live in? A city? A suburb? A rural area? What are the good things about each? What are the bad things?

Of all the social costs of sprawl, which do you think are the most damaging? Which impacts do you think might be worth the cost?

Why did sprawl happen? Who or what caused sprawl? What kinds of actions would be required to change it?



# economic

## The Economic Costs of Sprawl |

**Sprawl has economic consequences that affect everyone.** In short, the more we build, the more we have to maintain. When a new subdivision is built, the developer pays for the initial costs of building new roads, sewers and water lines. But the cost to maintain that new infrastructure falls on all of us.

Suburban development is typically low-density development as opposed to high-density housing found in more urban areas. It costs more for governments to provide services to sprawling development. Operating expenditures for local governments in Erie and Niagara counties increased nearly 65 percent over the last 10 years – nearly triple the rate of inflation.

As we sprawl farther from shopping, recreation and services, the dependence on the automobile becomes even greater. Since 1982, our local highways have become 150 percent more congested. On the average, we're each spending an additional 65 more hours each year in our cars at an annual cost of roughly \$1,300.

Tolls, gasoline taxes, and other user fees cover only about 70 percent of the cost of building and maintaining the nation's road system. The rest is paid by our taxes through government subsidies. Without these subsidies, it has been estimated that drivers would have to pay \$6.50 per gallon of gas to offset the costs that their automobile imposes on the economy.

Sprawl affects property values as well. For the past decade, housing prices in our region have been stagnating. When inflation is taken into account, our local home prices have dropped nearly 24 percent during that time. As assessed values decline, our property tax rates actually need to be raised just to maintain the current levels of revenues and services.

In short, the economic costs of sprawl are high. They include: higher property taxes, declining real estate values in the city and inner suburbs, increased costs associated with expanding infrastructure, higher tolls, gasoline taxes, and vehicle maintenance.





**SHIBLEY:** The economic costs of sprawl are clearly staggering. It is just as clear that we are doing it to ourselves by subsidizing the behaviors we call sprawl. Yet if we got ourselves into this mess, we can get ourselves out. Sen. Rath, what role is New York State ready to play in that effort?

**RATH:** Last year, Governor Pataki asked Lieutenant Governor Mary Donohue to develop some ways that New York State might foster what we called "Quality Communities." The Lieutenant Governor held hearings around the state and did some in-depth research about what the State is already doing to promote Quality Communities, what the problems are, and what are the barriers to action. The final report is a kind of road map for recommendations and ultimately specific legislation. This year, the Governor asked me to sponsor a bill that would provide some grant dollars for Quality Communities through the Secretary of State.

One of the key questions about sprawl is how we can encourage people to return to the neighborhood patterns that prevailed a few decades ago. One great example is the neighborhood that straddles the Amherst-Cheektowaga town line around the intersections of Harlem Road, Kensington Avenue, Wehrle Drive, and Cleveland Drive.

Those two towns, the businessmen there, and the residents of that community have pulled themselves up by the bootstraps and insisted on becoming a walking community again. They're doing just that and they're making their neighborhood vibrant again. They have called on the New York State Department of Transportation to help them, and they are talking about making the roads narrower. That's what they want because they know it will make their neighborhood a better place to walk.

**SHIBLEY:** We've talked about the role of education in responding to sprawl. Is all the teaching in the world going to make a difference?

**Building on the edge of town means infrastructure costs go up and municipal budgets get stretched.**



The grants are available for training, if that's what localities need. Or they might provide actual investment for infrastructure. For example, funds might go to help redevelop abandoned strip malls. Or they might be used to promote walking patterns for people in neighborhoods instead of duplicating the pattern of building more roads to accommodate more cars to go to big box stores out in farmland.



