

Sprawl, Smart Growth, and the Statistics

By IAC Transportation, Marcus Bowman, 7/14/08

This is a presentation of statistics. The purpose is merely to ground policy discussions in facts and statistics. I confess, I am not really sure what “smart growth” is. If posed as a trademarked combination of two words then I understand what advocates mean—mixed-use, denser development that makes it easier for more walking, bicycling, and transit. As a free market solution presented to buyers as a living option, I am not against that kind of “smart growth”. Yet, it should not be federally-mandated. There are lots of ways to “grow” “smartly”. Past, and current forms of “growth” have been, and are “smart”. What is wrong with choosing a single-family home, with a decent-sized yard, fresh air, and convenient access to good schools, and a pool? Buying several things at your choice of a few big retailers, like Wal-Mart, or Target, may actually be pretty smart. Placing your bags of groceries in the back of an SUV is convenient and smart—it takes a bit of food to feed a family with growing kids. So, just how bad is “sprawl”?

Looking at the Statistics

The National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has found that “Sprawling development is gobbling up the American countryside at an alarming rate of about **365 acres per hour**”.¹

- 365 acres per hour. That’s 8,760 acres per day. That’s 3,197,400 per year.
- So how many acres are there in the U.S.? According to the Economic Research Service of the USDA there are 2,300,000,000 acres in the U.S.²

If the U.S. has 2.3 billion acres and is using 3.2 million additional acres of land every year, how big is the impact?

- **Land use in the U.S. is growing 0.13% per year.**

If the U.S. develops 365 acres per hour for the next 41 years, by 2050 we will have developed another 131,093,400 acres. How big is the impact by 2050 then?

- Land use by 2050 will have grown by 131 million acres. This is **development of an additional 5.7% of the total U.S. land from 2008-2050.**

How does this correspond with the population?

By 2050, the U.S. population is expected to grow from its current population of 304.4 million people³ to 419.9 million people.⁴ **This equates to a 38% increase in the population compared with the above 5.7% increase in the total amount of U.S. land used in development.**

The population will grow nearly 7 times faster than land use during that time. It would appear that current development trends are overwhelmingly sustainable.

¹ NRDC Smart Growth web site as of 7/14/08: <http://www.nrdc.org/smartgrowth/default.asp>

² <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/EIB14/>

³ <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>

⁴ <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/natprojtab02a.pdf>