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Where Growth Is Concerned, Denser Can Mean Smarter

By DONALD J. POLAND

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The debate over sprawl verses smart growth in Connecticut is almost always about changes at the state level.

It may be time to act locally.

Although many changes are needed to state land-use laws and the state's approach to planning, the most effective way to reduce sprawl and change how Connecticut is developing can occur at the local level.

Go to any planning and zoning commission hearing on a proposed residential development and you will hear the same arguments over and over against residential development and sprawl. "The development is too dense and has too many houses." "Density is bad, we are a rural town." "The development will generate more schoolchildren." "We need to preserve open space and farmland." "Residential development is a fiscal negative." "Sprawl is bad."

And many would agree that these are valid arguments. We do need to preserve more open space and farmland. But that does not mean that residential development is bad. If we want our state and regions to grow, if we want more jobs and more economic development, then we need to accept the fact that we will also need more housing, including affordable housing.

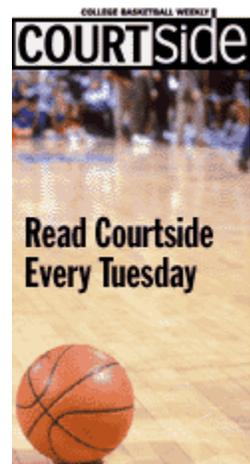
The way many communities have reacted to these common arguments against residential development and sprawl is to increase minimum lot size requirements for residential housing lots.

By increasing residential lots, communities can reduce the number of homes that can be built within its borders. This also reduces the potential future population, including school-age children.

Though this may seem like a valid approach to controlling sprawl and reducing the local tax burden, it can also have serious negative effects.

First, although this may make perfect sense in one town, what if every town did it? If every town in every region in Connecticut increases minimum lot size requirements, the cumulative effect reduces the potential growth of the entire state. Second, large lots tend to mean larger homes, which cost more and

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reduce affordability of housing. Thus we keep poor and even middle-class people out of a community.

Another very detrimental effect may be sprawl. By increasing minimum lot size requirements, more land is needed to build the same number of homes that the market demands. So while an increase in minimum lot size may reduce density and total population, it increases land consumption, reduces open space and chews up farmland.

A review of statewide historical housing permit data further raises the question about land consumption. Looking back at the 1980's, a period of significant growth for Connecticut, housing data reveals that from 1984-1988 an average of 24,552 permits per year were issued for new housing units in Connecticut. From 1997-2001 an average of 9,990 permits per years were issued for new housing units in the state. That is 60 percent fewer new homes built from 1997-2001 than in 1984-1988.

Unfortunately there is no exact data on the amount of land consumed by the 24,000 new homes in the 1980s compared to the nearly 10,000 new housing units per year at the turn of century.

But if you consider the number of communities that have increased the minimum lot size required for building a residential home and created other limitations, it is probably safe to say that we are consuming as much land now with 60 percent fewer homes per year being built.

Stopping sprawl and implementing smart growth is not only a state legislative issue, it also has to occur at the municipal level of government. We need to overcome the perceptions that new housing and density are bad. We need housing if we want more jobs and want Connecticut to be economically competitive in the national and world economy. And we also need to preserve open space farmland to maintain Connecticut's New England charm.

Towns shouldn't wait for the state. We need to maintain our very good quality of life. Increasing density, allowing smaller lots, and increasing open space requirements may be a good place to start.

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