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# Public Policy and "Rural Sprawl": Lessons from Northeast Ohio


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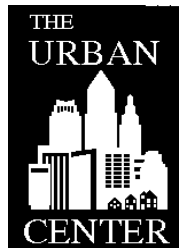
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LESSONS FROM  
NORTHEAST  
OHIO



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**Public Policy and “Rural Sprawl”:  
Lessons from Northeast Ohio**

*By*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This report presents an in-depth, micro-level look at land use and development in a traditionally rural, but now rapidly growing, county in northeast Ohio; it also explores the policy framework relevant to that development.

Medina County, which lies southwest of Cuyahoga County and its central city, Cleveland, is experiencing rapid population growth and loss of farmland. Whereas residential development previously occurred in platted subdivisions in the cities or villages, recently construction of single-family homes on five-to-ten acre parcels on rural roads has greatly increased.

By default public policy has been to promote unplanned growth. Rather than coordination or collaboration between governmental jurisdictions or levels, or between various governmental agencies, there is fragmentation. There is no official county-wide, much less regional, perspective on development. Moreover, state agencies that affect development patterns, such as the Department of Transportation, need not consider local plans. At the same time, while many residents do not like the growth they see, they are leery of larger level comprehensive planning.

Without strong action by state and local governments, development will continue to “nibble” at Medina county’s prime farmland. GIS-based analysis of the type used in this research may produce the evidence needed to build support for stronger public sector action.

## **Introduction**

The last few years have witnessed the re-emergence of “sprawl” as an issue of concern and a topic of research and discussion. There are many dimensions to the issue: central city decline, loss of farmland and open space, growth management and “controls,” property rights, and the environment, to name a few. The development practices that give rise to the issue are largely actions of the private sector, whose members finance and engage in land development and housing construction. But there is a public sector arena as well, for public policies both affect and are affected by private development actions..

This research examines the public policy implications of expanding regional development--a.k.a. “sprawl”--by focusing on land use and growth in a single fast-growing county in northeast Ohio. By default, public policy in Ohio has been to promote sprawl. This is because no formal or official policy regarding regional growth and development patterns exists. At the same time, the fragmentation of responsibilities among agencies, policy areas, jurisdictions, and levels of government ensures that, without major governmental intervention, present development patterns will continue.

The following pages present a brief overview of the issue popularly referred to as “sprawl,” and some discussion of its dimensions in Ohio. An in-depth look at Medina County, which is southwest of Cleveland, follows, focussing particularly on the role played by the public sector. The report then draws on the lessons of Medina County and northeast Ohio to determine the implications of present development patterns and processes for public policy.

## The “Sprawl” Issue<sup>1</sup>

Where did this issue of “sprawl” come from? What are its dimensions and why are some researchers, policy makers, and citizens concerned about it? American cities have always expanded, spilling out into the countryside as populations grew. In the late nineteenth century cities spawned suburbs and became metropolitan regions, but no one expressed concerns about sprawl. The expanded pace of suburbanization after World War II invited analysis and critique, but it was not until the 1960s that the phenomenon was called “sprawl.”

By the late 1960s the expansion of metropolitan areas and associated problems were attracting serious attention. One element, coinciding with the rise of the environmental movement, focused on the wasteful and inefficient use of land and natural resources. In 1974 the U.S. Government Printing Office issued a three-volume study by the Real Estate Research Corporation: *The Costs of Sprawl: Environmental and Economic Costs of Alternative Residential Development Patterns at the Urban Fringe* (Real Estate Research Corporation 1974). The study examined conventional low density leapfrog suburban developments and calculated the costs to both consumers and society associated with that type of development. It also projected costs for other development patterns. Comparisons of the costs led to the conclusion that standard development practice was probably the least beneficial from the greatest number of perspectives.

There were social and political concerns as well. Those leaving the cities for the suburbs were largely white and middle- or upper-income; those who remained were not. A host of works

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive overview of the issue and literature related to sprawl can be found in Patricia Burgess, “Revisiting ‘Sprawl’: Lessons from the Past,” a Research Monograph in publication by The Urban Center, Levin College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University.



in the 1970s illuminated various aspects of racial and economic segregation. Some focused on the declining central cities; others talked about the need to integrate the suburbs; still others illustrated the fiscal burdens that cities faced trying to meet increasing needs with fewer resources. Those works were not generally framed in the context of sprawl. However, the connection was undeniable. In the rush to gobble up farms and woodlands beyond the urban fringe the white middle class was draining the central city.

Despite the all the scholarly and public attention given the issue twenty years ago, and despite many efforts to address some part of the issue, very little has changed. Metropolitan regions continue to expand geographically while their populations grow slowly--or in some cases actually decline (Kasarda, et al. 1997). Elsewhere expansion of urban land uses far exceeds population growth. The 1990s have seen a resurgence of interest in the subject and a fuller appreciation of how inter-related its dimensions are. While there seem to be as many perspectives as there are ideologies, professions, or scholarly disciplines there is no shortage of research and viewpoints.

One set of concerns still focuses on the problems of the central cities, which have worsened (Kasarda 1993; Downs 1997; Bourne 1992; Wilson 1995, 1996). Changes in the national economy and the nature of work have left increasing numbers of poorly educated minorities virtually unemployable in the central cities. While suburbs court economic development, both from other regions and from the nearby city (Vanderbilt 1997), city property values and tax revenues continue to decline. And by the 1980s older, inner-ring suburbs in many metropolitan areas were also feeling the pinch. Many have little industrial or commercial tax base and their aging housing stock is not always competitive with new housing in the outer suburbs (Orfield 1997a, 1997b; The

'Burbs Fight Back 1997). In a related vein, former Albuquerque mayor David Rusk has concluded that the healthiest American cities are those "without suburbs"--that is, those that have been able to annex the outlying land and development (Rusk 1993).

A related issue concerns farmland and ecologically sensitive landscape resources--how much are we losing to expanding urban development and how can we protect or preserve them? Growth controls and growth management techniques may--or may not--be the answer (Popper 1981; Daniels 1997; Arendt 1997; Gale 1992; Landis 1992; Nelson 1992; Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force 1997). The growth controls/growth management debate is itself multi-faceted (Downs 1992; Godschalk 1992; Strong, Mandelker, and Kelly 1996). Some fear that limiting development to specified areas drives up the cost of housing, furthering economic and social inequity. Others protest the imposition of growth controls and other land use regulations, claiming the value of their property has been taken from them. Still another dimension relates aesthetic concerns to social and ecological ones. Land planners, urban designers, and architects, many of whom have long decried the sterile homogeneity of conventional suburbia, now suggest alternative development patterns (Arendt 1997, Calthorpe 1993, Kunstler 1996). Cluster zoning will preserve farmland or sensitive landscapes; neo-traditional or "new urbanist" developments both save precious resources and promote social interaction.

Although it is not clear to what extent "sprawl" is a cause of other problems or a result of them the issue continues to be explored and discussed. In recent years it seems there has been at least one article related to metropolitan growth patterns in almost every issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association* (see, especially, 56, 4; 48, 4; 62,1; 63, 1; and 63,2). *Housing Policy Debate* ran a special forum on planning and growth in Portland, Oregon, a region many

consider at the forefront in addressing the issue (Lang and Hornburg 1997; Abbott 1997; Richmond 1997; Fischel 1997). The Brookings Institution and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy joined forces for “Alternatives to Sprawl,” a 1995 conference (Burchell and Listokin 1995, Richmond 1995). And as Fischel’s comment on Portland (1997) and the exchange of *JAPA* articles by Gordon and Richardson (1997) and Ewing (1997) make clear, opinions are divided on possible solutions and even about whether there is a problem. Whether it is good, bad, or irrelevant, however, what is undeniable is that American metropolitan regions continue to expand into once-rural areas while their central cities generally continue to lose population.