**BULLARD:** Absolutely. I think education, information, and awareness are key to changing behavior and moving people to act. When people get more information about how much sprawl is costing them and how their tax dollars are actually subsidizing the problem, they are going to get mad. When they understand that there are alternatives to being stuck in traffic, breathing dirty air, not being able to walk anywhere, and their kids not having sidewalks, people will get mad, and then they will get organized and — when people start seeing all these things — they start demanding real changes. When we start to act collectively, that's when we get government to respond. In fact, communities and organizations have to come together and respond before government will respond. That's the way it happens on almost every issue and it seldom happens the other way around.



**Property values have sagged while property taxes have soared.**

**RATH:** I think that's right. When people see houses standing vacant and communities deteriorating and assessed values going down, they start to realize that sprawl has an impact on the tax structure in their own town. That's when people will start to come together. One of the key choices people make is the one they make on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. When people understand the costs of sprawl, we will see people being elected or being put out of office based on their position on this issue.

**SHIBLEY:** What is the impact on these choices of how the federal government provides capital funding for transportation facilities? Federal transportation dollars come with a lot of strings attached. So, how do we change the pattern locally?

**MORSE:** Actually, there has been a substantial change in how federal transportation priorities are set and how funds are allocated. Dollars that used to be provided in rigid categories can now be used more flexibly for priorities that regions and localities set for themselves. Transportation funds come to Western New York, as they do in all major metropolitan areas, based on the collective decisions of the Metropolitan Planning Organization. But it's not the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council, per se, that makes these decisions. It's all of our elected officials from the major municipalities, working with the Thruway Authority, the New York State Department of Transportation and the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority — with input from the public — that set these priorities together. The priorities that we establish together are the backbone of the long-range transportation plan for the whole region.



**New commercial development in the suburbs means a declining customer base for city stores.**

**SHIBLEY:** So if the formula says we can't have federal money for an extension of the light rail line can we turn that around if the MPO and local officials and the public say light rail transit is a priority for this region?

**MORSE:** Possibly. But there's more to it. Transportation systems depend on land use patterns and land use patterns depend on transportation. If we are going to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in light rail transit, it ought to be where there are housing and employment

densities that will support it. But in general we need to work with local communities to make sure that the development of transit services matches the needs of people to get to work and back home, and that patterns of development are dense enough to support baseline transit services. It's not just about funding. It's also about land use planning.

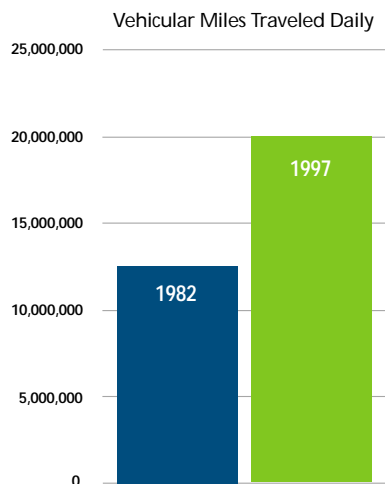
**GAUGHAN:** I think it is crucial that Buffalo Niagara have a strong regional land use planning capacity. It's great to have GBNRTC, but a regional planning body needs a broader mandate than just transportation.

Nor is it adequate for us to continue to regulate land use on a town-by-town or city-by-city basis. It has to be regional to successfully address the problem of sprawl. The general municipal law of the State of New York permits regions to create planning councils to govern growth and development within them. I have proposed creation of such an entity that would be citizen-based and would be charged with regulating growth in an equitable way and directing growth back into the city.

It is true, as Dr. Bullard argues, that race has been one of the driving factors behind the flight from the city, the creation of the suburbs, and sprawl in general. Yet, today, great cities are being created around this nation. In the last census, the population of central cities went up – except here. I think an effective regional planning body could provide the leadership to turn that around.

It is also true that education is one of the most powerful tools we have against sprawl. The League of Women Voters and WNED have made a huge contribution in this effort. But there are many others. Groups as disparate as Voice Buffalo, the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, and the Buffalo Niagara Association of Realtors have gotten involved in these issues. We have the ability, interest, commitment and intellectual capital to make a difference. An effective regional planning body with a strong citizen base could bring all of this energy together.

