

Portland's Smart Growth Approach May Offer Health Benefits

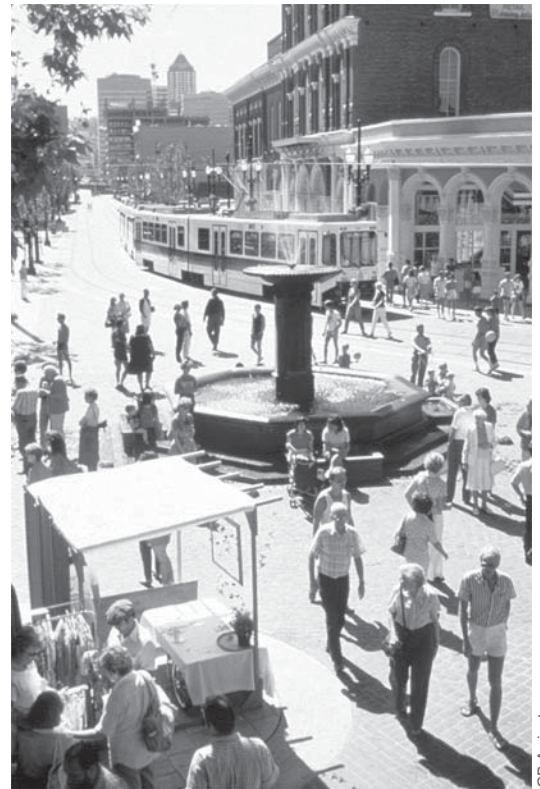
Jon Duckart

Wendy Rankin lives in a Smart Growth city, and she's working to make it smarter. As evidence mounts that community design—and more specifically, urban sprawl—affects health, public health professionals such as Rankin are taking a top-down approach, working with land use and transportation planners to address the most pressing health problems today. “I think concerns around rising obesity rates and subsequent chronic diseases have really brought the public health community to the urban planning table to ensure that communities are being designed with the public's health in mind,” says Rankin, a chronic disease prevention manager for the Multnomah County Health Department in Portland, Oregon. “And urban planners are glad to have us. They recognize that these health problems are exacerbated by urban sprawl, and they appreciate the health perspective we bring in making good urban design decisions.”

Urban sprawl, that well-recognized description for land-gobbling, auto-dependent living, is now being linked to a decline in physical activity, rising rates of obesity, increased traffic accidents, and worsening environmental quality. As the public health community becomes more involved in urban planning, many are looking to Portland's Smart Growth approach as a model for how to build a healthy city.

Urban sprawl

Most people know urban sprawl when they see it, but a formal definition will clarify the problem. Sprawl has three major features. First, sprawl is characterized by low density land use: Fewer people live on a square mile of land in a suburb like Palmdale, California (1,100 people per square mile) than in higher density cities such as New York (26,000). Few sidewalks and abundant cul-de-sacs combine to make walking difficult and unsafe. The second feature of sprawl is segregated land use, in which residential areas are separated and many miles from stores, workplaces, and other destinations. These features naturally lead to the third quality of sprawl: auto dependence. In communities where residential areas are dominated by wide roads and few sidewalks, with long distances separat-



GB Arrington

Skidmore Fountain in the heart of Portland's Old Town.

ing destinations, cars become the only safe and practical means for getting places.

Researchers at Smart Growth America, a national coalition of city design advocacy groups, examined the main features of sprawl and calculated a sprawl value for each of the major metropolitan regions in the nation. Riverside, California, was found to be the most sprawling city, and New York City, the least. Among the least sprawling cities, Portland ranked a respectable eighth. This ranking may be the result of farsighted land use planning laws enacted more than 30 years ago in Oregon to reduce sprawl.

