

Despite 'smart growth' policy, N.J. still sprawling.

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Despite a state “smart growth” policy, we’re still sprawling.

That’s the conclusion of a new Rowan University study with a sprawling title: “Evidence of Persistent Exclusionary Effects of Land Use Policy within Historic and Projected Development Patterns in New Jersey: A Case Study of Monmouth and Somerset Counties.”

The study compares residential growth patterns prior to 1986 with the booming period from 1986 to 2007. It found that, before 1986, the predominant type of residential development in New Jersey was medium-density, defined as two to five homes per acre. But from 1986 to 2007, the trend shifted toward large lots of an acre or more.

So what’s wrong with larger lots and low-density development? Plenty, according to the study. The smartest growth pattern would have been to concentrate new homes in areas with existing infrastructure, public transportations and jobs. Instead, large chunks of New Jersey’s remaining open land were gobbled up by automobile-dependent subdivisions of large, expensive homes.

In raw numbers, the study found about two-thirds of New Jersey’s developed land is used for residential housing. During the study period, 227,198 acres went from open space to residential development, the equivalent of 22 football fields developed every day for 21 years.

Compared to the pre-1986 figures, the number of acres used for residential development increased almost 27 percent during the study period. Over the same period, however, the state’s population grew by just 14 percent (from 7.5 million to 8.5 million), so population growth alone wasn’t driving the development. In the last five-year period of the study, when population growth slowed, the rate of residential development increased to an all-time high.

Of course, sprawl isn’t just about the number of acres in development; just as important is where and how new homes are built.

The study found:

- Before 1986, 43 percent of newly-developed land went to low- and rural-density residential development, defined as less than two houses per acre. During the two-decade study period, however, the number jumped to 67 percent.
- The majority of land developed for homes was outside the “smart growth” areas designated by the State Development and Redevelopment Plan.

- Even within smart growth areas, 40 percent of residential land developed went to low- or rural-density development; outside smart growth areas, 92 percent went to low- or rural-density development.
- But during the same period, 80 percent of the acres dedicated to commercial and industrial development were in smart growth areas.

Taken all together, the study demonstrates that New Jersey is not growing wisely. While jobs are being created in designated growth areas, much of the nearby housing is made up of large-lot homes many workers can't afford. As the study points out, this pattern of employees living far from where they work helps explain the Garden State's commuter traffic.

Looking into the future of a state with finite land resources, these trends mean too much land in smart growth areas will be filled with low-density housing, forcing other development onto land we should be conserving.

The report doesn't offer solutions to these problematic trends because, frankly, it doesn't need to. The State Development and Redevelopment Plan offers the tools and processes necessary to mitigate some of the worst consequences of sprawl, if only the state will commit to it in a meaningful way.

You can read the report, including its implications for affordable housing, on the Rowan Geospatial Research Lab website at <http://gis.rowan.edu/labprojects/exclusionary>

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