We're not forcing people to change their lifestyles. The property rights people have raised powerful issues in the debate over sprawl. The development community must have its say and they should be involved in the discussion. All we are saying is that if you choose to live outside the city, just don't expect everyone else to subsidize your choice by building new roads and strip malls and so forth. I think it was 30 years ago that Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the great United States Senator from New York, said let us agree that we have spent the last public funds to lay down more concrete. Well, here it is 30 years later and we still haven't had the courage to follow through.



Nevertheless, it is my absolute conviction that those cities and regions that come to grips with the challenge of sprawl, that find a way to plan effectively on a regional basis, are the cities and regions that will succeed in the new century. I think Buffalo Niagara should be among them.

**SHIBLEY:** That's a compelling vision. But we aren't there yet. How do we get there?

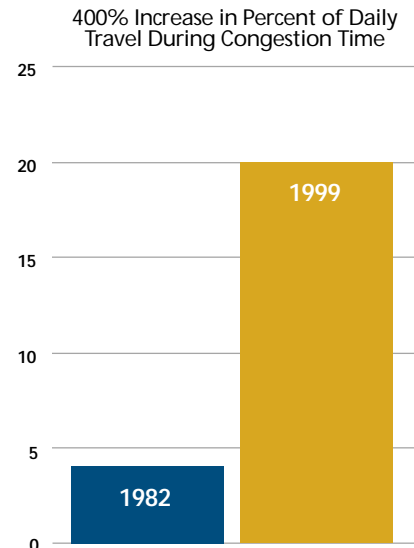
**RATH:** We are one of only two places in New York State that doesn't have a regional planning board. We used to have one, and it's a long story, but we don't anymore. There is now a move afoot to create a new regional planning organization and we should all support that effort. What model the new planning entity will follow is not yet clear, but we need something.

Clearly, we need to have a regional plan. People may work in one place, want to live in another place, use recreational facilities in another, and shop in another. If we plan together, that's easy to do. We can preserve farmland, provide outdoor activities, and make the transportation system work. We defined a lot of these needs in The State of the Region project several years ago and those needs haven't changed. The need to plan is still there.

**SHIBLEY:** Part of the "move afoot" for a regional planning entity is a discussion about the possibility of enlarging the mandate of the GBNRTC to include much more than just transportation. Will that work?

**MORSE:** I think the proposal really fits the moment and would provide what the community is asking for. It could provide a unique opportunity for this region to decide collectively on a vision for where we want to go. It would give us a chance to examine who we are, where we live and work, what kind of services we want and then decide on an overall plan to provide those things into the future. Frankly, the possibility is very exciting.

**GAUGHAN:** And the question of how we get there is crucial. The answer, I think, is that we are getting there step by step. It was only five or six years since we gathered at Chautauqua and joined the national movement of communities determined to view themselves regionally, across the geographic, social, and racial boundaries that have diminished us so much. Now, we have proposed resuscitating the regional planning council. Amendments to State law in 1999 have made the enabling legislation much stronger. And it is not too far in the future when developers who want to build a Wal-Mart or a Regal Cinema will have to bring their case to a citizen-based regional planning council and argue that their proposal fits the public vision for the future.



### Questions for Discussion

Can individuals help reduce the negative impacts of sprawl? Or, is it impossible for one person acting on their own to make a difference? If so, how? If not, why not?

Hal Morse says above that land use patterns follow transportation investments and transportation investments follow land use patterns. Can both statements be true? Which came first? Which should we change first?

Several of the speakers suggest that regional planning can help us fight sprawl. Do you think that is true? If not, why not? If so, how can planning help?



# environmental

## The Environmental Costs of Sprawl

For all the social and economic concerns, there are also environmental consequences associated with urban sprawl. As people move farther beyond the urban center and first ring suburbs, farmland and open space are lost to development. In fact, in the last 35 years, Erie and Niagara counties have lost 27 percent of their farmland.

The concern here is not only the loss of agriculture, which is an important part of the region's economy, but also the destruction of wildlife habitat and the loss of wetlands. In addition, there is an increase in water pollution from contaminated urban runoff.