### **“Sprawl” in Ohio, and in Medina County**

The phenomenon discussed above is affecting many U.S. urban areas, and it takes different forms. In the sunbelt it is driven in part by population growth, much as suburban growth has always been, but it is consuming proportionately more land per person or household than in previous eras. In the Midwest the situation is different. There, declining industrial cities, beset by the nation’s change to a post-industrial economy, lose population to surrounding counties that contain some of the nation’s most productive farmland. At the same time, population in the region is stable or declining. Ohio is representative. In central cities of six of the state’s seven major urban areas the number of households declined between 1980 and 1990; the exception is Columbus, which has traditionally had a very aggressive annexation policy (and is thus somewhat like one of Rusk’s “cities without suburbs”). Inner suburbs in five of the seven have either lost households or experienced much less growth than their outer suburbs. Even Columbus, the lone growing central city, has grown much more slowly than its suburbs (Sommers 1995). During roughly the same period (1982-1992), more than 470,000 acres of farmland were converted to

urban uses. The implications are serious, for much of Ohio's farmland is prime farmland or unique soils and one job in six in the state is in agriculture or food processing (Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force 1997). In its recent report, the Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force referred to research by David Rusk that compared population growth to growth in urban land area between 1960 and 1990. While Ohio's population grew by 13 percent, urban land area increased by 64 percent, producing a ratio of urban land use to population of 4.7, more than twice the national average (Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force 1997). Another perspective on the situation is given by estimates of the Union (Ohio) County Engineer's Office. That office surveyed all eighty-eight counties regarding the number of building sites created in unincorporated parts of the state in 1996. Multiplying the number of building sites in major subdivisions, minor subdivisions (lot splits), and non-subdivisions (parcels greater than five acres) by the average size building site for each type, the Union County Engineer estimated that 78,470 acres of unincorporated land--122 square miles--was converted to building sites in 1996 alone (Union County 1997). In Ohio, it is primarily the loss of farmland that has raised the issue of metropolitan expansion.

In northeast Ohio issues related to metropolitan growth patterns have attracted considerable attention. For several years researchers in the Housing Policy Research Program in The Urban Center at Cleveland State University's Levin College of Urban Affairs have tracked migration, home sales, and property value and tax data. They recently completed a project with Minnesota state legislator Myron Orfield on "Winners and Losers," which examined at the community level the gains and losses resulting from regional development patterns. Researchers at Case Western Reserve University conducted the Regional Environmental Priorities Project, which

identified sprawl as a major concern. The Catholic Diocese of Cleveland has recognized the impacts of metropolitan growth on urban congregations and initiated “The Church in the City,” an effort to build awareness and partnerships between urban and exurban churches and help strengthen the former. Meanwhile, an ecumenical organization, We-Can, has formed to address some of the social consequences of regional expansion. All of these efforts relate central city and inner suburban fortunes to exurban development. The research presented here is yet another element. Regional development patterns provide the context for a microscopic examination of development in a single county to illuminate the public policy implications of that development.

### Medina County and its Growth

Medina County, southwest of Cleveland and west of Akron, is the fastest growing county in northeast Ohio. From 1980 to 1990 population increased 8.1 percent, from 113,150 to 122,354. Estimates for 1991-1995 inclusive, however, show population growth of 14 percent for the five years. Moreover, subdivision platting, land sales, and building permit data indicate that growth is not slowing down (Medina County Planning Commission n.d.). There are three incorporated cities: Wadsworth, in the southeast corner of the county, had a 1990 population of 15,718; Medina, the county seat, is near the center of the county and had 19,231 residents in 1990; Brunswick is on the county’s northern edge and had a 1990 population of 28,230. There is also a very small part--just over 100 people--of the city of Rittman (the rest of which is in neighboring Wayne County to the south). There are seven incorporated villages that range in population from a couple hundred to 3000. (Three border Chippewa Lake in the south-central part of the county and the others are in the western or southern townships.) The unincorporated land of the county is divided into seventeen five-mile-square townships. Agriculture, primarily dairy farming, has

always been a major component of Medina County's economy. In 1993, 42 percent of the county's land was in farms, with 970 farms averaging 119 acres in size. Analysis by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources indicates another 29 percent in forest land and 19.5 percent in single-family homes. As this last category increases, agricultural land and other open space decrease (ODNR 1992).

Although the population has been steadily growing, that growth has not been evenly distributed. A line drawn from northwest to southeast would put more of the population and the more dense recent growth on the right-hand side. This would include the areas around the cities of Wadsworth, Medina, and Brunswick, which is not surprising since Interstate Highways 71, 271, and 76 provide easy access to these areas from Cleveland and Akron. Also, development is more dense in this part of the county. There has been some growth within the three cities themselves, or on land being annexed to them (particularly Brunswick), but much of it has been in the townships that surround them or in adjacent townships.

There are two distinctly different patterns of residential development in Medina County and they affect the county in very different ways.<sup>2</sup> One is the traditional type of development of residential lots in platted and recorded subdivisions (though at a lower density than in previous decades). The other is the building of single-family homes on large--i.e., five-to-ten acre--parcels that are not in recorded subdivisions. From 1991 to 1996 the Medina County Planning

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<sup>2</sup> The discussion in this section is based on analysis of information provided by the Medina County Planning Commission and the Medina County Auditor's office, and deed transfer data files purchased from Ameristate, as well as analysis of GIS (Geographic Information Systems) maps created at The Urban Center of the Levin College of Urban Affairs from various public agency computer maps and data files.

Commission approved a total of 63 residential subdivisions, which contained 1745 single-family lots and an additional 392 cluster or condominium lots. The overwhelming majority of these were in the northern and eastern townships. Three townships in the southern tier had no new subdivisions approved and three other largely rural townships had only one each. In addition, the cities of Brunswick and Wadsworth, exercising their extraterritorial jurisdiction, also approved subdivisions within three miles of their borders. Thus most subdivision development is concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the county, around the three principal cities and most accessible to Cleveland and Akron.

Sales of agricultural land, which represent parcel-type development, produce a very different pattern, however. Ten years (1987-1996) of sales of agricultural land in parcels greater than ten acres showed that 1076 such transactions occurred, for a total of 36532.3 acres. Of those, only 3.9 percent (42 transactions) were sales of 100 acres or more in a single tract; the rest, thus, were parts of existing farms being sold off for development. Some sales of ten-plus acre agricultural parcels occurred in every township. There were somewhat fewer in the townships surrounding the three cities, as would be expected since less agricultural land remains there. But examination of the geographic distribution of the other sales shows almost 40 percent concentrated in the townships of the county's southwest corner, and more than 10 percent of the ten-year total in the county's most rural township alone.

When land use change and development over a longer period is examined, one can see how both its nature and location has changed. Using GIS technology Medina County Auditor's Office computer files of property characteristics (including land use and date of residential construction) were merged with a computerized parcel base map to produce a map showing residential

development since 1971 in five year increments, as well as remaining agricultural and vacant land. (Vacant land is in parcels smaller than twenty acres, no longer classed as agricultural for tax purposes but not yet built on.) By 1971 all the cities and villages were well-established, with development having occurred in subdivisions. There had been some parcel-type development, most of which was along the various state highways. Although it was dispersed throughout the county, the greatest amount was in two eastern tier townships and adjacent to the city of Medina. There was very little in the rural southwestern part of the county. Between 1971 and 1975 the greatest amount of subdivision development occurred in and around Brunswick, with somewhat less in Medina and Wadsworth. There was little to none in the villages. Parcel-type development began to show up along county roads as well as state highways and was no longer so noticeable in the eastern tier. The greatest amount of parcel-type development was in the middle townships of the top and bottom tiers (Liverpool and Westfield) and townships diagonally adjacent to them to the west. In the latter half of the 1970s subdivision development expanded the cities at their edges. There was less parcel-type development than in the early 1970s and it was more evenly dispersed throughout the county; however it tended to occur near similar large parcels that had been previously developed. The same pattern continued from 1981-1985, with the addition of a little subdivision development in two of the villages. And although parcel-type development was dispersed, there was noticeably less of it in the most rural western townships. By the late 1980s, the only real area of subdivision development was a "large-lot" subdivision southeast of the interchange of I-271 and State Route 94 in Granger township on the eastern tier. The steady, evenly dispersed pattern of parcel-type development continued, but it was not more intense than previously. The real change came in the early '90s. Two different types of subdivisions appeared:



some in and around the cities mirrored those of earlier decades (though they were a bit less dense); the others were “large-lot” subdivisions that appeared in Granger township and two others. Although all three of these townships were in the northern or eastern parts of the county, none contains a city or village. More striking was the increase in parcel-type development from 1991-1996. It was very evenly dispersed among the townships and appeared on minor township roads as well as on county and state highways. There was also some evidence of “rear lot” development, where a home was built on a large parcel behind an existing already-developed parcel; the rear parcel does not front on an existing road but rather is connected to the road by an access strip. The distribution of vacant, ready-to-build parcels indicates that some will fill in the edges of the cities and villages and some are adjacent to the large-lot subdivisions developed in the last decade. However, there is also almost as much land in isolated vacant, ready-to-build parcels as had been developed as large parcels in the last ten or fifteen years. Comparing the location of existing development with computer-generated maps showing prime farmland and flooding potential illustrates that much of the land being developed as large parcels is prime farmland. Throughout the county potential to flood has proved no impediment to development.

