



CONNECTICUT PARTNERSHIP FOR  
**BALANCED GROWTH**

## **Sprawl Myths: Connecticut's Development is a Result of Sprawl**

Sprawl is often characterized as uncontrolled, unplanned, irresponsible growth outside of central cities or core areas, in once rural areas, some distance away from existing development and infrastructure. This pattern of development may be common in some areas of the country, most often in high growth areas with unincorporated lands and annexation powers. However, Connecticut's development patterns are not associated with high growth, there are no unincorporated lands and annexation powers, and our development patterns have been planned and have accommodated our slow growth.

Connecticut has developed and continues to develop in a unified, planned, and well controlled pattern that is a balance of regulatory measures and market demands. Connecticut was first settled in 1636 by the British, and for the next three hundred years small, compact towns and cities developed throughout the state. Small increases in population occurred until the industrial revolution and limited transportation technologies kept most development to compact town centers. As transportation technologies improved, development began to expand. This was true with the horse drawn carriage, the electric street car, and later the automobile.

Suburbanization began in the 1930's and 1940's. In 1950 the City of Hartford had a population of 177,397 persons, and the Capitol Region (Hartford and the 28 surrounding communities) totaled 418,191. By 1950, prior to development of the interstate highway system almost 60 percent of the region's population already lived outside of Hartford.

Based on Hartford's small geographic size and existing zoning, Hartford could accommodate approximately 180,000 persons and had reached build-out (near maximum capacity) in 1950. Many factors have influenced urban decline, and between 1950 and 2000 Hartford lost 53,000 residents, while the Capitol Region's population increased by approximately 302,000 persons to 721,000 persons during the same period. Even if Hartford had not lost 53,000 residents, the city never could have accommodated the additional population growth that occurred in the Capitol Region. It is also important to note that not all Hartford's population loss is a result of abandonment. Rather the declining average household size possibly accounts for almost 50 percent of this population loss.

The first ring suburbs around Hartford continued to grow in population as the region's population increased. As development continued and land became scarce in these first tier suburbs, development increased in the next tier of suburbs. In time communities like Wethersfield and West Hartford reached build-out and population increases leveled out. Second tier suburbs like Rocky Hill and South Windsor are now beginning to reach build-out, and development continues in the third tier suburbs and exurbs.

This regional growth pattern has accommodated our state's population growth, and the majority of growth and development has occurred along our transportation systems. Our highest population densities exist in our urban centers and along the Metro-North rail line between New Haven and Stamford. New Haven and Fairfield Counties have our state's two highest population densities. The Hartford region has the third highest population density and has developed along I-84 and I-91.

Our land use system, market forces, and consumer preferences have created a pattern of development that has provided Connecticut's high quality of life and economic prosperity. However, the anti-sprawl (anti-suburbanization) movement has failed to recognize that our development patterns have been a balance of market factors and land use regulations and that after 370 years of growth and development, 81 percent of Connecticut's land area is still undeveloped.

The following are a few examples from U.S. Census data that demonstrate that many of the issues claimed to be a result of sprawl are in fact not true.

The anti-sprawl advocates argue that:

- **Sprawl increases our journey to work times:** A review of U.S. Census data shows that five communities often associated with sprawl (Avon, Canton, Hebron, Marlborough, and Tolland) saw an increase in commute times of 1.04 minutes. However, the five core communities in the Hartford region (Hartford, West Hartford, Bloomfield, East Hartford, and Wethersfield) experienced more than twice the increase in commute times (2.72 minutes) as the sprawling communities. So while the region is growing outwards, the central core is experiencing higher increases in commute times than the so-called sprawling communities.
- **Sprawl causes people to live further from work:** Using the same five sprawling communities (combined) from 1990 to 2000 there was a 2.94 percent increase in the number of people that live and work in the same town. In the same five core communities (combined) there was a 6.88 percent decrease in the people that live and work in the same town. Once again, this is the opposite of what the anti-sprawl advocates would have us believe.
- **Sprawl is a cause of automobile dependence, and low-density sprawling developments are to blame for our lack of viable public transportation:** Even with our outward growing region, from 1990 to 2000 public transportation usage increased by 3.9%. More interesting is that the five sprawling low-density communities saw a 0.8 percent increase in public transportation usage while the five core high density communities saw a 4.4% decrease in public transportation usage. The data demonstrate the opposite of what would be expected based on the arguments against low-density development.
- **Sprawl is a new phenomenon and our recent growth is destroying our state's character:** Compare the rate of development from 1970-1980 and 1990-2000 in the same five sprawling communities, and we find that the rate of development or sprawl was far more significant in the 1970's. From 1970 to 1980 the five sprawling communities experienced a 52 percent increase in the number of housing units, with a total of 4,542 new housing units. From 1990 to 2000 the same five communities experienced an 18

percent increase in the number of housing units, with a total of 2,854 new housing units. So a 52 percent increase in housing in the 1970's was called suburbanization and an 18 percent increase in housing in the 1990's is now known as sprawl.

- **Sprawl and new housing development increased the demand and burden placed on local school districts:** The Capitol Region in 1970 had 249,229 persons between the age of 0-19 (school age population) making up 37.2% of the total population. In 2000 that same age group's population had declined to 195,943 persons or 27.1% of the total population, a 10% decline. During that same period the region added 81,802 housing units. So for every new housing unit built, the region actually lost 0.65 persons of school age population.
- **Sprawl is not just about housing, but also about jobs moving further away.** In 2000, out of the 50 largest urban areas in the United States, Hartford ranked 27<sup>th</sup> in Central Business District (CBD) employment with 62,200 persons working in the CBD. At the same time Hartford ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the CBD share of urban area employment with 15.4% (1. New York, 2. New Orleans, 3. Washington, 4. Austin). Portland, OR, the poster child of smart growth, ranked 26<sup>th</sup> with a 10% share of urban area employment in the CBD. Therefore, job loss in Downtown Hartford is most likely more a result of downsizing in the financial service industry and jobs lost to other states, not to the suburbs.

The Connecticut Partnership for Balanced Growth recognizes that Connecticut has developed based on its geography, population growth, market demands, consumer preferences, and within the context of our existing land-use regulatory framework. Our challenge today is not to prevent or stop growth, but to encourage and accommodate future growth in our state and balance that growth with conservation and preservation needs. The challenge for smart growth in Connecticut will require leadership that recognizes our need to continue to grow and not to get caught up in the anti-growth movement that claims to be an anti-sprawl movement.