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stop sprawl

Sprawl Costs Us All:

How Uncontrolled Sprawl Increases Your Property Taxes and Threatens Your Quality of Life

By Brett Hulsey
Senior Midwest Representative, Sierra Club

Supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation
February, 1996

About the Sierra Club

Founded by Wisconsin conservationist John Muir in 1892, the Sierra Club is dedicated to protecting, enjoying, and preserving the outdoors. The Sierra Club's Midwest Regional Campaign to Protect People's Health, Homes and Environmental Rights is designed to educate citizens about threats to their communities like sprawl and property taxes increases, and recommend policies that can reduce these threats. This effort is supported by the Joyce Foundation.

About the author

Brett Hulsey is former president of Citizens for a Better Fitchburg, an ad hoc citizens group dedicated to controlling taxes and creating a better, not bigger community. He now chairs the Dane County Environmental Caucus and is Midwest Representative for the Sierra Club. Hulsey is in the Certified Public Manager Program at the University of Wisconsin, has a Masters in Geography from the University of Oklahoma, and has a Bachelors in Political Economy from Middlebury College. He has worked on land use and protection issues for more than 15 years.

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- Danger on Tap: Protect America's Drinking Water
- Clean Lakes, Clean Jobs: A Case for Cleaning Up Contaminated Sediments
- Clean Lakes, Clean Steel: A Citizens's Guide to the Great Lakes Steel Industry

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First Edition.

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Executive Summary

Property taxes continue to increase despite efforts of the legislature and local officials to contain them. Evidence suggests that a major cause of this unrelenting rise in property taxes is inefficient, sprawling development in our cities, villages and towns. Dane County is nationally-recognized as a great place to live and has been the fastest-growing county in Wisconsin for the past two decades. This rapid growth not only fuels the increase in property taxes but also threatens the character of the community which is so special.

To make informed land use decisions, we must know the full costs and benefits of new development. Just as environmental impact statements allow us to understand the effects of building projects on environmental resources, property tax impact statements will help us understand the full costs and benefits of new development. These statements are needed to make better land use decisions, to protect the character of our communities and to control property taxes.

No Property Tax Relief in Sight

Property tax growth is a top concern of Wisconsin's citizens.

The politicians have once again promised property tax relief, but a recent study by the non-partisan Wisconsin Taxpayer's Alliance states that the one-time average relief of \$200 will soon be gobbled up by increased county and city taxes to service new homes and building.

The non-partisan Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance says that the property tax will continue growing at 5% per year due to rising cost in other government sectors like city and county taxes. Their analysis states:

If recent trends continue, property taxes collected for municipal, county and technical college purposes will grow more than 5% annually. The amount of property taxes raised by other local governments may soon exceed school taxes. These taxes will slowly reverse the property tax slowdown of 1994 and 1995 and the anticipated cut in 1996.

The Taxpayers Alliance goes onto estimate that city and county property taxes rose in Wisconsin by 5 and 6.1% respectively in 1995.

Independent estimates by the Associated Press and the Legislative Fiscal Bureau show that school property tax relief promised for Dane County this year will be hardly noticeable. In 1996, the change in school taxes in Dane County will range from a mere 0.7% savings to an increase of 2.1%. School taxes make up roughly 52.7% of property taxes statewide.

Ignoring the costs of sprawl and uncontrolled building has serious tax consequences. Fitchburg city leaders ignored repeated citizen requests to estimate the cost of rampant development there in 1994 and total taxes have soared by over 24% in the last three years according to news reports. Much of this increase was due to a 200% increase in police calls. "We are feeling growing pains," said police Lt. Tom Blatter.

Across Dane County last year, tax levies skyrocketed by up to 22%. Oregon village taxes are up 11.5%. Madison taxes are up by over 6%. Verona school taxes will increase by 19%, Belleville by 17%, Deerfield by 16%, Middleton-Cross Plains by 8.9% according to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau. Mt. Horeb assessments rose as well. Middleton faces increased taxes and an unpopular and expensive new sewer line to service its suburban sprawl. All this while inflation is running less than 3%.

We do not know the exact cost of sprawl to county taxpayers, but we do know sprawl continues to add to our property tax burden.