Portland and Smart Growth

If press accounts and Google searches are any measure, Portland has won the reputation as the quintessential Smart Growth city. Briefly, Smart Growth is a planning approach that concentrates population growth into a definable urban area, resulting in high-density, mixed-use development, with extensive public transit links and options. If all goes as planned, the approach preserves forests and farmlands, generates investment in already built-up areas, and creates a safe, convenient, pedestrian-friendly city with a strong sense of community and a thriving downtown core.

In many ways, Portland meets expectations as Queen of Smart Growth, but this wasn't always the case. Sprawling development patterns in the 1960s and 1970s led visionary state

leaders in 1973, mindful of Oregon's beautiful natural resources, to require that all cities in Oregon limit land growth of a city by defining a boundary where development must end. Termed *Urban Growth Boundaries*, any land inside the boundary is considered fair game for zoning and development, and land beyond is considered a natural resource, off limits to building. In 1979, Portland went a step further and created the nation's first and only regional government, Metro, which has the task of managing growth in the Portland metropolitan area's growth boundary. In addition, Portland area planners have embraced an extensive public transit system, including a new streetcar system downtown, to encourage commutes by foot, bus, and train. All this has had the intended effect of concentrating the region's increasing population inside the boundary, instead of sprawling growth ever outward. Moreover, new evidence suggests that Smart Growth may also be improving the health of Portland residents.

Health effects of sprawl

Awareness of the health consequences of city design date back hundreds of years. Concerted efforts between planners and public health practitioners reached a peak in the twentieth century when infectious diseases were brought under control, largely through clean water and improved sanitation. Over the years, however, many city functions have become specialized, and have become separated from public health concerns. Recently, health researchers have renewed their interest in community design and health. The *American Journal of Public Health*, for example, devoted an entire issue to the topic in 2003, and the message was clear: Thoughtful regional planning is needed to build healthy and livable cities.

Health researchers have identified three major categories of health and environmental effects from sprawl. First, sprawl leads to increased reliance on automobiles, which increases pedestrian and car crash injuries and fatalities, and reduces air quality. Second, the separation of land uses creates communities dominated by roads and cars, with features unfriendly to pedestrians, which in turn reduces physical activity and increases obesity. Sprawling land use patterns can also lead to water contamination, mostly because rainwater runs over ubiquitous paved surfaces, picking up oil and other contaminants on its way to rivers and streams. The third category relates to the social effects of urban sprawl. Reductions in civic engagement and mutual trust in communities—referred to as social capital—have been documented for

many years, and sprawl may be contributing to this by isolating us from our neighbors.

All this sounds plausible in theory, but the challenge comes in measuring these health factors and isolating urban design as the cause. Health researchers have only recently tackled this complex interaction, and have found intriguing evidence linking urban sprawl with many health problems. A national analysis by Barbara McCann and Reid Ewing, released in 2003, is one of the first studies to measure the health effects of sprawl. McCann and Ewing combined their sprawl index of counties with health risk factor data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and found that sprawl was directly related to declines in physical activity and increases in both obesity and hypertension. A recent study by Sturm and Cohen in the journal *Public Health* found that, in addition to obesity, sprawl is linked to increases in diabetes, arthritis, and even severe

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Smart Growth Communities Defined

Smart Growth America, a nationwide coalition, has published the following list to describe what a Smart Growth community would look like. To achieve Smart Growth, communities should:

1. Mix land uses. New, clustered development works best if it includes a mix of stores, jobs, and homes. Single-use districts make life less convenient and require more driving.
2. Take advantage of existing community assets. From local parks to neighborhood schools, public investments should focus on getting the most out of what we've already built.
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices: houses, condominiums, affordable homes for low-income families, and "granny flats" for empty nesters.
4. Foster "walkable," close-knit neighborhoods. These places offer not just the opportunity to walk, but something to walk to, whether it's the corner store, the transit stop, or a school.
5. Promote distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place, including the rehabilitation and use of historic buildings.
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
7. Strengthen and encourage growth in existing communities. We should look for opportunities to grow in already built-up areas, such as downtown business districts, Main Streets, and places with good public transit access.
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices. More communities need safe, reliable public transportation, sidewalks, and bike paths.
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective. Builders wishing to implement Smart Growth should face no more obstacles than those contributing to sprawl.
10. Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions. When people feel left out of important decisions, they won't be there to help out when tough choices have to be made.