The parcel-type development that has occurred has a much greater impact on the character of Medina County than the subdivision development. For every year since 1991 between half and two-thirds of the residential building permits issued in Medina County have been for parcels outside one of the three cities. When examining the pattern of individual parcel development over time, one finds that initially one or two parcels along the same road would be developed. In the next five years a couple more parcels on the same road might be developed, then within the next five years still a couple more. Where this has occurred on roads that are parallel or at right angles

to one another, there has been an incremental “eating up” of farm-able blocks of land. This sort of domino effect has been aggravated in some places by rear lot development. Some townships have “islands” of farmland surrounded by single-family homes on five-to-ten acre lots. Taken together with the large number of vacant, ready-to-build parcels this type of development will make serious inroads into the usable tracts of farmland that remain. A foreseeable problem is that land will be sold off in five-to-ten acre parcels for residential development at a faster rate than demand for such development grows, leaving the land undeveloped but no longer suitable for agriculture because of its size, location, and loss of agricultural tax class.

Although development has been occurring in Medina County throughout the last twenty-five years, that development has not always been viewed as “sprawl.” In the early 1970s most of the county’s land was in active agricultural production and many of those who lived in the cities and villages worked in the county in agriculture-related jobs or meeting the consumer and service needs of Medina County farmers and other residents. Despite its proximity to Cleveland the county did not perceive itself--and was not perceived by others--as being within the Cleveland metropolitan area. In the 1980s, however, population growth became visibly apparent as new subdivisions appeared at the edges of the cities. The pace has picked up in the 1990s, especially with the increased sales and construction on five-to-ten acre parcels. Many of the new residents of the last fifteen years do not work in Medina County; they commute to neighboring Cuyahoga or Summit counties, often to employment centers on the fringes of Cleveland and Akron. The county is now clearly within the greater Cleveland metropolitan area, and its development is seen as evidence of “sprawl.”

It has long been a truism of suburban development that people move “up and out,” that is, that middle and upper income families move farther and farther from the central city, leaving the poor behind. To gain some understanding of the price level of both new and existing housing in Medina County some analysis of home sales prices in both Medina and Cuyahoga counties was conducted.<sup>3</sup> Sales of new homes in Medina County increased by almost 600 percent from 1987 to 1996, but the new homes being built in Medina County are not the most expensive in the region. Sales prices are higher for new homes in Cuyahoga County’s outer suburbs than for those in Medina County, which presumably reflects a higher land cost. There is actually less difference in price between new homes in Medina County and Cleveland (\$11,678.00) than between new homes in Medina County and the neighboring southside suburbs within Cuyahoga County (\$13,422.00 for Strongsville and \$28,658.00 for North Royalton). But even among Cuyahoga County’s outer suburbs there is variation. New homes in the southside suburbs just north of Medina County are noticeably less expensive than those in the eastern or westside suburbs. At the same time, development in Medina county is clearly putting some price pressure on the market values of existing homes. Over the ten years while new home sales prices increased more in Cuyahoga County than in Medina County (42.03 percent compared to 31.92 percent) existing home sales prices increased much more in Medina County (76.42 percent) than in Cuyahoga County (53.33

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<sup>3</sup> This analysis considered ten years (1987-1996) of sales prices of both existing and new homes (excluding most custom homes, which do not show up in the data since only the lot sale and not the finished home shows up on the deed transfer). County figures were examined for both Medina and Cuyahoga counties, as well as for the city of Cleveland and several outer suburbs still within Cuyahoga county. These included two on the south, just north of Medina county (Strongsville and North Royalton), two on the east (Gates Mills and Solon), and one on the west (Westlake).

percent). Finally, prices of both new and existing homes vary within Medina County. There is a ten-year pattern of the lowest prices in the villages (where there has been very little new development) and the most rural townships and the highest prices in or near the three cities and eastern tier of townships (closer to Cleveland and Akron and where development has been most dense).

One element of this research on public policy and development was to examine the zoning provisions in Medina county, compare them to actual development patterns, and then project when various parts of the county would be fully “built out.” The first step in this process was to create a generalized zoning map of the entire county.<sup>4</sup> Two variations were produced, one showing the zoning densities with the current level and location of water and sewer service and one showing the residential densities if the entire county were sewerred (which theoretically allows for more dense development). Although much of the land is presently in agricultural use, there is no agricultural zoning as such; any land not zoned for commercial, industrial, or public uses is thus zoned for some type of potential residential development. With the present level of water and sewer service, residential zoning in Medina County is as follows. Most of the three cities, the area north and east of the city of Wadsworth, and most of the villages are zoned at a density of residential lots of 15,000 square feet or less. However, for more than half of the village of Westfield Center the lots are between 15,000 square feet and .5 acre. Areas north, east, and south of the city of Medina, west and northeast of Brunswick, and the remainder of Spencer and

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<sup>4</sup> It is generalized in the sense that residential densities are shown as a range, to accommodate the different standards of the various communities. The most dense development is for lot sizes of 15,000 square feet or less, the next is 15,000 square feet to .5 acre, then is .5 to 1.5 acres, followed by 1.5 to 3 acres, and the least dense grouping is greater than 3 acres.

Westfield townships are zoned for densities ranging from .5 to 1.5 acres. All other townships except Homer are zoned for densities of 1.5 to 3 acres; Homer, which is in the southwest corner of the county, is zoned for minimum lots greater than 3 acres. If the entire county had public water and sewer service, potential densities would increase in five townships, with two increasing to the .5 to 1.5 acre range and three increasing to the 15,000 square foot to .5 acre range. Other provisions are unchanged. Land zoned for industrial use is fairly well located in the county, but there is relatively little of it yet to be developed. On the other hand, there may be more commercially zoned land than is warranted, especially where it is in strips along two-lane state highways rather than clustered in or near a city or village. Commercial uses along these roads may encourage more intense uses, leading to demands for the roads to be widened, followed by greater subsequent development pressure. When one compares the minimum zoned densities with the level and scale of development that is actually occurring, however, it quickly becomes apparent that most development is on lots far larger than the minimum allowed. This is particularly so for the parcel-type development away from the cities. Thus the minimum lot sizes specified in the zoning codes are not really affecting the nature of development. Given the size of the parcels being developed (i.e., five to ten acres), it is unlikely that development patterns would change if water and sewer lines were extended. Sewer extensions could, however, affect new subdivision locations.

To project a residential build-out for the county, a baseline level of development in number of units and acres was calculated for each municipality (city and village) and township, using figures from the period 1986-1995. The average lot or parcel size for new development was .63 acres in the cities, .34 acres in the villages, 1.98 acres in the townships surrounding the cities, and

4.38 acres for all others. As noted above, this is larger than the minimum residential density for all jurisdictions. Development for each jurisdiction at its baseline level was then projected forward, in five ten-year increments, for the undeveloped land theoretically available for residential use. In the next ten years no communities in Medina County would be totally built out. However, between 2005 and 2015 the cities of Medina and Brunswick would be fully developed, as would the village of Spencer. Wadsworth city and Seville village would join them in the next ten years. Two more villages (Gloria Glens and Westfield Center) and five townships (most in the north and east) would be built out by 2035. The full fifty-year projection adds ten more townships to the built-out list. Thus by 2045 only two villages and two of the most rural southwest townships remain with buildable land.

