

# tools and measures that can help curb sprawl



The following descriptions and examples are adapted from the Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse, [www.sprawlwatch.org](http://www.sprawlwatch.org).

## Planning and Zoning

### Comprehensive Land Use Plans

Depending on the state, comprehensive plans may be optional or mandatory for local governments, and they can be merely advisory in nature or legally binding on public decisions. Lincoln, NE, has a successful comprehensive plan that outlines planning goals, establishes growth patterns, and provides a policy framework for implementation tools, such as zoning, capital and transportation improvement programs, design standards, and protection of the natural environment.

### Cluster Zoning

This type of zoning allows groups of dwellings on small lots on one part of a site so as to preserve open space and/or natural features on the remainder of the site. It also reduces minimum lot and yard sizes for the clustered development.

### Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs)

Designation of specific areas for limited development helps to encourage more livable urban spaces and to protect farmlands and open space from sprawling development. Local governments estimate the amount of land needed for new business, housing, recreation, etc., for a period of time. They then draw a line around this land. New development can occur within the line but not outside it. Statewide urban growth boundaries are now mandated in Oregon, Washington, and more recently in Tennessee.

### Agricultural Protection Zoning (APZ)

This zoning practice stabilizes the agricultural land base, by designating areas where farming is the desired land use,

generally on the basis of soil quality as well as a variety of locational factors. The density of residential development in these areas is then limited by agricultural protection zoning. Maryland has several county ordinances that permit a maximum density of one unit per 20 acres.

## Land Protection

### Land Trusts

These private, nonprofit organizations seek to obtain conservation of land through donated or purchased easements or through buying land outright through custom-tailored deals with private landowners. The net effect, in either case, is preservation of open spaces that provide aesthetic relief, recreational opportunities, new tourism, a stronger agricultural base, and a healthier ecosystem.

### Greenways

Greenways are corridors that protect a stream, scenic view, or other natural resource from development and provide connections and opportunities for pedestrian and bicycle travel. Many states have created special funds or taxes to acquire land for conservation. Florida for instance, has authorized the sale of \$300 million in bonds a year over ten years to acquire and preserve land.

### Purchase of Development Rights

A number of states have created programs to purchase the development rights of agricultural lands, thereby keeping them as open spaces in perpetuity. Under such arrangements, a farmer sells the rights to develop his or her land to a local trust or estate agency while retaining title to the land, the right to farm on it, and all other rights and responsibilities of private landowners. In West Windsor, NJ, a town of 16,000, local property taxes raise about \$414,000 a year to buy farms or development rights.

## Economic Approaches

### Tax Incentives

Changes in tax codes can be used to maintain the economic viability of farming. Michigan, New York, and Wisconsin allow farmers to claim state income tax credits in order to offset their local property tax bills. These programs relieve farmers of real property taxes that exceed a certain percentage of their income. Tax incentives can also be used to promote reinvestment in existing communities. In Maryland, the state legislature changed its tax code so that businesses that locate or expand in designated urban “growth areas” are eligible for a new job creation income tax credit. In Pittsburgh, the new land tax is five to six times the tax on buildings and improvements. Following the adoption of the new tax rate, development in downtown Pittsburgh exceeded that of many similar neighboring cities.

### Transfer of Development Rights

Many municipalities have programs that allow a developer to buy development rights at one location—where there is an historic site, wetlands, special natural site, etc.—and transfer the right to develop to another place within the jurisdiction. In Montgomery County, MD, some 89,000 acres have been designated a “preferential agriculture zone,” which allows only one residential unit per 25 acres. Land bought there brings with it “development rights” that can be transferred to designated growth areas elsewhere in the county.

### Regional Tax Base Sharing

One of the most effective ways to sever the link between local property taxes and local services (and thus prevent the competition that fuels sprawl) is through regional tax-base sharing. As long as different towns in a metro region have widely disparate property tax rates—and thus disparate levels of public services—municipalities will continue to compete among

themselves for businesses and residents. By sharing tax revenue, localities have less incentive to encourage sprawl because of the tax benefits it is perceived to bring.

## Urban Renewal

### Historic Preservation

Rehabilitating a downtown structure is generally less expensive than erecting a new building. It also helps bolster a community's economy and social bonds and differentiates it in business markets saturated by sameness. Preservation also helps to reduce environmental harm by reducing the pressures fueling sprawl. In Chippewa Falls, WI, downtown merchants created a business improvement district that taxed itself for renovations and promotions. The town reinvested \$42 million, rehabilitated 124 buildings, and netted 45 new businesses and 457 new jobs.

### Brownfield Reclamation

Brownfields are abandoned, idle, or under-used industrial and commercial facilities, where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination. Wyandotte, MI, transformed a defunct, 84-acre chemical manufacturing plant along the Detroit River into a public recreation area and a nine-hole golf course. Through a combination of public and private funding, the city was able to revitalize the waterfront and the once-blighted neighborhood around the plant. This redevelopment has precipitated economic growth throughout downtown Wyandotte.

### Location Efficient Mortgage Program

This is a lending program that allows mortgagees to borrow more money than they would normally qualify for so they can buy larger houses in the city, based on the actual cost savings of living near mass transit. Under a pilot program being

developed in Chicago, banks will use a computerized model to calculate the location-specific cost savings that individuals can reap by living near mass transit and not owning a car. Based on this amount, the borrower then qualifies for a higher mortgage, giving the borrower additional funds to purchase a home.

### Affordable Housing

Affordable housing can advance racial integration, reduce concentrated poverty and its social fallout, enhance welfare-to-work efforts, reduce traffic, and improve regional growth. Rockville, MD, adopted an inclusionary ordinance in 1990, which requires all subdivisions of 50 or more dwellings to include moderately priced units. After a thirty-year decline in population, the District of Columbia recently passed the \$5,000 Homebuyer Credit Act to help replenish the city's population and, in turn, its taxpayer base.

## Transportation Alternatives

### Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA)

State and local governments can use Federal ISTEA funds to develop non-driving modes of transportation. From supporting downtown shuttle buses in Boulder, CO, to commuter bike stations in Long Beach, CA, and a railroad depot in Lafayette, IN, ISTEA has made transportation more efficient while mitigating its environmental impact and spurring economic development in urban areas.

### Transportation Oriented Development

This style of development involves moderate- and high-density housing, with jobs, retail stores, and services, all concentrated at strategic points along an expanding regional transit system. Ballston Station in

Arlington, VA, was a low-density suburban area until 1984. Since that time, 2,471 residential housing units and 3.7 million square feet of commercial space were built within a one-third mile radius of the subway station.

### Bicycle-Friendly Design

Davis, CA, Boulder, CO, and Eugene, OR, have broad bike lanes and plenty of bike parking—the infrastructure that bicyclists need to make shopping and other activities feasible without an automobile. Portland, OR, and Madison, WI, have added bicycle racks to city buses, providing an integrated system of public transportation and increasing the area that can be reached by bicycle.

## Additional Resources

- Planning Communities for the 21st Century  
American Planning Association  
<http://www.planning.org/plnginfo/GROWSMAR/gsindex.html>
- American Farmland Trust  
[www.aft.org/how/tools/htm](http://www.aft.org/how/tools/htm)
- Center for Neighborhood Technologies  
[www.cnt.org](http://www.cnt.org)
- National Trust for Historic Preservation  
[www.nthp.org](http://www.nthp.org)
- Smart Growth Network  
[www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org)
- Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse  
[www.sprawlwatch.org/bestpractices.html](http://www.sprawlwatch.org/bestpractices.html)
- Surface Transportation Policy Project  
[www.transact.org](http://www.transact.org)



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