With people living farther from the urban center, there is a greater dependence on the automobile. Over the past 15 years, there has been a 56 percent increase in the average number of daily commuter miles. Even though the population in Western New York has decreased by roughly 180,000 since the 1970s, our local highways are 150 percent more congested.

To accommodate this increase, it's necessary to widen existing roads or build new ones. Increased traffic means increased pollution as well as more sprawl. In short, some of the environmental costs of sprawl are air pollution from increasing traffic congestion, loss of valuable farmland, loss of wetlands, destruction of wildlife habitat, and water pollution from contaminated urban runoff.





**Sprawling development eats up farmland and wildlife habitat and makes residents more dependent on automobiles.**

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**SHIBLEY:** If there's a very heavy environmental cost to sprawl, in addition to the social and economic costs, maybe we can't afford to let the movement to address sprawl just bubble up from the grassroots. Maybe we need to make these public choices as a nation – like we did with civil rights – rather than as individual municipalities or even regions. What's the national picture?

**BULLARD:** Attacking the negative impacts of sprawl on a national basis will require aggressive policies on all the things we have been talking about – the degradation of air quality, the loss of farmland, the economic costs of traffic congestion, and more. These issues need to be addressed at least on a regional level because, if you think about it, air pollution from automobiles doesn't stop at the city line. It affects an entire region.

It won't be easy to change these conditions because they go to the very heart of how we live. Do we all need to drive SUVs? Do we all need to have 5,000 square foot houses deep into the suburbs? Do we all have to get on the highway to get to the job? Addressing these problems will go right to the heart of the American Dream and the "right to sprawl."

What makes the situation even more difficult is that all of these decisions seem like individual choices, but the impacts are all collective. We like to say it's nobody's business what we drive or where we live, but our decisions about these things are a lot of what adds up to a very serious social problem. So, we have to find a way to address these issues in a way that involves all the stakeholders and produces public choices that really make a difference.

**SHIBLEY:** Is there really a right to sprawl? Or have we just not done the math yet on the environmental consequences of our SUVs?

**RATH:** I'm not sure there is a right to sprawl but there are some important rights at stake here. This discussion has a big impact on people who own property in farmland areas. Those folks would tell you that it is their right to sell those farms to developers. Their property is the only nest egg they have. Their property is their retirement. Their kids don't want a farm.



**Loss of farmland and increases in impervious surfaces interfere with groundwater recharge.**

What we've done in response is buy a great deal of agricultural land all around the state – to protect the property owner's rights and to protect the public's interest.

These are very highly charged and emotional political issues. But there are ways to work through these issues and come to productive agreements. There's a working group in Albany that has brought together the most disparate interests in issues of land use planning and development. Environmentalists, realtors, homebuilders, planners, you name it – everyone is at the table. It was surprising enough that all these people could even be at the same table together and have a reasonable conversation. That had never happened before. Even more surprising, they actually came to some agreements, which contributed to the Lieutenant Governor's Quality Communities report. The participants didn't get everything they wanted, but they did find they could get 60 or 70 percent of what they're interested in. That's a huge achievement and it will have a big impact on legislation and policy.

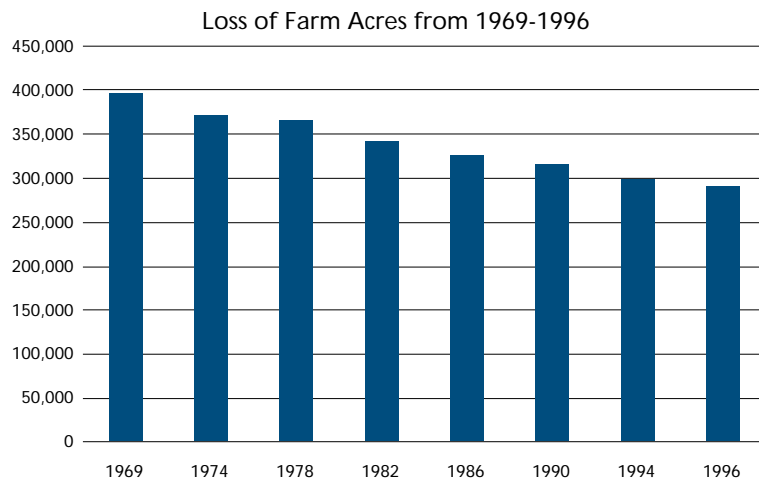
**GAUGHAN:** We have talked a lot about the rights of Americans to do what we want. But if we think that effective regional planning is at odds with those rights then we are misunderstanding the situation. The purpose of regional planning or addressing sprawl is not to thwart growth but rather to organize it in a way that protects our rights.