Although actions of government establish the framework in which development occurs and some shape its direction, the exurban growth that has been occurring is largely driven by the private sector. In Medina County land developers and builders buy farms--or more often parts of farms--and then either re-sell the lots or build "spec" homes, meeting an apparent market demand. Small highway commercial strips and larger shopping centers soon follow. Banks and other financial institutions provide loans for both development and consumers' mortgages. The public sector, for the most part, is only indirectly involved in development. Local governments have planning and zoning regulations that permit or restrict development, but such regulations do not drive the process. Highway departments fund road improvements that facilitate development and economic development officials recruit businesses for their regions, but it is still the private sector that makes development happen. Still there are multiple public sector implications.

### **The Public Sector and "Sprawl"**

This sections explores public sector involvement in development, considering the actions of and relationships between various agencies and levels of government, as well as the policy framework in which they operate. There are many ways the public sector affects or is affected by development in Medina County, but there is no explicitly stated coherent public policy regarding growth. By default, the “policy” has been to promote random growth. The best word to describe the public policy situation is fragmentation. Public involvement is split among different levels of government--federal, state, and local--and among jurisdictions or agencies within each level. But there is no effective vehicle for coordination, or even communication in many cases.

### The National Level

There is no national policy on land use or urban and regional growth patterns. More than twenty years ago a National Land Use Policy Act was proposed. It grew out of the recognition that the nation and its communities were facing environmental and land use problems and it was based in part on a Model Land Development Code the American Law Institute developed after much study. In the mid 1970s the proposed act passed in the U.S. Senate but failed in the House (Bosselman 1975, Feagin 1989). The idea of a national land use policy has not been revived. This does not mean that decisions at the national level are irrelevant, however. The devolution to the states of many programs related to social welfare will ultimately affect what local governments are able or required to do. Because regional growth patterns shape regional and local demographics as well as shaping tax revenues, they will also affect the social responsibilities of local government. Thus the federal government may place on local governments responsibilities those governments are unable to meet.

More directly, however, the federal government affects local and regional growth and development as they relate to environmental matters. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers all have policies, programs, and regulations affecting what happens at the local level. This is particularly so with respect to drainage basins, watercourses, and wetlands. Where various flood control measures are undertaken or devices removed can affect local watersheds, and consequently development potential. However, not all local governments incorporate the substance of federal environmental provisions into their local plans and zoning codes. As will be discussed below, several Medina County townships have no provisions relating to flood control or natural hazards in their zoning regulations. Federal regulations can also affect the provision or extension of sewer service. Under the federal Clean Water Act, each state must prepare a statewide water quality plan, with regional components, to be approved by U.S. EPA. Once Ohio's plan is approved, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency would be prohibited from granting permits for treatment plants or sewer extensions that conflicted with that plan. Availability of sewer service may affect both local and regional development, particularly of residential subdivisions. Two northeast Ohio regional planning agencies, NOACA and NEFCO, have indicated they will undertake creation of a regional growth and development plan, involving and affecting more than one hundred communities, that will be incorporated into the state's water quality plan (Nichols 1997). It is not clear at this time how the regional growth and development plan will incorporate coordinated planning for land use and transportation.

Other federal environmental policies and regulations may affect development at the local or regional level as well. A required Environmental Impact Review or Environmental Impact



Statement may reveal a threatened natural resource, altering a planned development project. Clean Air Act provisions can affect existing industrial operations or developments as well as proposed ones. Provisions of the Coastal Zone Management Act apply to northeast Ohio's Lake Erie shoreline. Most federal regulations affecting development, however, are triggered by a site- or project-specific circumstance; they are not really intended to address regional growth issues.

### The State Level

State government is not directly involved in growth but plays a major role in the policy arena, formulating the policies and setting the rules by which local government acts and under which development occurs. The major exception to this framework relates to highways, as will be discussed below. The Ohio Revised Code (ORC) establishes the structure of local government. It outlines the "rules" under which various units of local government operate and details the processes they must follow. It also sets the procedures for municipal incorporation and annexation, under which unincorporated territory in a township becomes, or is attached to, a municipality.

Ohio has a strong tradition of local government. In 1912 voters passed an amendment to Ohio's Constitution providing for Home Rule. Prior to Home Rule, the state legislature had set general rules for city governments under the Ohio Municipal Code. This meant that to address their particular local concerns individual cities had to seek specific approval from the legislature. After 1912, they could adopt city charters and ordinances to deal with a wide array of local issues (Warner 1964). Like many states Ohio has local government provisions for counties and for incorporated municipalities. Municipalities are either cities or villages, depending on their size.

Unincorporated land in the counties is organized into townships, which also have some governing powers and responsibilities.

Related to the issue at hand, the ORC allows counties, townships, and (both charter and non-charter) municipalities to exercise planning and zoning powers (Meck and Pearlman 1997). It does not require that a plan precede adoption of a zoning ordinance, however. Nor does it explicitly provide for cooperation between neighboring local governments. This structure has allowed three cities, seven villages, and seventeen townships--twenty-seven units of local government--in Medina County to exercise planning and zoning independently of one another. The ORC gives counties the police power for zoning, but limits their jurisdiction to unincorporated areas where no other entity is exercising such power (and it also requires approval by the township officials and/or residents). Since all of Medina County's townships have their own zoning resolutions, the county in effect has no zoning authority for there is no place to exercise it.

The ORC also provides for regional planning. The provisions are permissive, rather than prescriptive, and allow municipalities, townships, and/or counties to join together in a regional planning agency for various planning purposes. The regional agency can conduct or contract for studies and produce reports or plans. The constituent members determine both the programmatic and geographic scope of the regional agency. Although they can address land use issues in studies and plans, regional agencies do not have authority for zoning (ORC as discussed in Meck and Pearlman 1997). The northeast Ohio region is split between two such agencies. The Northern Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) covers Cuyahoga, Lorain, Medina, Lake, and Geauga counties. Thus Medina County is in the same regional organization as the counties to its north and northeast. However, the counties to its east and south--Summit and Wayne,

respectively, along with two others (Stark and Portage) are in a separate agency--the Northeast Four County Regional Planning and Development Organization (NEFCO). In recent years, the regional planning agencies have primarily been involved in transportation planning.

There are also state agencies that have some planning capabilities that could potentially affect local land use or metropolitan or regional growth patterns. These include the Ohio Department of Development (DOD), the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) (Meck and Pearlman 1997). Each of these agencies provides information and assistance to local governments, and OEPA and ODOT in particular can affect local land use decisions by their actions. However, these agencies need not coordinate their actions with one another or with the affected local governments.

Another area in which regional growth patterns are relevant to the state relates to social welfare. Welfare (now Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF), Food Stamps, and Medicaid are state programs funded by a combination of state and federal funds. They are administered by county welfare departments. With the current move to get those who have been receiving public assistance into the workforce, county welfare officials must now deal with issues related to the location of jobs, access to jobs, and availability and location of childcare facilities. In Medina County this may pose some problems. The county's population is heavily automobile-dependent. Most new development has been residential, rather than commercial or industrial, and that of moderately-priced to fairly expensive homes. County planners indicate that new employment growth has been slow and the county's average weekly earnings lag behind the state level. Moreover, almost half of all non-farm workers are employed in the service sector or in

wholesale or retail trade (1994 Medina County Profile n.d.). All of Ohio's counties are to be preparing plans for the state, indicating how they will administer and implement welfare reform. Given its development patterns, Medina County officials will face a challenge getting those who have been receiving assistance employed at accessible jobs that allow them to be self-sufficient.

As noted above, the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) is one state agency with planning responsibilities and it impacts local land use and development patterns more than any other agency. In addition to carrying out projects for state and federal highways, ODOT is also responsible for many local projects involving major improvements or new construction. ODOT develops project on its own, but counties and cities also propose projects to ODOT that will be paid for in part by federal funds that pass through ODOT. These might include such new construction and improvements as widening streets, creating turn lanes to relieve congestion, or adding new interchanges or new lanes on highways. These projects can be a response to growth and development but also an inducement to it. Because there are more projects proposed than funds available for them, ODOT has developed a scoring system to rate and prioritize them (ODOT 1997). In addition to such factors as traffic capacity and accident history or potential, projects are rated for their economic development potential and the proportion of local funds available for their completion. In the "Draft Major New Capacity Program, 1998-2005," released by ODOT early in 1997, the department reviewed 201 major/new construction projects that had been requested and placed them into one of three categories. Tier I projects are slated for construction in the 1998-2001 period; Tier II projects will complete their present stage of development but not yet be scheduled for construction. There will be no further development on Tier III projects. The "Draft" program showed no Medina County projects in Tier I, but several in

Tier II, including the addition of lanes to Interstate 71 in the county and a bypass around the city of Medina (where several state highways come together). Revisions of the “Draft” altered the status of several projects, raising the priority of some—including part of the I-71 widening—in Medina County. While each of these would alleviate some of the problems the recent surge of growth has caused, they would also stimulate more growth in the area by making it easier to commute to the Cleveland area (where many exurbanites are employed). The transportation improvements are thus a mixed blessing, depending on one’s perspective about growth.