While we appreciate the tax relief the Wisconsin Legislature just passed, we know that won't last long if eaten up by the costs of inefficient sprawl development. For example, it will take only \$6,600,000 in new construction to offset the average McFarland resident's \$200 property tax break. That means that the cost of servicing only 50 new homes will wipe out any gains

McFarland residents will get in the property tax cut.

Estimating Sprawl's Impact on Property Taxes

We suspect that inefficient sprawl development threatens our families by worsening problems like increased taxes, lost farm and park land, neighborhood breakdown, increased crime, and clogged roads and traffic. But how much of our property tax check goes to pay for sprawl?

UW Professor of Regional Planning Jack Huddleston estimates that Wisconsin taxpayers will be asked to pay over \$4 billion in the next 15 years for services such as transportation, public works, public safety, education, culture, recreation and government for the 400,000 new state residents. As the chart below shows, Wisconsin governments could save over \$25 million each year by curbing sprawl and promoting compact development.

Paying for Growth Estimated additional local government expenditures required to meet needs of 400,000 new Wisconsin residents by the year 2010.			
Development pattern	Capital	Operations	Total
Suburban, low density, significant "leapfrogging"	\$3,949,000,000	\$495,000,000	\$4,444,000,000
Dispersion beyond suburbs, but minimal "leapfrogging"	\$3,746,000,000	\$493,000,000	\$4,239,000,000
Higher density, urban containment	\$3,552,000,000	\$488,000,000	\$4,040,000,000

Source: UW-Madison Dept. Of Urban & Regional Planning. Costs include transportation, public works, public safety, education, culture, recreation and government. Methods based on major 1974 study by Chicago-based Real Estate Research Corp. Findings are preliminary and are listed in constant 1994 dollars.

Huddleston estimates the cost difference between low density sprawl development and high density contained development at \$400 million over 15 years– or \$25 million per year.

The sprawl option will cost \$300 million per year and each new resident will cost taxpayers an average of \$11,000 each in 1994 dollars. Clearly, we need to get more specific information about these local costs so we can weigh the benefits of additional development.

Some villages and towns like McFarland and Dunn, Wisconsin have already started to estimate these costs. According to the Wisconsin State Journal, Dane County Board Supervisor Kevin Kesterson said that each new \$1 million new construction costs each McFarland taxpayer \$30 in additional property taxes to pay for police, fire, sewer, schools, and other services.

While new home building brings in additional property tax revenue, it appears that this revenue does not adequately cover the costs of servicing these new developments with roads, sewers, fire and police protection, garbage collection, buses, water, and other public services.

The Town of Dunn estimates that new residential building costs town taxpayers \$1060 to service for each \$1000 the owner's will pay in taxes, while farm and parkland only costs \$180 for each \$1000 in taxes paid. These figures may be conservative considering that the service cost of single family homes is \$1670 in Madison Village, Ohio and \$1070 in Lake Elmo, Minnesota.

The average cost of public services for communities in the Midwest is 124% of the tax income derived from residential housing, versus 44% of the tax

income derived from farm and parkland. This means that the average new home costs taxpayers \$1240 while farms and parks cost only \$440 for every \$1000 paid in property taxes in six Wisconsin, Minnesota and Ohio communities.

So the relationship seems to be that sprawl causes expensive services to drive up property taxes. Conversely, compact development can lead to more efficient services and property tax savings.

The Costs of Sprawl

There are many models for assessing the cost of new development, but any plan commission, city council, town and county board can consider these costs, adapted from UW Professor Jack Huddleston.

The annual costs to provide these public services should be compared for various types, configurations, and locations of development ranging from the most compact, densely clustered to loosely scattered building.

Transportation

- Streets and road building, maintenance, and added traffic*
- Freeway and expressway needs and demands created by sprawl
- Bus and mass transit needs and costs

Utilities and Public Works

- Water and sewage treatment costs including added lines and capacity*
- Storm drainage and additional polluted run-off demands*
- Solid waste collection and disposal*

Safety services

- Police protection*
- Fire protection*
- Emergency Medical Services*

Education

- Elementary and secondary schools
- Vocational/technical education

Culture and Recreation Services

- Libraries*
- Parks, playgrounds and recreation*
- Open space

General Government

- Employees, planning, and support service

Other costs

- Loss of productive farm families and agricultural land
- Loss of wildlife habitat
- Lower drinking water supplies and qualities

* 1993 Wisconsin Act 305 authorizes local units of government to charge impact fees to developers for capital costs, but not for annual operating costs. Note that schools costs, the largest cost item for most communities, cannot be charged.