—Smart Growth America (www.smartgrowthamerica.org)

headaches. Another study by Reid Ewing and colleagues, reported in the *American Journal of Public Health*, found that urban sprawl was directly related to traffic fatalities and pedestrian fatalities. Several other recent studies in major public health and urban planning journals have supported these findings.

Health benefits for Portland

All this is probably good news for residents living in Smart Growth Portland. But it's difficult to say at this point what effect Smart Growth has had on public health here. Looking at the available data, the jury is still out. Some indicators show promising results, but other measures are more troublesome. Looking at negative results first, traffic congestion in Portland is increasing; fewer than 10 percent of Portlanders use public transit, and physical inactivity and obesity rates are still a major concern. But on the positive side, air quality in the Portland region today is not a problem; car

crash deaths declined 38 percent between 1990 and 2001; and pedestrian death rates have declined 35 percent between 1994 and 2000. Both pedestrian and car crash death rates are far below the national average. Research by Arthur Nelson at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta also shows promising results. Nelson compared Atlanta, which had a sprawling population growth spurt, to Portland's roughly equivalent population growth, between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. He found that Portland's air quality improved, commute time declined, and neighborhood quality improved. In Atlanta, the results were the opposite.

Reconnecting community design and public health

Despite the challenges in measuring the health effects of Smart Growth in Portland, one thing is clear: Public health professionals and city planners here are working together again to design healthier cities, and people like Rankin are leading the way. Rankin's work with land use and transportation planners to create pedestrian-friendly routes to school and her efforts to develop bike paths and promote public transit could go a long way to creating a healthier city. "Building relationships with land use and transportation planners is an important first step," Rankin said. "The potential to improve the community's health is huge. We have a lot to learn together." She believes it's worth the effort because, by working together, her community will not only be smarter, but also healthier. 🐾

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Resources

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Oregon Land Management Under Attack

Land use planning has been a hot topic in Oregon since the passage in the early 1970s of land use laws restricting the growth of cities inside Urban Growth Boundaries. Land use issues remained a hot topic in Oregon during the 2004 election season, culminating in the passage of Ballot Measure 37 by 60 percent of Oregon voters. Many are interpreting this measure as a clear threat to Oregon's land use planning system.

Briefly, Measure 37 is a statute that allows property owners to file a claim for compensation when they feel that a county, state, or city land use rule has reduced the fair market value of their property. Assuming owners can show that a land use rule has lowered the value of their property, governments are then faced with a choice: They can either compensate property owners for the lost market value or they can waive the land use restriction, opening up the possibility that land that was previously off limits to development can now be developed. One important aspect of this statute is that it is retroactive to 30 years, so property owners can submit a claim if they believe their property's value was reduced by any land use regulation enacted after 1974. As times are tough fiscally for many governments throughout the state, it appears that the most likely scenario for claimants will be a waiving of the land use restriction.

As of early February, state, county, and city agencies had received about 220 claims since the law took effect on December 2, 2004. One pro-planning group has estimated that as of mid-January, 106 claims have demanded the development of 4,200 acres of land. Nine claims have been filed in Portland, and four claims have been filed in Multnomah County. County and city governments have 180 days from the time a claim is submitted to decide on actions to be taken for a claim. The first decisions are expected in May 2005.

What effect will Measure 37 have on land use planning and Smart Growth in the Portland area? "It's too early to tell at this point," said Derrick Tokos, a land use planner with Multnomah County. "We'll just have to wait and see the kinds of claims people file, and we just don't have enough at this point to know." Stay tuned. ■