Even projects that did not make the Tier I priority list for construction by 2001 may still be built. Ohio law allows local jurisdictions to create Transportation Improvement Districts (TID) and enter into agreements with ODOT that increase the local jurisdiction’s share of a project’s cost to 50 percent. This increased local share also raises its priority ranking. Medina county has created such a district and entered into an agreement with ODOT. Since the agreement includes only highway capacity projects (no transit, rail, bikeway, or non-highway projects), it will address issues of growth by potentially stimulating more growth. The county commissioners placed a sales tax increase for road improvements on the November 1997 ballot. If passed, the increase would have provided funds for the county’s share under the TID agreement, allowing earlier completion of Medina County highway projects (EcoCity Cleveland 1997, Luttner 1997). Voters defeated the hotly-debated issue at that time, but it may well be raised again. ODOT actions clearly impact growth patterns in the county and the region, but at present there is no vehicle for coordinating its projects with local or county land use planning.

There is one final area in which state level public policy relates to regional growth patterns and “sprawl” in Medina County. That is farmland preservation. For some time Ohio law has

allowed farmland to be taxed on the basis of its present use rather than its potential development value. The CAUV (Current Agricultural Use Value) program sets the terms under which landowners can apply for the preferential rates. However, there is no indication at this time that the CAUV program has slowed conversion of agricultural land to urban uses, and some conjecture that it may actually encourage speculation and farmland conversion (Wunderluch 1997).

Concern about farmland conversion led Ohio Governor George Voinovich to appoint the Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force late in 1996. Composed of both public and private sector representatives as well as citizens, the twenty-one-member task force was charged with studying the issue of farmland loss and reporting by the governor by June 1997. The Ohio Department of Agriculture served as lead agency to support the task force, which was also assisted by the American Farmland Trust. The task force gathered data and information from existing studies and research and also held public hearings in the northeast, northwest, southwest, and southeast quadrants of the state. After several months of meetings, hearings, and study, the task force submitted to the governor its report, which contained several recommendations to address the issue of conversion of farmland to urban uses. During the fall, members of the state legislature began drafting legislation based on the report's recommendations. (Both the report and the legislation are discussed in more detail later in this report.)

In sum, there is really no state policy on local growth and regional development patterns. Clearly the actions of some state departments--particularly transportation--affect local and regional growth patterns, but Ohio officials have tended to view growth as a local issue. They defer to local governments, to whom they have given the power to plan and zone.

## The Local Level

At the local level, those most directly involved in growth and development are land use planning and zoning officials. As long ago as 1969 a tri-county comprehensive development plan that included Medina County (along with Summit and Portage counties to the east) expressed some concern about development. It noted the importance of agriculture to the region's economy and stated that in order to strengthen and maintain agricultural production it was important to keep urban uses out of agricultural areas. The plan was particularly concerned about houses being built on large lots without (sewer) services, and suggested a combination of zoning and greenbelts to encourage "urban" development adjacent to the existing cities and village centers (Tri-County Regional Planning Commission 1969). There was no enforcement mechanism, and land use planning devolved to the individual counties, municipalities, and townships.

As noted earlier there are three cities wholly within Medina County. Each has its own zoning ordinance and each also has a comprehensive plan that was updated in 1995 or 1996. Zoning authority extends only to the municipal corporation limit. However, Ohio has traditionally granted cities extra-territorial jurisdiction (ETJ) to review subdivision plats up to three miles beyond their borders, and as noted previously both the cities of Brunswick and Wadsworth have exercised the ETJ. A recent act of the state legislature, however, will end the ETJ authority effective January 1, 1998. The Medina County Planning Commission reviews subdivision plats for all unincorporated territory within the county--townships have no independent subdivision review. All of the seven incorporated villages have zoning ordinances but not all of them have plans. In addition, all seventeen townships have zoning resolutions, and seven of the northern or eastern ones have comprehensive plans as well. Almost all of Medina County's townships and villages

have a stated goal of maintaining the “rural character” of the community and keeping the small village centers (including unincorporated ones in the center of several townships) for local convenience retail needs. These statements may appear as explicit goals or objectives in the comprehensive plans or they may be embedded in the text of the plan or the zoning ordinance. Whatever their location, they indicate a clear concern about development in Medina County.

There is no state or county requirement that municipalities communicate or coordinate land use planning with their surrounding townships or that adjacent townships collaborate in any way. The result is that for the most part twenty-seven units of local government engage in land use planning independently of one another. The major exception is Wadsworth. In its comprehensive plan update, the city of Wadsworth explicitly recognized that it is a part of both Wadsworth township and a larger metropolitan region. The plan recommended that city and township officials work toward creating a unified zoning code. Township planning documents also indicate a desire to work together. By contrast, the city of Brunswick and Brunswick Hills (its surrounding township) have a long history of friction over annexation and water issues, making collaboration on zoning and land use unlikely. Moreover, Hinckley township, which is on Brunswick’s eastern border and thus within the three-mile ETJ, has been displeased with Brunswick’s use of ETJ to review subdivisions in Hinckley and had been a major supporter of ending the ETJ provision.

In general zoning ordinance provisions for the three cities present few problems related to sprawl since they address development either within or on the fringes of the cities themselves. Township zoning provisions do raise some problematical issues, however. Within Medina County are several watercourses and ravines, but zoning regulations for only five townships have explicit flood control or natural hazards provisions limiting development in these areas. Because such



areas are often quite scenic they may be attractive sites for expensive homes. Alternatively, because such land is not easily farmed it has sometimes been the location of some of the poorest quality (and hence least expensive) housing. So along many of Medina County's streams and ravines both the rich and the poor may find their homes flooded at some future time. Also, all township zoning exempts agricultural activities from regulation, setting the stage for potential conflict between farmers and new residents of moderately expensive single-family homes who may find certain farm practices objectionable. Finally, there are zoning provisions that encourage spreading homes out on large parcels rather than grouping them. Instead of having homes grouped around a new street in a planned subdivision, there has been a tendency for property owners to sell off parcels of five or more acres along the frontage of existing state highways or county and township roads. Sale of a parcel five acres or larger, that is on an existing road and requires no infrastructure for development, is not considered a subdivision (and is thus not subject to subdivision review). In addition, several township zoning resolutions permit subsequent development (of one house) on remaining "rear lots," as long as such lots are five to seven acres in size and have an 80-100 foot "access" strip. (Because of their shape--a large square or rectangle connected to the road by a long, thin access strip--such rear lots are called "flagpole" lots.) As noted in the discussion of development in Medina County, this has become particularly evident since 1990. Thus, driving along a country road one will see a single house on a large (five-acre) lot, followed by a "flagpole" lot containing another house more-or-less behind the first, followed by another single house on a large lot, and so on. Any resemblance to "rural character" in this countryside is non-existent, and meaningful open space, whether farmland or forest, is gradually disappearing. Since agriculture is a permitted land use in all townships, there is no specific

agricultural zoning; the provisions that come closest are for a “rural residential” class allowing a single home on a five-to-twenty acre parcel. There is consequently no zoning basis for preserving farmland from development.

This large parcel-type of development has two major advantages for the property owner or developer and both relate to infrastructure, which is another local government level policy area. First, residential development without services (i.e., water and sewer) is allowed on large parcels (generally a minimum of two or three acres). Thus developers are not constrained in their choice of land to locations in a designated sewer service area and there are no assessments or tap-in fees to be paid. Second, Medina County requires that developers pay for the installation of new streets in platted subdivisions; since planting houses on parcels of existing frontage and flagpole rear lots requires no new streets it saves developers money.

