

Sprawl in Maine

Maine's population is on the move – leapfrogging from traditional cities, towns and villages out to once rural territory. This outward movement isn't just in southern and coastal Maine. It's as strong in Penobscot County as it is in Cumberland and York counties. Rural towns are becoming suburban communities, while the vitality is being drained from many of our urban areas and downtowns. Coastal villages are turning into seasonal resorts, sending many year-round residents inland in search of more affordable housing. Farmland, fields and forestland are producing less food, hay or lumber, and more residential and commercial development. Put it all together and what you have, across the state, is land use spreading out. This pattern is called sprawl.

A Definition of Sprawl

While sprawl means many things to many people, everyone's perception of this dispersed, low-density pattern of development shares a few common characteristics:

- Homes, offices, shopping, etc. are **separated** from each other so walking between uses is difficult.
- Different groups of people (i.e. young, elderly, wealthy, middle class, poor, ethnic) are **segregated**.
- Public buildings, such as schools, post offices and town halls are **isolated** from other land uses.
- Large open spaces are divided into smaller parcels and their **function is lost**. They no longer serve their traditional agricultural or wildlife use.

Communities across the state are experiencing sprawl. It is often described as suburban type development, though it can look more like rural in places where development is scattered over large open spaces. Both residential and commercial development can result in sprawl.

Residential Sprawl

- Single-family homes, built at one or two units per acre or less, spread over large areas,
- beyond walking distance of goods and services, and
- occupied by persons who, of necessity or choice, commute to work by automobile.

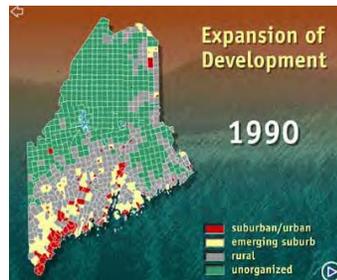
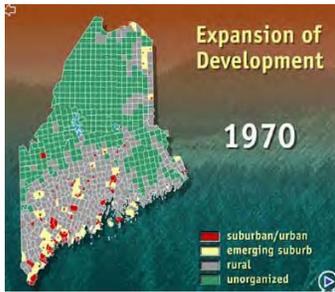
Commercial Sprawl

- Auto-oriented development with many square feet of parking for every square foot of actual building space ,
- usually located in strips along major routes or in business parks, and
- usually separate from other land uses.

Why is Sprawl Occurring?

Since the mid 1900's people have been moving out to the country. Many, pulled by the desire for more room and open space outside their back doors, or pushed by disenchantment with urban living and a desire for lower taxes, make choices that result in sprawl. **The automobile** has helped make these choices possible and easier. Cars offer more options and flexibility when people choose where to live, work, and shop.

In Maine, over the past 35 years the fastest growing towns have been the “new suburbs” within about a 10- to 40-minute commute of hub communities where most jobs are located.



State Planning Office Maps

On the other hand, we know that other people prefer traditional type neighborhoods, with next-door neighbors, sidewalks, a store on the corner, a school within walking distance, and a mix of housing. But **local ordinances** often prohibit construction of these kinds of places many of us grew up in. Many local ordinances require large lot sizes for homes, and strict separation of different land uses. In addition, community ordinances are often stricter in built-up areas, creating an unintended incentive to develop in rural areas.

And finally, some of our **state policies** actually subsidize sprawl. For example, state aid for school construction favors the fastest growing suburbs at the expense of hub towns and declining rural towns.

How Do You Know If It's Sprawl?

- If homes are almost all single-family;
- If homes are spread out on 1+acre lots and you can't walk within 10 minutes to a store, post office, or church.

- If most of the new development is either spread out along major roads (e.g. strip development) or is on streets that dead end, for example with cul-de-sacs.
- If the local elementary school isn't part of a well-defined neighborhood.
- If town hall isn't part of a village or business district where you can walk to do some errands after registering your car.
- If almost everyone drives to pick up a pizza.
- If the number of large blocks of land not fragmented by roads or houses, is dropping.



Something To Think About

There are alternatives to sprawl. And considering alternatives does not mean stopping development. “Smart growth” can happen, with education and planning.

GrowSmart Maine is working to help educate people about sprawl and the alternatives. This “brief” is the first in a series of publications designed to help the public understand the issues and what can be done. Other briefs will address specific issues that communities may be facing and offer ideas to consider as approaches and alternatives.

We hope you will find this information helpful, and will let us know how best we can help you understand what sprawl means in your community, and how to make “smart growth” happen.

Additional Resources

- [Maine State Planning Office](#)
- [Friends of Midcoast Maine](#)
- [Vermont Forum on Sprawl](#)

Related topics

- [Growth Caps](#)