

Debunking sprawl myths: What we really want in our communities

Myth 1 Everyone wants to live far from towns and cities in big houses

People want the most house for their money in a good neighborhood, not a huge lot, according to the National Association of HomeBuilders (NAHB). NAHB's surveys have shown that people want to live within walking distance of shops, good schools, and parks. People prefer narrow streets with conserved open space. Large-lot developments far from existing towns and cities have distanced people from what they want.

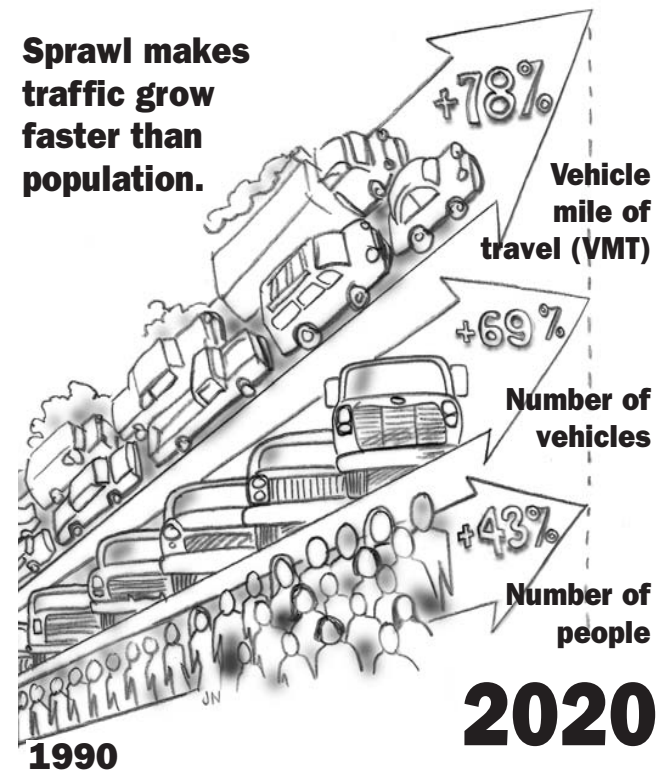
People don't need as much space as they once did. Today's families are smaller than they were in the past few decades. Less than half of American families have children under 18 years old living at home. Of those that do, one-third are single-parent families. Moreover, as our population grows increasingly older, more people want smaller homes in communities close to friends, family, shopping, and health care. Reflecting this trend, more than half of the new homes built and sold in metropolitan areas like Baltimore are townhouses, condominiums, and other types of housing in neighborhoods.

Myth 2 Developers just build what the free market dictates

There is no "free market" for housing. Since the late 1940s, federal and state governments have subsidized sprawl. Tax incentives make it cheaper to build on farms and open spaces. The government emphasis on highways instead of trains, light rail, sidewalks, and bike paths has given developers unprecedented access to cheap land far from established town centers. Low-density zoning often required by local governments favors sprawl. Ironically, many people prefer the look of neighborhoods and communities common before World War II to those typical of today's sprawl.

Myth 3 Cities and towns are worse for the Bay than the suburbs

Urban runoff pollutes the Bay. However, the insidious effects of sprawl are often worse. Because sprawl developments are farther from jobs and shopping, we're forced to drive further and more often. Between 1990



and 2020, population in the Chesapeake Bay region is projected to grow by 43 percent while the number of vehicles will grow by 69 percent and the number of miles we drive will grow by 78 percent. More driving generates more air pollution. More and wider roads increase runoff. More houses on larger lots reduces the amount of land that filters rainwater. Living in established cities and towns is more efficient and makes technological approaches to treating runoff possible.

Myth 4 More density means more crime

Close-knit neighborhoods with narrower streets where people walk around more are actually better at preventing crime than spread-out sprawl development. As scholar and urbanist Jane Jacobs notes, areas of higher density put more "eyes on the street." According to Robert Moose, chief of police in Montgomery County, Maryland, community policing is aided by designs that include pedestrian-friendly streets, a diversity of housing types and densities, and a diversity of people of different ages, incomes, and cultures. Studies confirm that there is no cause-and-effect relationship between crime and density.

Myth 5 More density means more traffic

In communities where houses are closer together and closer to shopping and services, traffic actually decreases. One recent study showed that doubling the density of homes reduces the total number of vehicle miles driven in an area by 20 to 30 percent. In these communities, people can do more without having to drive as far or as often. In these more compact communities, it is more cost-effective to create transportation alternatives like buses, light rail, and sidewalks.

Myth 6 Sprawl development preserves rural character

The opposite is true. Two-, three-, five- and even 10-acre "farmettes" eat up traditional landscapes, ruin country and character, and make it impossible to sustain natural uses like farming and timbering. In a 1996 Chesapeake Bay Foundation study, a conventional, low-density, rural development design consumed twice as much open space as a more compact, clustered concept.

Myth 7 Managing growth means that the state will take over local powers

Local governments must retain primary authority for local land-use decisions. They know their communities and are most closely connected to the people whose lives they impact. But sprawl is a problem that crosses town and county lines. State growth objectives and requirements should serve as a guide for local plans. Examples of policies that work include urban growth boundaries, purchase and transfer of development rights, and location-based mortgages. The state also has a stake in conserving open and productive land and in making public infrastructure investments efficient.