In addition, the cost of maintaining streets (repaving, patching potholes, plowing snow) is a public responsibility. The Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) is responsible for all state and U.S. highways within the county, the County Engineer’s office is responsible for county highways, cities are responsible for streets within their borders, and individual townships are responsible for township roads and local streets in unincorporated areas. Although the amount and location of the work they do is affected, those responsible for road maintenance do not participate in deciding the amount or location of new development. (They may, of course, speak at public meetings where subdivision plats are reviewed and zoning actions debated.)

Also with little or no voice in development decisions, but clearly affected by them, are those officials and agencies that provide for public safety or public and social services. The Sheriff’s Department coordinates 911 dispatching for the entire county and also maintains a jail for

all. However, each city and village has its own police department as do some of the townships. Other townships have service agreements with the Sheriff's Department. Each of the cities has a professional fire department; the other jurisdictions rely on volunteer fire departments, using equipment purchased by the townships. There is consequently considerable variation in safety service levels across the county, and service capacity may not be commensurate with growth. The county has a sanitary engineer with jurisdiction over the unincorporated areas and each city and village has its own. The county administers welfare and publicly assisted housing, and there is a county library district. There is a county park district, but cities and some townships also have parks. Parkland has recently become an issue in Medina County as population growth has left the county with an unsatisfactory ratio of population to parkland while development pressure is limiting availability of land and driving up its cost.

One of the most troubling local public policy issues involving growth in Medina County relates to schools. Public schools in Ohio have been funded largely by property taxes. However, early in 1997 the state Supreme Court ruled the existing funding formula unconstitutional because of the wide variations in per pupil expenditures it produced; the court has ordered the legislature to devise a new formula but the form that will take is not yet clear. The present formula, which provides most school funding from property taxes, can be particularly hard on a district where farmland is being developed into low-density single-family homes, as is the case with some districts in Medina County. There are three "city" school districts in the county--Brunswick, Medina, and Wadsworth--but their attendance zones extend well beyond the city borders to include much of the surrounding townships and then some. There are also four "local" school districts: Black River, Buckeye, Cloverleaf, and Highland. When GIS-generated maps displayed residential development

within school district boundaries (rather than by political jurisdiction) two different patterns appeared that would produce two different impacts. The three city school districts face the greatest enrollment increases, since they include the land where most subdivision-type development has been occurring. However, they also have the greatest amount of existing commercial and industrial development--and the greatest potential for more such development--to help compensate for the loss of revenue associated with conversion of farms to residences. The four local school districts will not face enrollment increases as great in absolute numbers, but the impact may be greater since the impact will be on a proportionately smaller student population base. Moreover, conversion of agricultural land to large parcel residential use will impact tax revenues more since there is little commercial or industrial land to make up the difference. Indeed, Highland Local Schools and the three city school districts are all presently experiencing enrollment growth and/or revenue "crunches." Stephen D. Hambley, Ph.D., a former researcher at the University of Akron and presently a Medina County Commissioner, has calculated the fiscal impact on the Highland Local School District of the conversion of a one-hundred-acre farm to residential development. Under three different estimates for the average number of students per household (provided by area school systems and ranging from .53 to .78), the annual tax revenue loss to the district ranged from \$26,942 to \$73,566 per hundred-acre-farm (Hambley 1997). Some school officials and boards of education have indicated that they believe they should be involved in the planning process, and on a diagram of the process Hambley has posed the question: at what point? As things are now, they have no official involvement. Thus they face the consequences of development but cannot control or direct it.

As this discussion of governmental actions and agencies indicates, there are many public actions--at the local, regional, state, and national levels--affecting or affected by development. But (in Ohio, at least) there is no public policy *per se* about regional development patterns--a.k.a. "sprawl."

### **Dealing with Regional Development Issues**

As noted in the first sections of this report, the issue of regional development patterns--popularly known as "sprawl"--is attracting considerable attention in the United States. After considering the problems associated with metropolitan expansion, the next step is to address them, and some efforts are underway at the national, state, and local levels.

Nationally, there is no movement equivalent to that of the 1970s that produced the ALI Model Land Development Code or the subsequent (unpassed) National Land Use Policy Act. However, the American Planning Association has embarked on a major initiative called "Growing Smart." This involves research into both the issues surrounding land use and development and the approaches being used in different places to address them. Throughout the United States much planning and zoning legislation is still based largely on the Standard State Planning and Zoning Enabling Acts developed in the 1920s. (That is the case in Ohio.) But conditions and development practices have so changed that new models are needed. APA is compiling and analyzing information on enabling legislation for planning and zoning in all fifty states, as well as legislation and other policy efforts and programs that address growth and development issues. "Growing Smart" will then develop and promote new models that will address contemporary problems and take into account differences in various regions of the U.S. Of course, individual states will still have to follow through to adopt and implement the new models.

At the state level, some states, such as Oregon and Florida, have been addressing growth related issues for several years. Maryland's governor has indicated that the state will only support public improvements within designated "smart growth" boundaries. Ohio is farther behind, but the work of the Farmland Preservation Task Force may have some impact.

As noted previously, the task force was named late in 1996 and, after several months work submitted its report to the governor in summer 1997. Interest in their work was high. A total of approximately 900 people attended the four public meetings held February 18 and 19, 1997, and more than 180 spoke. Public interest in the issue was so strong that testimony at the forum in northeast Ohio continued well past the time allotted. In addition, the task force received 350 letters. While some speakers and writers championed the rights of builders and developers, others expressed concern about environmental degradation and the costs of growth in rural areas. Still others noted the connection between population and revenue decline in central cities and sprawl in the countryside. The task force's report recognized that urban, suburban, and rural growth and development issues are interconnected, noting the "chain reaction" that follows the suburbanization of agricultural land and impacts cities, suburbs, and rural areas. "Preservation of a healthy agricultural economy and urban revitalization are two sides of the same coin," the report stated. It also noted that activities central to supporting an agricultural economy are often incompatible with residential development, and added that there is much land available and suitable for development in incorporated areas. The report stated that nationally an estimated one-third of all incorporated land with "utilities and other infrastructure is vacant, unused or underutilized." Task force members believe that there is even more underutilized land in Ohio's municipalities (Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force 1997).

After discussing the mission of the task force and the dimensions of the problem in Ohio, the report made a series of recommendations. Overriding all others were two: make preservation of farmland an official state policy; and create an Office of Farmland Preservation within the Department of Agriculture. The report grouped other recommendations into three categories. First was “Voluntary Incentives for Farmland Preservation,” which included such things as programs to allow purchase, lease, or transfer of development rights, among others. Presently in Ohio there are no provisions for governments to purchase development rights. Second was “Planning and Infrastructure,” which suggested developing an “Ohio Farmland Preservation Strategy” to coordinate state policies and spending on infrastructure related to development and to direct such policies toward preserving farm land and promoting cohesive development. Policies should also encourage local governments to prepare comprehensive land use plans (which ideally would promote development near populated areas and discourage sprawl-type disconnected residential development). Third was “Economic Development and Urban Revitalization,” which proposed programs to promote agricultural economic development and suggests review of all existing economic development programs and initiatives to determine their impact on farmland preservation and urban revitalization (Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force 1997).

If enacted, most of the report’s recommendations would be permissive or voluntary in nature. They also rely heavily on local government to be the primary actor where land use planning and controls are involved. This is the situation that presently exists, though without “official” state “encouragement.” Moreover, despite the report’s reiteration in several places that urban and rural development issues are related, the report did not make a strong statement for some form of effective regional planning or coordination. If task force members were aware of

innovative activities in other states, such as Portland, Oregon,'s Urban Growth Boundary, it was not evident in this report.

The report was not without its critics. The Ohio Home Builders Association prepared and submitted to the governor a formal "Response" to the task force's findings and recommendations. It challenged several of the findings regarding the amount of farmland conversion (although it did not dispute the USDA figure of 472,000 agricultural acres converted in Ohio between 1982 and 1992). In strongly worded statements it also took issue with the recommendations, believing the task force had far exceeded its charge and that current state provisions regarding planning are adequate to address the points raised by the task force. Thus Home Builders will probably not view favorably legislative attempts to implement the recommendations.