The Problem, The Challenge

Why do property taxes continue to rise despite state cost controls and promised tax relief? Several communities have begun to trace the cause of this continued tax increase.

Franklin, Wisconsin

The City of Franklin, a fast growing suburb of 25,000 south of Milwaukee, similar to Fitchburg, did an exhaustive study of the cost of new sprawl and development in 1992. City leaders estimated that a new single family detached home costs city taxpayers \$10,607 to service. The home's average value was \$96,000, and it paid much less than \$5,000 in property taxes at that time. As you can see from the chart, most of these costs were in providing schooling, parks and civic costs.

The city proposed charging half this new cost in the form of an impact fee at the time. However under the 1993 Impact Fee Act 305, Franklin now only charges \$813 to offset the estimated \$10,607 costs of a new home. Act 305 limits the impact fees communities can charge to direct on-site costs. But sprawl costs more, like added school costs.

School Costs Add Up

Franklin estimated it will have to build four new elementary schools, one middle school, and one new high school to meet predicted sprawl-related growth total over \$48 million in 20 years. With an estimated 6,000 new residential units in Franklin, each of these units would add over \$8,000 in school costs to the public.

Dane County

Dane County grew by nearly 27,000 people between 1990 and 1995 and is expected to add another 43,000 people in the next decade. That will mean adding communities the size of Sun Prairie, Middleton, and Fitchburg in the next 10 years.

The question remains where will they live and who will pay for the public services they need? If each household has an average of 2.4 people, we will need additional 18,000 new residential units to house them.

Applying the estimates Franklin used of \$10,607 per new home, Dane County taxpayers could pay up to \$190 million in new costs of schools and government services to handle the projected growth in the next ten years, or \$19 million per year. If new residents pay their fair share for their own services and new housing is developed efficiently, these costs could be cut significantly.

While the state aid formulas and school costs differ for Franklin and Dane County communities, this \$10,607 estimate underscores the need to find out how much new building is costing Dane County taxpayers.

Town of Dunn

The Town of Dunn, southeast of Madison, has done extensive analysis of costs of servicing various land uses. As the chart shows, the town estimates that public services cost 106% of taxes received from residential building. Public services only cost 29% of taxes received for commercial building and 18% for agricultural, forest, and open space.

That means that it costs \$1060 to service a home that only pays \$1000 in taxes each year. Farm land and park land only cost \$180 to service for the same \$1,000 in revenue.

This is why Town of Dunn officials are considering paying farmers for their rights to develop their land, to keep the land in farming and keep the property tax growth down. This may explain why the Town has kept its taxes low. The Town of Dunn's 1993 mill rate was only \$1.85 per \$1000 assessed value, compared to \$2.85 in Oregon and \$3.49 in Sun Prairie. The cost of providing inefficient services to sprawling subdivisions may lead to inflated property taxes for *all* residents.

Regional Perspective

The costs in the Town of Dunn are consistent with other studies of sprawl in the Midwest and Northeast conducted by the American Farmland Trust. The

chart below shows the regional costs of development per \$1,000 of tax revenue by land use type.

Cost of Servicing Different Land Uses per \$1,000 Tax Revenue

Location	Farmland, parkland, and open space cost		
19 Town of Dunn, WI	\$1,060	\$290	\$180
19 Lake Elmo, MN	\$1,070	\$200	\$270
Independence, MN	\$1,030	\$190	\$470
Farmington, MN	\$1,020	\$790	\$770
Madison, OH	\$1,670	\$200	\$380
Madison Township, OH	\$1,140	\$250	\$300
Midwest Average	\$1,165	\$320	\$395
Connecticut Avg.	\$1,060	\$470	\$430
Massachusetts Avg.	\$1,120	\$417	\$327
New York State Avg.	\$1,240	\$235	\$345
Northeast Average	\$1,140	\$296	\$376

Wisconsin Land Use Laws: Weak...

The 1995 Wisconsin Strategic Growth Task Force recommended that state officials should take the lead in shaping growth and development and perhaps withhold money from communities that fail to plan land use. The report of the task force, *Land Use Issues Facing Wisconsin*, found the following shortcomings in the current land use decision making process. Wisconsin:

Lacks a common land use vision.

Underutilizes and inadequately implements land use planning techniques.