Myth 8 Smart growth means forcing everyone to live in big city high rises

Actually, some of the best examples of smart growth are in some of the region's oldest, most charming, and most desirable communities. Easton, Maryland, Alexandria, Virginia, and many small towns in

Pennsylvania accommodate substantial growth with minimum impacts on the Bay. Traditional town designs, following familiar, centuries-old patterns in the Bay region, can accommodate growth without sacrificing privacy, safety, or comfort. The townhomes, duplexes, and small-lot designs that give these places such charm are also beneficial to the Bay and there will always be opportunities for low-density living.

Myth 9 Local economies need the tax base that growth management would destroy

Again, the opposite is true. Sprawl usually weakens tax bases by costing much more in municipal services like police, schools, and sewers than it returns to local coffers. A recent report by Prince William County, Virginia, for example, estimates that each new sprawl-designed home costs the locality \$1,600 more than is returned in taxes and other revenues. The side-effects of sprawl, such as traffic congestion, often drive local businesses away. An effective growth management program helps the development community better predict growth as well as protect the quality of life that makes a region attractive to business and industry.

Myth 10 Urban areas will benefit from growth management, but rural areas will suffer

Not true. Rural jurisdictions that need growth will still be able to attract it. But those jobs and improved services would be more appropriately directed toward established towns and villages, and other designated centers. In addition, traditional rural industries, such as farming, forestry, tourism, and fishing, which are often endangered by sprawl, will be protected. Finally, suffering urban areas can also find relief through redevelopment, and through the revitalization that naturally occurs as people rediscover towns and cities.

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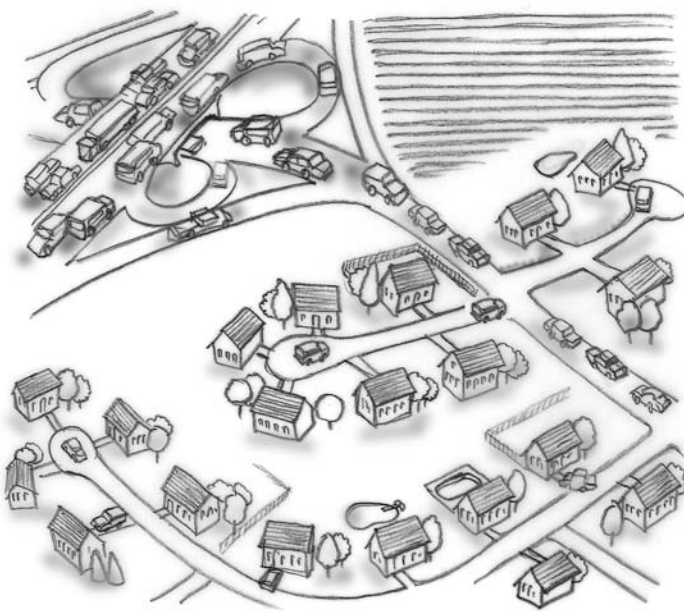
The Chesapeake Bay region is becoming crowded. More people live here today than ever before, and the numbers are projected to increase. The manner in which we manage this growth will have a tremendous impact on the health of our communities and the health of the Chesapeake Bay. For decades, advocates of sprawl development have said that they are simply giving people what they want when they convert farms, fields, and forests into strip malls and housing developments far from established communities. They have spun a web of myths to make their case. When these myths influence policy, they result in more taxes, overcrowded schools, pollution, and traffic.

The myths

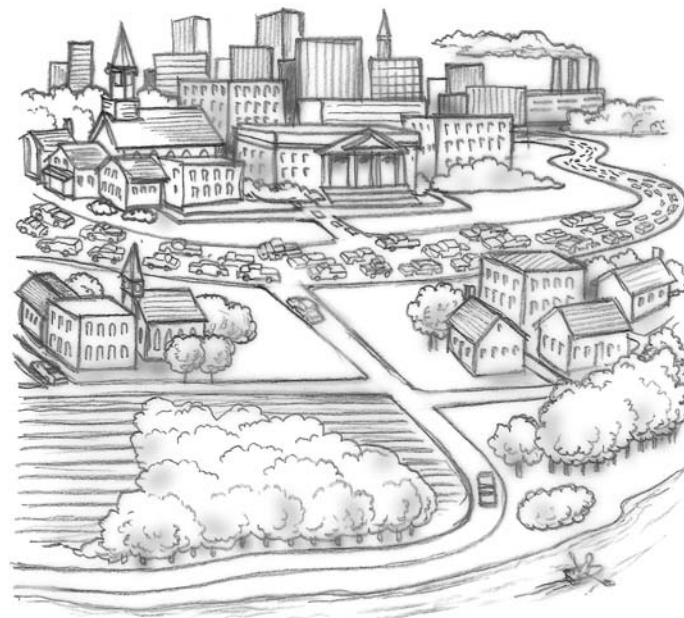
- Most home-buyers want big lots as far from town as possible.
- Sprawl is a product of the free market.
- Smart growth means high-rise buildings, crime, and traffic.
- Towns and cities create more pollution than do sprawling suburbs.
- Suburbs are pastoral safe places that preserve rural character.

The facts

- Surveys show that people want the most home for the money and want to live close to schools, shopping, and parks.
- With decades of government subsidies for sprawl, the free market isn't free and isn't delivering the kinds of communities people want.
- Close-knit communities, where work, stores, and schools are close-by, are better set up to prevent crime than sprawl developments.
- Because people must drive more in the sprawl-burbs, there is more traffic, pollution, and runoff than in other types of communities.
- Sprawl developments convert farms, fields, and forests into roads, roofs, and lawns, and makes it difficult for remaining farmers to survive.



Conventional development



Smart development

What to do, Who to call, Where to get further information

To learn more or to get involved in fighting sprawl, contact the Lands Program of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

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