

A Graphic Look at Demographics

Urban sprawl is destroying Wisconsin's quality of life.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

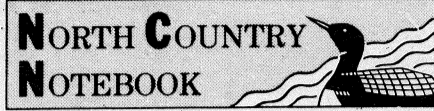
Steve Born is a professor of urban and regional planning and environmental studies at UW-Madison. He wrote and sent along the following. Steady Eddy calls it Urban Sprawl 101.

The Dane County region expects an influx of 40,000 people in the coming decade. Other regions of Wisconsin—the southeastern, the Fox River Valley

and the northwestern, which is impacted by growth in the Twin Cities metro area—all face similar demographic changes. As citizens, we need to be prepared and informed for the emerging debate on how that growth should be accommodated.

The economic vitality of all our regions in Wisconsin depends on sustaining a high quality of life as measured in so many familiar ways. And yet, we as communities and individuals seem tranquilized while urban sprawl devours our "goose that lays the golden eggs"—our land resources and landscape. During a period when the make-up of our citizenry, our lifestyles and our needs are changing rapidly, we need to recognize that we're a different society than we were when the idea of suburban sprawl and strip development was conceived.

Sprawl development spreading out from community centers—including many of the so-called edge cities—has enormous environmental, social and economic costs. It destroys farmlands and rural communities. It destroys



natural systems that are of irreplaceable value in their own right and essential for many human recreational activities.

Sprawl destroys open space and the scenic character of the region that we've all come to take for granted. It increases air and water pollution, wastes energy and fosters decay in our cities. Moreover, sprawl creates unne-

cessary cost burdens as urban services are stretched inefficiently and as expensive infrastructure and services are duplicated.

A study done in the mid-1970s while I was state planning director is still largely valid today. It indicated that increased density reduces capital development costs for local streets, sewers and the like by as much as 60%. In view of the costs of sprawl and local stressed economies, it seems incredible that development densities in many of our communities are decreasing.

"Government" is hardly a popular word these days when "markets" and "privatization" are the virtuous buzzwords. Government seems to be one of the few things that everybody wants less of, but government, no matter how maligned, is not something inherently evil. In reality, it is the only way we have of making collective decisions above the level of the family.

Except for some public intervention and influence, the face and character of our communities and regions will be determined by the choices made by developers. Developers are not bad people intent upon destroying cherished Wisconsin values. But developers don't have to consider the full range of effects—sometimes called "spillover effects"—from their profit-oriented decisions. Lack of governmental concern and involvement represents a refusal by elected public officials to accept some responsibility for the future of our communities.

Growth management doesn't mean "no growth." It's concerned with housing, jobs, protecting natural systems. Its concern is balancing a strong economy with a healthy environment. I have a few ideas on starting to deal with growth and related problems in our regions.

First, there must be leadership by elected officials and other influentials. We need county and village board members, mayors, legislators and governors who are skilled in taking the issue to the citizens of Wisconsin and who will follow up with the necessary political actions—including funding growth-management efforts.

Second, we need leaders who will look to the effects of our fiscal policies and intergovernmental structure on the way we decide about growth. At present, we suffer from many inefficient, even adversarial, relationships between state and local governments and between various local units.

Legislative reforms that enable government to function more effectively in fiscal terms, and more effectively in making decisions that affect other governmental units, need to be developed and discussed.

Third, we need effective results-oriented planning involving all affected communities in order to guide growth and make sound intergovernmental plans. Planning must be more than simply responding to initiatives by developers. And planning must be coupled with strong educational efforts to allow democratic and informed decision-making by citizens.

Fourth, we need to address the annexation and "border war" issues associated with sprawl and other developmental decisions that transcend local jurisdictional boundaries. Mechanisms developed in other states—such as mechanisms to review developments having regional impacts and various tax base-sharing approaches—should be carefully evaluated for possible application in Wisconsin.

I believe the time has arrived for serious political and public discussion of growth and related economic, social and environmental problems in our state. A groundswell of local concern and the political will to tackle the problems are critical next steps if our collective dreams for a high quality life for future generations are to be fulfilled. ■