

Appendix C  
Discussion on Sprawl

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Discussion of Sprawl for LRTP 2004 Update

**Definition:** Sprawl is a term used to describe a suburban pattern of land development that is low density and separated into single use pods frequently accessed by cul-de-sacs or single use driveways. Despite trends toward smaller households, bigger houses on larger lots predominate. Long distances between destinations, lack of a network of thoroughfares (connected to other thoroughfares at both ends), and failure to permit construction of sidewalks makes suburban areas almost completely dependent on automobile travel.

The complex function of urban streets is vastly simplified in suburbia: single use functions of either land access or high speed traffic mobility are provided instead of the mixture of traffic mobility, parking, transit stops, sidewalks and other pedestrian amenities in addition to land access.

The quality of housing and private space is very high but urban designers note the disappearance of civic places and decreased quality of public spaces including the street which lacks connectivity, sidewalks and street trees.

**Causes:** The causes of sprawl are complex. Subsidized extension of water, sewer and highways in the 1960's and 70's to accommodate postwar population booms created cheap land that could be developed for urban uses; cheap fuel makes longer commutes affordable; increasing per capita wealth and the willingness to spend time and both public and private resources on transportation; an evolving value system favoring private spaces over civic spaces all contribute.

Demographic changes including more, smaller households for smaller families, larger numbers of single adults, including seniors, living alone create market demand. Preference of lending institutions for new, single use developments over older city neighborhoods, and decades of institutionalized redlining of cities and older suburbs shifted affordable housing demand to the urban-rural fringe.

Suburban zoning calls for "coarse grained" land use patterns (large areas of single land use, market value, and density) and strict separation of residential, retail, office and industrial land uses from each other.

Greenfields with large lots and utilities are faster and easier to develop than urban brownfields and obsolete buildings. Regulations at every level favor greenfields. Distribution of goods and services – by both the private businesses and public organizations – emphasizes economies of scale above all other values. A lack good urban design standards in town codes also contributes to the metropolitan product called sprawl.

**Effects:** Sprawl increases the geographic size of the urbanized area and infrastructure that must be maintained, despite decreasing population and household densities. This is true in Onondaga County, with a decreasing metro are population as well.

Strip retail developments along major arterials, concentration of high traffic generating uses including big box education, health care, and religious facilities, but particularly big box retail stores serve to concentrate trips to a few locations and peak time periods.

Very low density of trip ends and very long transit route effectively diminish a significant transportation forl for transit. The lack of a collector road and street network, sidewalks, and bicycle facilities requires near total dependence on automobiles and relatively few arterial roads to carry most traffic.

The futility of "the congestion/build cycle" of suburban arterials (congestion results in constructions of new highway capacity; increased capacity draws more intense retail development and traffic until the highway is again congested) is not well understood by municipalities charged with land use decisions.

The separation of municipal land use authority from state and county responsibility to fund, design and construct new highway capacity exacerbates the problem.

State highways, designed to carry traffic between regions, are lost in places to strip retail arterials where congestion, frequent traffic signals, and traffic cued for turns all but eliminate through traffic mobility.

Corporate site plans, signs, and architecture designed to compete for the attention of motorists form the visual character of "suburban main streets" – four to nine lane arterials lined with big-boxes.

Commute times increase as speed limits and average travel speeds are decreased. Trip lengths increase as more and more households seek to move beyond congestion. Per capita and total VMT, energy consumption, air pollution all increase.

Cities and older, first ring suburbs suffer depopulation, property abandonment and disinvestments, and loss of tax base to maintain aging infrastructure.

The community suffers the collective loss of institutions and civic places, a sense of place, a sense of community.