**Increasing vehicle miles traveled offsets technological gains in fuel efficiency and air pollution control.**

Take the farm family that worked its land for so long and now wants to reap their proper reward. If we had a regional planning entity that followed these trends, we could plan for, protect, or compensate for the change in use of that property. We can do it if we have a regional planning capacity and a reasoned, comprehensive, forward-looking, informed plan. We don't have the same kind of tradition of progressive planning they have in Oregon, but we do have beautiful countryside that needs to be protected and we should get organized to do that.

**SHIBLEY:** If we subsidize sprawl, might we not subsidize farmland protection instead?





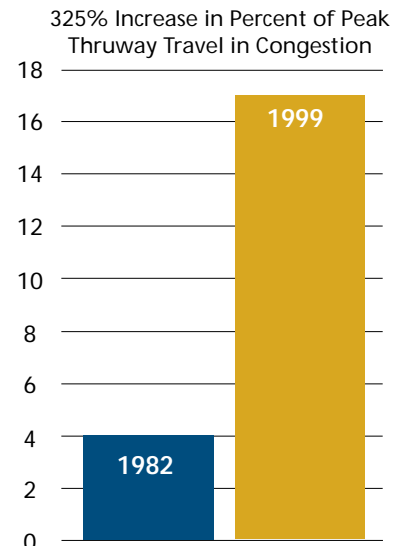
Higher density development, like this in Buffalo, leaves a smaller footprint on the land.

**RATH:** It's already happening. We've purchased a lot of farmland all around Amherst. We're also seeing a higher degree of cooperation on planning issues between municipalities, at least in the northern suburbs that I represent. Amherst and Clarence are working together. Amherst and Cheektowaga are, too. And there are overtures from Tonawanda. So, it's happening. This planning effort is really starting.

**SHIBLEY:** That's welcome progress at the local level. But what about the national level? Is there the political will to address issues of sustainability – farmland protection, air quality, water supply – as a matter of federal policy?

**BULLARD:** We don't have a national policy to address these issues and, frankly, I'm not sure we are going to get one. The best we may be able to do right now is to address the issue, region by region, or perhaps state by state. Some states have been much more aggressive than others in trying to limit unplanned growth, bring back cities, promote sustainable development, invest in transit, or subsidize redevelopment of central city "brownfields." We can make real progress this way. But as a nation we have been very reluctant to deal with the ills of the city – until there's some kind of disaster, an earthquake or a riot or whatever. So, if we're going to get ahead of this problem, we're going to have to do it at the state and regional level.

**GAUGHAN:** I think we can see the national will being exerted one city, one region, and one state at a time. Governor Parris Glendening of Maryland is one of the founders of the "smart growth" movement in America. His was just one state. But what he and others started has proliferated around the nation and now "smart growth" legislation is the rule in the United States, not the exception. This promise of democracy, of strong



regions centered by terrific cities, is going to be redeemed one city and one region at a time. We're at the very beginning of a sweeping movement. I think it's a great opportunity for our region to take the lead in that process of innovation.

**SHIBLEY:** We're talking about a grassroots democratic movement to address sprawl. But a lot of the impacts of sprawl are also quantifiable in a very technical sense. How do we bring the two together? How do we reconcile a strong role for the public and a strong role for technical decision-making?