Makes infrastructure decisions without adequate consideration of land use impacts.

Allows tax and fiscal policy to drive land use in ways that conflict with land use goals.

Lacks financial and technical resources to plan and regulate land use.

This shows that Wisconsin has a long way to go to get control over property taxes and sprawl. The Wisconsin State Journal compared Wisconsin's laws with those of Oregon, a more progressive land protection state. As the table below shows, Wisconsin has none of the six key land use measures needed for successful land protection and balanced development.

Wisconsin and Oregon		
Comparison of States Land-use Regulations		
Do state regulations require:	Oregon	Wisconsin
Statewide land-use planning?	Yes	No

Land-use plans of all cities and counties?	Yes	No
Consistency between statewide goals and local plans?	Yes	No
Consistency between local zoning decisions and local land-use plans?	Yes	No
Coordination between city plans and county plans?	Yes	No
Consistency between state goals and state agency programs?	Yes	No
Source: Donald Last, UW-Stevens Point, member of Wisconsin Strategic Growth Task Force (WSJ graphic from July 23, 1995.)		

Unfortunately, the Wisconsin Legislature seems to be heading in the wrong direction by making it more difficult to assess the cost of development and plan land use effectively.

Impact Fee Bill In 1993, the legislature passed the Wisconsin Impact Fee Act 305, with the support of the real estate industry. This measure will "significantly challenge local governments' ability to pay the costs of roads, sewers and parks associated with more or expanded development," according to Harvey Temkin and Wayne Hanewicz of the real estate department of Foley and Lardner.

This law limits local governments' right to charge impact fees to cover the cost of new schools. The act requires local governments to:

1. Conduct a Public Facilities Needs Assessment,
2. Conduct a public hearing,
3. Include only the proportionate share of costs, not the added costs, in impact fees,
4. Adhere to strict accounting and paperwork requirements .

According to Foley and Lardner's legal experts, the bills practical effect "could be painful for all involved."

...and Getting Weaker: Proposed Land Use Legislation

The 'Take Your Taxes' Bill, AB 521

This bill would force local governments to go to court to defend local zoning decisions that protect the local communities and tax payers. If the alleged action lowers the potential property value by more than 20%, a court would require the local government to pay the developer.

This bill would strip local governments' ability to protect themselves from incompatible developments like liquor stores and strip bars near schools. It also reduces control on property taxes by putting the value of the developers property before the overall costs of the development to communities and local governments. This measure would significantly increase taxes.

The 'Town Sprawl' Bill, AB 893

This bill would give towns exclusive zoning rights and make them exempt from extraterritorial zoning of adjacent communities. They would not have to coordinate land use decisions with the county, cities or neighboring communities. It would mean, for instance, that a town could site a landfill or quarry next to neighborhoods or schools in a neighboring village or city.

This bill would increase sprawl and lower counties' ability to control property tax growth and protect neighborhoods from incompatible development like landfills and quarries. One of the key recommendations of the Wisconsin Strategic Growth Task Force was to increase the coordination of land use plans between all levels of government. This bill is contrary to this recommendation.

This bill makes it easier for developers to get land out of agriculture exclusive zoning if the owner is not eligible for the farmland preservation credit or the landowner makes less than \$6,000 in gross farm profits each year. This will increase the expansion of sprawl development on farmland that had been zoned solely for agricultural use.

Summary

These measures will loosen the public's control over land use decisions that lead to sprawl and higher taxes. This underscores the need to put more information and power in the hands of the taxpayers to assess the impacts of sprawl development.

Property Tax Impact Statements

Taxpayers need concrete information to protect their families and neighborhoods from soaring taxes and the other destructive effects of sprawl. The property tax impact statement will allow citizens to get a handle on the real costs of unchecked development in our Dane County and Wisconsin communities and estimate how much new development will cost taxpayers for annual services.

The property tax impact statement will estimate the additional costs of providing and servicing schools, roads, fire, police, water, sewer and other public services that will be required for each new development. With the statement, we will know up front what we will be paying for and decide if this development is beneficial or detrimental to the community. Towns, cities and counties can perform these estimates without passing new laws. Citizens can go to their plan commission and city council meetings and ask that these estimates be done before approval of new developments.

Some may say the property tax impact statement is unneeded regulation, but citizens have the right to know where their tax money is going and how much new sprawl will cost them. The statement will allow us to weigh the costs and benefits of new construction. If we do environmental impact statements, why can't we do property tax impact statements?