A "Preliminary Analysis of Farmland Preservation Legislation" issued by State Representative Gene Krebs (who had served on the task force) indicates that many of the report's recommendations are being proposed. Although most provisions are permissive rather than prescriptive, if followed they would encourage redevelopment in declining older cities, concentrate new development in and around existing urban centers, discourage infrastructure expansion into rural areas, and promote farmland preservation (in part by making it an explicit policy consideration for all state agencies). They would also encourage greater coordination between and among state and local governments and their agencies. The proposals leave the Ohio Department of Transportation "relatively untouched," so its role in promoting expansion will not change. Of particular relevance to development in Medina County is a proposal that county commissioners be permitted to expand the definition of "subdivision" to include parcels between five and twenty



acres (Krebs n.d.). (Note, this is only a permissive provision, not a mandated change.) During the next several months the proposals will begin the legislative process.

One of the most interesting aspects of the process involving the Farmland Preservation Task Force and its recommendations is curious sense of *deja vu*. Exactly twenty years before the task force issued its report, another body issued a similar report. *The Report of the Ohio Land Use Review Committee to the Ohio General Assembly* was issued in June 1977. It, too, noted the importance of agriculture to Ohio's economy and the increasing conversion of farmland to urban uses. (In a parenthetical note, the report project that between its issuance and the year 2000 approximately 360,000 additional acres of Ohio farmland would be converted to urban uses. The Farmland Preservation Task Force report indicates that we have far surpassed that--with 472,000 acres being developed between 1982-1992 alone!) The 1977 report followed its discussion of development patterns and farmland loss with a series of changes recommended for state and local government to address the situation (*Report of the Ohio Land Use Review Committee 1977*). The Ohio Revised Code was later amended with variations of some of the recommendations, but by and large they were not implemented. It remains to be seen whether history will repeat itself.

Meanwhile there is also action to address regional development in Medina County. By the mid-1990s some members of Leadership Medina, the county's business and professional community, sensed that growth in the county was increasing and felt it was not being adequately provided for. They began a series of discussions that focused on land use patterns, infrastructure provision, and "community design." Community design was primarily concerned with "big box" commercial development, loss of green space, and "cookie-cutter" houses. Concern was greatest in and around the three cities and in the central part of the county. Leadership Medina members

then approached the Medina County Commissioners and requested that they authorize some type of planning effort. The result was funding for a “Community Guide” process to be undertaken from June 1996 to June 1998.<sup>5</sup>

From the beginning a member of the Medina County Planning Commission staff was dedicated exclusively to the Community Guide process. She began by meeting with local officials and interested groups and individuals. From these meetings two sets of concerns emerged: one about land use and development (i.e., what residents sensed was happening) and the other about local control. Township officials reported feeling very constrained. On the one hand, they felt that state law did not give them the power and resources to address their development issues. On the other, they felt that township residents might not accept the manner in which officials might choose to address those issues. Given that more than half the new development in Medina County is in the townships--particularly the type of development that is “sprawling” and dispersing the population--the opinions of township residents and officials are important.

It is important to note that the Community Guide is essentially a process, *not* a comprehensive plan. There is no statutory authority for the county to adopt a land use or comprehensive plan, and at the beginning there was a fair amount of reticence and suspicion on the part of local residents about what the county was “going to do to us.” (An anecdote related by the principal planner provides some insight into at least one resident’s view; that individual suggested that if the county just put all the local zoning ordinances together, they’d have a plan.) At the

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<sup>5</sup> Information about the Community Guide process was derived from Medina County Planning Commission records and interviews with the Planning Director and the principal planner dedicated to the Community Guide.

same time the initial meetings were being held a Community Guide Committee was formed. The committee has representatives from all local jurisdictions and various interest groups. There have been meetings, forums, focus groups, surveys, and other efforts to both elicit information and allay suspicions. It has been very difficult to get many people to a frame of mind where they can see that this is their opportunity to tell county officials what their concerns are and what they would like for their county, that they have a chance to shape the policy that can produce the results they want in Medina County. One of the most difficult issues the Community Guide process has encountered is localism. Residents in many Medina County communities, especially the townships and villages, have difficulty seeing that they are part of a larger entity--i.e., the county--much less part of the region. They have a very insular perspective. After eighteen months there has been some improvement in this regard, but the narrow vision is certainly not all gone. In addition to the various meetings, forums, and focus groups there have been community education workshops on specific topics--such as open space, economic development, or emergency services--for citizens, local officials, and public sector employees. These workshops present substantive information about the topic and also discuss how it relates to larger issues of growth and development. At the same time, they provide an opportunity to gain information from those attending about their viewpoints and activities.

The Community Guide will produce a report that will be circulated for responses and then revised. It is intended to serve as a starting point for future planning efforts at the county, city, and township level in Medina County. Part of that report will attempt to portray past, present, and future development trends on a county-wide basis. It will illustrate the fragmentation of public development policy at the local level, with subdivision review divided between the county and the

cities, but with villages and townships, as well as the cities, having independent zoning authority. Using the same type of GIS-produced maps used for this research, along with several others, the report will show the aggregate of the many individual, incremental actions. It will show how construction of a house on a five-acre parcel along a country road, followed three or four years later by another one on a seven-acre parcel farther down the same road is slowly but surely eating up the farmland. Many township residents and officials believe that since they have zoning, they are protected from excessive sprawling development. The Community Guide report will illustrate that not only is their zoning not protecting them, it is exacerbating their problems, since it encourages population dispersal (rather than concentration) and leads to increased service costs and less efficient use of public safety forces.

Along with its exploration of land use and development issues the Community Guide process has revealed a number of socio-political tensions in Medina County. There is friction between the “old” (that is, long-time, existing) residents and the new. Most of the old residents are farmers, former farmers, or small business people who deal who deal with farmers. They dislike or resent the new residents, who they don’t see as being “part of the community.” For their part, the new residents are mostly recent arrivals from Cuyahoga or Summit counties who work in Cleveland, Akron, or one of their suburbs. They work, shop, and seek their entertainment and recreation outside Medina County and they are not involved in community affairs. They moved out to Medina County for a “rural lifestyle,” by which they seem to mean a house on two to five acres. At the same time, some of them fear increasing development as they see the “rural lifestyle” they moved out for beginning to disappear; they want to “close the gates” to future in-migrants. There is also tension between pro-growth and “no”-growth elements. The forces supporting

growth are in the business community. They speak of jobs, tax revenues, and other benefits of economic development and they are highly organized and articulate. By contrast their less organized, less articulate opponents can seem to be “against progress,” or to not have the community’s best interests at heart. Finally, there is the tension associated with some local officials’ “tunnel” vision. Some genuinely do not see that they are affected by actions beyond their borders; others don’t quite “trust” county government or the county planning commission--it’s too removed and they fear it will tell them what to do.

It is too soon to predict what will come of the Community Guide process, the recommendations of Ohio’s Farmland Preservation Task Force, or APA’s Growing Smart initiative. As this exploration of development and public policy in Medina County, Ohio, illustrates, the issues are many and complex. They are also important.

### **Public Policy Lessons from Medina County and Ohio**

What is happening in Medina County, and the policy framework that permits or encourages it, is being repeated to a greater or lesser extent in much of Ohio. Ohio has several major dispersed urban concentrations: Cincinnati and Dayton in the southwest, Toledo in the northwest, Columbus in the center, and Cleveland, Akron-Canton, and Youngstown in the northeast. Exurban development is occurring in the counties surrounding all of them. If the central cities’ counties are added to their surrounding counties, more than one-third of the state is affected by regional development expanding far in excess of population. The same fragmented policy framework applies statewide. Moreover, unless government officials take a more assertive stance within that generally loose and permissive policy framework, or unless there is a change in that

framework to encourage or mandate communication and cooperation, the formless expansion of residences into the countryside and population decline of the central cities is likely to continue.

The key difficulty with the present policy framework is its fragmentation, which is of two sorts. There is fragmentation between levels of government and between policy areas. That is, there are national, state, and local policies that relate to regional growth but they do not relate to each other; nor is there any explicit relationship between policies on land use, transportation, economic development, or the public and social services arena. This fragmentation encourages a narrow perspective or tunnel vision on the part of government officials. On the one hand, township trustees and city council members seem to view their jurisdictions' borders like the walls of medieval towns, not acknowledging how their actions may affect neighboring communities or how they may in turn be affected by the actions of others. On the other hand, agency officials are equally narrow in their vision. For example, transportation officials are concerned with the capacity of roads and highways and their ability to get people where they want to go with a minimum of inconvenience, regardless of how that relates to land use issues, housing needs, or economic development goals. Transportation officials may realize that other development patterns might lessen the need to increase highway capacity, but they believe that actions to shape land use and development patterns are outside their area. The problems of central cities, with their unemployment or declining populations and tax revenues are still further removed. They may be raised during public hearings about a particular project but they are not figured into formulas that set priorities.