**MORSE:** I'm not sure there's a conflict. We have to take into account the real air quality impact of any of our projects. In fact, we also need to demonstrate that there's an air quality benefit for the money we invest in all of our projects across the board. That's an expression of the national will to deal with sprawl and its impacts that transcends our local jurisdiction. Our technical knowledge informs our political will and vice versa.

**SHIBLEY:** All of this sounds quite hopeful. From the out-of-town perspective, is it possible to share this hope?

**BULLARD:** Well, no. If you go from region to region you see clearly that we're still in love with the automobile, still in love with mega-malls, the mega-schools, and the mega-suburbs. As new mega-malls, mega-schools, and mega-suburbs are being developed, they are being developed without public transportation. They're being built around automobiles. And as useful as the automobile has been, it is a very destructive invention. We are laying more and more concrete, more and more asphalt roads. The environmental impacts on our air, our land, and our waterways are tremendous. We're not arresting that. We have not made a lot of changes. Basically, we have been putting Band-Aids on a cancer.



**Big houses on big lots means neighborhoods that are not walkable.**

**SHIBLEY:** We are in love with all of those things. We choose our SUVs, our mega-malls, our mega-schools, our suburban environments. And, as long as we love them more than we hate the social, economic, and environmental costs of sprawl, we will live with them and they will do what they are doing to us.

We do have a lot of things that are very hopeful: regional planning emerging with lots of good leadership, some from our panel members; farmland protection; a kind of increasing awareness and changing national attitude about sprawl. But there is much more to be done. And since "we" the public have created the problem, "we" the public must be the ones to solve it.

### Questions for Discussion

Is there a "right to sprawl"? Do we have a right to drive whatever kind of car we want as much as we want? What are our rights? What are our obligations in regard to sprawl?

Environmental values are often placed in opposition to economic values. When it comes to sprawl, do environmental values and economic values conflict? If they do, in what cases should we give priority to one over the other?

What would a city that doesn't sprawl look like? How would you create it? How would change the cities we have now? Would you want to live in such a city?

## Suggestions for Further Reading

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**Beatley, Timothy. 2000. *Green Urbanism: Learning from European Cities*. Washington, DC: Island Press.**

Emphasizes “green thinking” and explores innovative aspects of environment, transportation, renewable energy, and building policy in cities such as Vienna, Helsinki, London and Berlin.

**Becker, Barbara and Eric Damien Kelly. 2000. *Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan*. Washington, DC: Island Press.**

Offers a broad overview of the planning process and step-by-step directions for planners and citizens. An excellent reference for students.

**Benfield, F. Kaid, Matthew D. Raimi, and Donald D.T. Chen. 1999. *Once There Were Greenfields: How Urban Sprawl Is Undermining America's Environment, Economy, and Social Fabric*. New York: Natural Resources Defense Council.**

Describes the environmental, economic, and social impacts of sprawl development. It also proposes guiding principles for a new kind of “smart growth.”

**Bullard, Robert D., Glenn S. Johnson, Angel O. Torres, (eds.) 1999. *Sprawl City: Race, Politics, and Planning in Atlanta*. Washington: Island Press.**

A case study on the making of sprawl with a focus on the dynamics of race and housing, public transportation, and environmental quality.

**Calthorpe, Peter. 1993. *The Next American Metropolis: Ecology, Community, and the American Dream*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.**

America's foremost proponent of “the New Urbanism” details his prescription for moving away from sprawl and toward more compact, mixed-use, economically diverse, and ecologically sound communities.

**Daniels, Thomas L. 1999. *When City and Country Collide: Managing Growth in the Metropolitan Fringe*. Washington, DC: Island Press.**

Offers practical methods for protecting the rural landscape while promoting more compact urban development.

**Duany, Andres, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. 2000. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York: North Point Press.**

A cogent investigation into the nature of sprawl and the failure of suburbs, they mince no words in condemning the soulless, “repetitive and forgettable” landscape of subdivisions, shopping malls, office parks, and congested roadways that ring our cities.

