



The Iowa Environmental Council's position on Sprawl and our environment

Iowa's current approach to development is inefficient, expensive, and damaging to our environment. With some changes in our public policy and a coordinated approach that works to limit sprawl, Iowa will better protect our state's land, water, and wildlife — and the quality of Iowans' lives.

The Iowa Environmental Council supports:

- 1. Recognition of the true costs of development**
- 2. Revision or elimination of programs and policies that subsidize sprawl**
- 3. Coordinated comprehensive land use planning**
- 4. Incentives for development within existing urban areas**
- 5. A smart transportation policy**
- 6. Extensive public participation in policy making that affects development**

Background

Development is destroying natural vistas in the Loess Hills, wooded greenways in Dallas and Johnson counties, and blufflands along the Mississippi River. Natural areas within urban areas face threats from development as well. For example, an extension of the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway in Des Moines has been proposed that would be built through an area of the Des Moines River valley now set aside for habitat, flood control, and recreation.

This sprawl takes a toll on Iowans' quality of life. We face more time-consuming commutes. We breathe unhealthy air, and we pay more to have our polluted drinking water treated. Sprawl results in decaying neighborhoods, a loss of community identity, and the degradation of special places.

Sprawling development also means extensive demands for new infrastructure, such as roads and sewer lines. At the same time, similar infrastructure in our cities is decaying for lack of a stable revenue base. This continuing construction of new infrastructure and abandonment and decay of older infrastructure is a significant strain on Iowa's economy.

Further, people are developing in areas away from planned or existing infrastructure, increasing the use of septic systems. Inadequate handling of waste from these systems is occurring, leading to water quality problems.

Sprawl also diminishes private property owners' ability to use and enjoy their land. Communities condemn private land for the expansion of utilities and for development. The value of property is diminished when uncontrolled sprawl increases water flow, causing flooding on adjacent lands.

The strain on Iowa's environment is even worse. Sprawl is an especially critical problem for Iowa's environment for two primary reasons: Iowa has so little natural habitat left, and its soils are particularly valuable for agriculture. Fifty-three percent of our agricultural land is prime farmland, according to DNR, and much of the land is vulnerable to development, because of its levelness and proximity to Iowa's metro areas.

We now have only 0.1 percent of our prairie left, and half of those remnants may be of poor quality. Ninety percent of the wetlands that once dotted our open spaces and lined our rivers is gone. Nearly two-thirds of our 6.7 million acres of forest were lost as well. (*Source: Iowa: Portrait of the Land*)

Ambitious efforts are underway to restore some of our prairies, wetlands, and forests, but Iowa's extensive habitat loss means that we have just a small fraction of our once abundant and diverse wildlife. About 80 animals, from bobcats to bats and from snails to butterflies, are now threatened or endangered in Iowa. In addition,

about 150 Iowa plant species, such as the western white-fringed prairie orchid, have been classified as rare or endangered in this state.

The Iowa Environmental Council's position

1. Recognize the true costs of development

Most Iowans assume development will financially benefit their communities. In actuality, development can be a financial burden. The Iowa Environmental Council and others should educate the public about the financial costs of providing clean and reliable drinking water supplies, sewage services, road expansions, schools, and other infrastructure to sprawling development. Communities should be encouraged to require property tax impact statements for proposed developments, so that the full costs are considered before development is approved.

2. Revise or eliminate programs and policies that subsidize sprawl

Iowa has many programs that may have admirable goals but too often result in subsidies for sprawling development. For example, Tax Increment Financing (TIF) was established to fix up "slum and blighted areas" but has been broadly expanded; today, it is even used by cities and counties to develop on farmland. TIF, tax abatements, RISE (the Rebuild Iowa's Sound Economy program), CEBA (the Community Economic Betterment Account), and other subsidies should be reexamined and tailored so that they don't contribute to sprawl.

3. Require coordinated comprehensive planning

The Iowa Legislature should pass a comprehensive statewide growth management act to mandate and encourage local land use planning according to statewide standards. Statewide help is needed because cities and counties are unable to enact the necessary controls on their own because of economic competition and limited jurisdiction. A growth management act is a powerful tool for encouraging more compact and mixed use development, conserving natural resources, prime agricultural land, and protecting life and property from the effects of development in inappropriate areas, such as floodplains. Citizens must have early

and frequent opportunities to influence the development of this statewide comprehensive planning.

4. Provide incentives for development within existing urban areas

Iowa's policies must encourage in-fill development, urban rehabilitation, and redevelopment rather than the conversion of rural greenfields to housing and strip development. Additional incentives should be provided to encourage this urban development. A state tax credit program for in-fill and preservation should be implemented. The 1996 Iowa "brownfields" legislation was a good first step in this direction; even stronger funding and rules are needed to respond to the legitimate concerns about building homes and businesses on contaminated land inside cities and towns.

5. Support a smart transportation policy

Traditionally, the Iowa Department of Transportation and its federal equivalent have contributed extensively, both directly or indirectly, to sprawling development. Our transportation policy should stress investments in multi-modal transportation, including mass transit, light rail, and bicycle and pedestrian trails, and upgrading of existing roads rather than additional road building. Transportation officials should take seriously their mandate to inventory and avoid high quality natural areas when planning transportation improvements. The direct economic benefits of roads must be weighed against their detrimental direct, indirect, and long-term impacts to the natural environment, which inevitably affect the quality of human life.

6. Ensure extensive public participation in policy making that affects development

Too often, decisions about development are made without the input of those who will be affected most by it: local citizens. For example, officials worked for years planning the Martin Luther King Jr. northern extension before involving neighborhood and environmental groups. Current notification and public participation laws need to be strengthened. Broad-based citizen participation will only improve the development decisions affecting Iowa's communities, cities, counties, incorporated towns, planning districts, watersheds, and air quality regions.

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