In short, there is no holistic vision of regional development within the policy arena. In carrying out its official duties no level of government or agency needs to work within--or even

recognize--the larger context. Northeast Ohio's regional planning agencies, NOACA and NEFCO, could provide some of that regional focus or vision but their agenda is set by their members, who represent local governments. Even if the larger geographic context of the region could become the basis for development decisions there is still the disconnection between policy areas. Economic development efforts, with their concern about job creation and tax revenues, clearly relate to land use patterns; so do schools. The work of social welfare agencies, whether dealing with housing assistance and affordability or matching former welfare recipients to jobs, is also affected by land use and development patterns. However, those responsible for administering these various programs often do not interact, even within a single governmental jurisdiction. In Medina County, the county Board of Commissioners oversees the individual agencies that deal with land use and development, as well as welfare and assisted housing, but employees within those agencies do not formally interact. Each school district has its own elected Board of Education but a private non-profit entity promotes economic development. It is only through the initiative of individuals that contacts are made and perspectives and concerns shared. Knowledge of those concerns and perspectives, however, could change some decisions.

Traditionally in the United States decisions regarding land use and the administration of land use regulations have been separated from decisions regarding provision of public and social services. This examination of development in Medina County, Ohio, illustrates some of the problems with such a policy. There are very uneven levels of service and protection by law enforcement and fire departments, not only because the population is unevenly distributed but also because those services are provided in different ways in different jurisdictions. Some have their own local law enforcement, some contract with the county; some have paid professional fire

fighters, others rely on volunteers. Development changes school enrollments and revenues but school boards play no part in the approval process. Also, school district boundaries do not coincide with political boundaries, so one district may bring in students from all or part of several different political jurisdictions, which may themselves have differing approaches to development. Depending on where what kind of development occurs, the work of those responsible for welfare or publicly subsidized housing is made easier or more difficult as the relationships between housing affordability, employment availability, and transportation comes into play. But public and social services are rarely considered when zoning maps are drawn or subdivisions reviewed.

Another difficulty posed by the fragmentation is competition between jurisdictions or policy areas for money and resources. None of Medina's County's cities is large enough in population to be entitled to federal CBDG funds; thus they must develop proposals to get a share of the county's CBDG grant that comes through the state. Consequently instead of working collaboratively to meet shared or common needs they must compete. (In recent years some have used much of their money for public improvements to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.) Related to another financial matter there was considerable discussion among the three commissioners of Medina County in the summer of 1997 over a possible tax increase to be placed on the November ballot. There is an acknowledged shortage of parkland for the rapidly growing population and land costs are rising. Revenue from a sales tax increase could help remedy that; but that revenue could also be used to fund the county's share of construction costs for road improvements in the Transportation Improvement District. Funding both parks and roads would require separate ballot issues. Procedural matters determined that a tax increase for parks could not be placed on the



November ballot, but the road improvements issue was--and it lost. As development continues so will the needs. Will voters tax themselves for both roads and parks--or for either?

There are other difficulties as well. As noted above, cities control subdivision approval within their borders and the county planning commission controls subdivision approval for unincorporated land in the county. Zoning, however, is administered by each city, village, and township in the county. As would be expected, there is wide variation in the level of knowledge and expertise of those making decisions. Local officials can seek assistance from the county planning commission, or contract for services from consultants, but they are not required to do so. On examining the codes and provisions of various jurisdictions in Medina County and the development that has been occurring, one gets the impression that one way officials have sought to slow down or limit development is by making the subdivision process more cumbersome or expensive. Developers put in or pay for subdivision streets and arrange for water and sewer tap-ins, the costs of which are passed on to consumers when they buy a home. Rather than stopping or slowing development this has merely spread it out. Those who prefer to avoid the subdivision process instead acquire and build on five-to-ten acre parcels of frontage along existing county and township roads or the resulting rear lots. This not only uses more land than planned subdivisions would, it results in oddly sized or shaped tracts being left, tracts that are often not suitable for agriculture. As individual farmers and landowners repeat the process, they make it more difficult for farmers on adjacent lands to continue farming.

## **Conclusion**

This research has focused primarily on one aspect of regional development patterns, that related to land use in outlying parts of a region. The micro-level examination of a single, rapidly

growing largely-rural county thus did not explore or reveal many other issues relevant to public policy and regional development. For example, there was no discussion of tax base, income, poverty, or employment disparities, since those require analysis at the regional scale. Such research deserves to be done, and efforts directed by Minnesota State Representative Myron Orfield are examining those issues for several metropolitan regions. This research makes another contribution. Its in-depth examination of the land use element of the regional development issue illustrates other problems and other needs, particularly the need for regional land use planning and for land use planning that allows coordination between different levels of government and that allows consideration of public and social services. The present fragmentation of public policy, between levels of government and between various governmental agencies, hinders efforts to address local problems.

In Ohio recommendations in the Farmland Preservation Task Force report hint at possible policy improvements. But many of the recommendations are weak, being voluntary or loosely permissive in nature. Also there is not a strong tie to related urban issues. What is needed are policies based on the premise that central city decline and rural “sprawl” are opposite sides of the same coin, as well as policies that tie land use to housing provision, economic development, public and social services, and transportation.

Past experience shows that governments can be motivated to make more effective public policies and that governments and other interested parties can be motivated to collaborate to address common concerns. The early history of zoning and the environmental movement’s successes, both of which concerned development patterns and issues, provide evidence. In both cases knowledge and analysis provided the key to public action. Public officials and citizens alike

needed to be shown--sometimes very visually--what was happening, and what would continue to happen (or get worse) if they took no action. The same can be true again.

Research to document in detail the nature and scale of problems related to development has long been possible. However, it required that the raw data be retained and accessible, and that a researcher spend hours and hours collecting, assembling, and analyzing it. Both conditions have only occasionally been met. However, with the increasing amount of data of different types now available in computer files and with sophisticated GIS technology to merge different types of files and facilitate spatial analysis, that is much less a problem than it once was. This research involved analysis of several GIS maps that showed how Medina County has developed over the last twenty-five years. While the maps confirmed some of what both residents and officials had suspected was happening, they also showed what people had misinterpreted. GIS technology allowed research on development to be more detailed and more accurate. Equally important, it produced some very visual pictures of development. Maps showing structures built in flood-prone areas, or vast numbers of five-to-ten acre parcels carved out of prime farmland, were very revealing to Medina County officials. They can be equally revealing to residents, who see what is happening along the roads that they regularly travel but who often have little sense of what is happening in their township as a whole. Much less do they see the aggregate effect on the county. Medina County planners will use similar maps to illustrate the need for planning to follow the Community Guide.

On a larger scale, similar analysis and maps can illustrate the problems of current development patterns and practices to state and local government officials, as well as to citizens. They can thus document the need and help build support for change. Indeed, Minnesota State Representative Orfield credits passage of the Twin Cities regional tax base sharing effort to the use

of GIS analysis and maps. They allowed Orfield and his supporters to show different groups how they were affected by regional development patterns in the Twin Cities; they showed who gained and who lost. When it became clear how many jurisdictions were “losers,” and how much of the region’s population lived in those jurisdictions, they were able to build effective coalitions to create change. The same can happen elsewhere.

With respect to land use and regional development the ultimate goal, for Medina County as well as for northeast Ohio and other expanding regions, is not to stop growth and development totally, nor to restrict individuals’ housing choices and property rights, or developers’ abilities to earn a profit. It is rather to encourage development that is economically, ecologically, and socially beneficial to the region and its residents. Unless there is a change, however, trends of the past several decades will continue unabated. Decline in central cities will expand to the inner suburbs, while rural areas will experience loss of both farmland and quality of life.

#### Author’s Note

A paper based on part of the research discussed here was presented by Patricia Burgess at the 1997 annual meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. This report benefitted from discussions associated with that presentation.

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