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Sprawl Guide

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How Do You Define Sprawl?

- **One of the earliest uses of the word "sprawl" in terms of land use** was in a 1937 speech by [Earle Draper](#), then director of planning for the Tennessee Valley Authority: "Perhaps diffusion is too kind of word. ... In bursting its bounds, the city actually sprawled and made the countryside ugly ..., uneconomic [in terms] of services and doubtful social value."
- While there's no universally accepted definition, the [Vermont Forum on Sprawl](#) concisely defines sprawl as "dispersed development outside of compact urban and village centers along highways and in rural countryside."
- Noted policy analyst Anthony Downs, at a **May 1998 Transportation Research Conference**, identified ten "traits" associated with sprawl:
 1. unlimited outward extension
 2. low-density residential and commercial settlements
 3. leapfrog development
 4. fragmentation of powers over land use among many small localities
 5. dominance of transportation by private automotive vehicles
 6. no centralized planning or control of land-uses
 7. widespread strip commercial development
 8. great fiscal disparities among localities
 9. segregation of types of land uses in different zones
 10. reliance mainly on the trickle-down or filtering process to provide housing to low-income households

We welcome hearing your definition (and explanation) of sprawl. Selected replies will be posted. E-mail us at: editor@plannersweb.com

The following definition (and explanation) was e-mailed to us by Kurt Seidel of Phoenixville Borough, Pennsylvania:

"Sprawl is characterized by housing not located within walking distance of any retail."

Explanation: "This is a powerful definition because of its simplicity. All of the benefits of traditional neighborhoods flow from the ability to walk to a destination worth walking to, even a pizza shop, but preferably a cafe or pub.

If people walk to a cafe, they would walk to a bus or train-station located near the cafe. If you provide one, just one, retail establishment worth walking to, people will do it, and all else follows from that. Especially the 1/3 of people in our society who can't drive, be they elderly or 10-15 year-olds."

The following definition was e-mailed to us by Craig Kelly:

"Sprawl is NOT the consumption of farms and green space. It is: Disadvantageous development that

- separates uses
- accomodates the automobile
- provides densities that render transit options unattainable
- exists anywhere and cannot be discouraged by "Growth Boundaries"

The following was e-mailed to us by John Elsdon of Manchester, New Hampshire (which John notes is "A walkable city!"):

"Sprawl is the result of inappropriate land development policies over the past 50 years which has made the American Public unable and unwilling to walk anywhere, except in older cities where there is a great mix of development."

The following definition of sprawl by Attorney H. Bernard Waugh, Jr., Chief Counsel for the New Hampshire Municipal Association (from a 1999 lecture) was provided by Tim Thompson, Londonderry, NH, Town Planner:

"Sprawl may be defined as inflation, over time, in the amount of land area consumed per unit of human activity, and the degree of dispersal between such land areas, brought about as the avoidable consequence of society's use of automobiles.

A development or change in land use contributes to sprawl:

- (a) If it increases the need/demand for motor vehicle trip miles per unit in your community (that is, per housing unit, or, in the case of commercial development, per unit of economic activity);
- (b) If it increases the per person or unit amount of land space devoted to cars (road surface, parking lots, etc) -- or if it, by causing congestion increases the demand for devoting space for cars; or
- (c) If it otherwise increases the per person or per unit consumption or fractionalization of land areas which would otherwise be open space -- agriculture, forestry, recreation, wildlife habitat, etc."

The following definition was e-mailed to us by David Warren, a student at Glenunga International High School in Australia:

"Sprawl is the unplanned extension of urban areas into rural arable areas."

The following definition was e-mailed to us by Steven E. McKean:

"Sprawl is defined as erratic and large building patterns that redefine remote or newly desired areas."

The following definition was e-mailed to us by Richard P. Goss, AICP, Planning Director, Spotsylvania, Pennsylvania:

"Sprawl is the inability to participate in community life because you are unable to live where you work."

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