**Garreau, Joel. 1991. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. New York: Doubleday.**

A readable account of the evolution of sprawl from when bedroom suburbs ringed our cities to the present when jobs, housing, shopping and entertainment all cluster on the metropolitan periphery.

**Garvin, Alexander. 1996. *The American City: What Works and What Doesn't*. New York: McGraw-Hill.**

Based on analysis of more than 250 projects across the U.S., Garvin argues that planning does work when you do it right. A compendium of good ideas and best practices.

**Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.**

This diatribe against 1950s era urban planning became an American classic and continues to shape contemporary thinking about urban design and planning.

**Katz, Peter and Vincent Scully, Jr. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York: McGraw.**

The illustrated guide to new urbanism, principles and practice. Includes more than 500 photos, renderings, and diagrams.

**Kay, Jane Holtz. 1997. *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America, and How We Can Take It Back*. New York: Crown Publishers.**

A partisan history of the advance of automobile dependency in the U.S. with alternative prescriptions for a return to the walking city and convenient transit.

**Kuntsler, James Howard. 1993. *The Geography of Nowhere; The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. New York: Simon and Schuster.**

A biting and witty account of the development of suburbia and the eclipse of strong community life in small towns and cities.

**Kunstler, James Howard. 1996. *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Simon and Schuster.**

A sequel to *The Geography of Nowhere*, this book offers alternatives for repairing our sprawl-ravaged metropolitan areas.

**Langdon, Philip. 1994. *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.**

Details the problems of living in today's suburbs – long commutes, high costs, social fragmentation – and offers some practical solutions for nurturing true neighborhood and community.

**Marshall, Alex. 2000. *How Cities Work: Suburbs, Sprawl, and the Roads Not Taken*. Austin: University of Texas Press.**

Marshall argues that urban life has broken down because of our basic ignorance of the real forces that shape cities – transportation systems, industry and business, and political decision-making.

**Moe, Richard and Carter Wilkie. 1997. *Changing Places: Rebuilding Community in the Age of Sprawl*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.**

More than a jeremiad against sprawl, this critique is hard-nosed and historically based, emphasizing the importance of downtowns and neighborhoods, historic preservation, and the interplay of interest groups in making better cities.

**Orfield, Myron W. 1997. *Metropolitica: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.**

Orfield analyzes the effects of metropolitan social and economic polarization and offers innovative approaches to regional cooperation, including new systems of taxing, spending, and governance.

**Porter, Douglas R. 1997. *Managing Growth in America's Communities*. Washington DC: Island Press.**

Examines regulatory, and programmatic techniques that have been most useful, obstacles to be overcome, and specific strategies that have been instrumental in achieving successful growth management programs.

**Rusk, David. 1995. *Cities Without Suburbs*. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center.**

Argues that cities that lack the power to annex suburban territory suffer from social inequality, poor economic performance, and administrative inefficiency. Rusk suggests reconnecting cities with their suburbs.

**Shaw, Jane S. and Ronald D. Utt (Eds). 2000. *A Guide to Smart Growth: Shattering Myths, Providing Solutions*. Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation.**

Provides an alternative analysis of the causes, impacts, and solutions to sprawl from a conservative perspective.

**The League of Women Voters** is a multi-issue organization whose mission is to encourage the informed and active participation of citizens in government and to influence public policy through education and advocacy. Membership is open to all citizens, both women and men, of voting age. The League of Women Voters does not support or oppose political parties or candidates. In addition to providing voter information, the League studies governmental issues and, after arriving at a consensus, takes action on those issues.

1272 Delaware Avenue / Buffalo, New York 14209-2401

716-884-3550 / fax: 716-882-7671

LWVBN@juno.com / [www.lwvbn.org](http://www.lwvbn.org)

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272 Hayes Hall / 3435 Main Street, Buffalo, New York 14214  
716-829-3485 x.220 / fax: 716-829-3256  
rshibley@ap.buffalo.edu / [www.urbandesignproject.org](http://www.urbandesignproject.org)