Property rights advocates claim they have the right to do whatever they wish with their land, regardless of the consequences to their neighbors, communities, taxpayers or the environment. They argue that the U. S. Constitution's Fifth Amendment gives them the right to maximize the economic return from their land.

They also claim that any restraint that keeps landowners from making the most money possible, such as zoning, land use planning, or environmental protections, "takes" their private property. Proposals in the Wisconsin and federal legislatures would require the government to pay developers for potential losses in value. This could cost taxpayers billions each year.

These claims ignore that poorly planned sprawl development already costs taxpayers billions in increased property taxes, school costs, road building, sewer, water treatment, police, fire, and other direct costs, as Huddleston has shown. Few properties can be developed without the public assuming a property tax burden and other costs. The costs of sprawl appear to be far greater than the added tax base that most new building provides.

This report recommends practical, common sense solutions for reasonable development that includes assessing all of the costs, guiding building toward the least-costly areas, protecting farmland and park areas, and protecting citizens' quality of life -- and their wallets!

Higher property taxes from sprawl development affect us each personally, The long-term erosion of the character and quality to our community from sprawl is the greater threat.

Once the village of Cross Plains becomes the *Geography of Nowhere* , property tax relief alone will not restore its character.

A Vision for Dane County AND WISCONSIN

We live in a beautiful state and county, one of the finest places to live in the country. The rich farmland and culture come together here in 'just about

the right sized" communities. These communities are large enough to provide a wide range of cultural opportunities but small enough to provide good neighborhoods for our families.

Our vision for Dane County is to promote and protect:

High wage, family-supporting jobs

Affordable housing costs, including reasonable property taxes

Safe, clean communities and neighborhoods

Efficient, responsive government

Farms and farm families of the county

Efficient transportation with minimal traffic and congestion

Clean air, water, and parks

Good fishing, hunting, boating, biking, skiing, and other outdoor recreational opportunities

Our Values

Solutions to our community and land protection problems should be consistent with our values:

Honesty, we should be honest about how our tax money is being spent.

Fairness, those who benefit disproportionately should pay their fair share.

Responsibility, how we treat the land today determines the health of our community tomorrow.

Community, our responsibility to each other and the land.

Foresight to plan for the future of our communities.

Efficiency, we should build where it costs us all the least and is most beneficial to our communities.

Economy, cost of housing, including property taxes, should be reasonable.

Practical Solutions: What you can do

1. Ask for Property Tax Impact Statements on all new development projects to help weigh the costs and benefits of new development. Ask your city, town, village plan commission and county board to perform a property tax impact statement before each new development is considered for approval to determine what new development will cost in schools, roads, fire, police, water, sewer, parks, and other tax costs.
2. Support good planning and land-use decisions to guide building where it costs the least and is most efficient and beneficial to our communities. You can support and live in cost-effective compact developments in existing cities and villages where possible, like Marshall Erdman's Middleton Hills project, rather than scattered sprawl projects.
3. Support purchasing parks, conservation lands, trails and green space to protect these areas from development.
4. Acquire development rights from farmers on key threatened lands such as those near Verona and Sun Prairie, and in the towns of Westport, Middleton and Oregon to keep productive farms a viable part of the county's economy.
5. Support county board members and executives decisions to control expensive, scattered, and unsewered development.

Conclusion

Property taxes continue to rise despite efforts to lower them. If our land use decisions continue without a long-range vision or concrete plans to achieve that vision, the situation will only get worse. It appears that each new home may cost you \$5,000-10,000 in increased property taxes.

Property developers do not pay the full cost of building, servicing, and maintaining homes, so they do not have exclusive right to do what ever they want with their land.

Property taxpayers and citizens who want to protect their communities should work with their local units of government to assess the full costs of sprawl in economic and other terms.

The community has the right to know how much sprawl costs, and to direct development to where it costs the community the least and provides the greatest benefits. It is only fair to ask those who benefit from new home building to pay their share of the new taxes. If we are going to keep home ownership affordable in Dane County and Wisconsin, we must assess all the costs of new developments, before they are built and the taxpayers become committed to the long-term cost of servicing those developments. We must assess the home and tax costs and do the best to balance each.

If we do this, there is some hope of controlling taxes and protecting our communities.

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