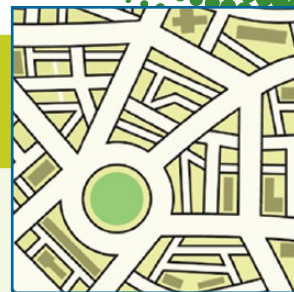


Local Focus

The End of Sprawl?



One of the unanticipated consequences of the Great Recession is a slowing, and in some cases an outright reversal, of urban sprawl. The reasons for this are complex, and the next boom economy may push development patterns back toward sprawl. Still, there is no doubt that at least in some geographic areas, the Great Recession turned growth patterns away from those characterized by sprawl.

Some of this is simple economics. The Great Recession hammered many local economies nationwide, but the suburbs got hammered hardest. One report looked at job losses in 100 metro areas and found that the farther away the area was from a central business district, the larger the loss in employment there. Between 2000 and 2007, job growth was likely to be found in areas 10 to 35 miles away from a central business district. The Great Recession ended that, with jobs becoming more concentrated in central business cores. And where there are jobs, people will follow.

It is not just employment opportunities, though. There is evidence of a significant shift in the attitudes of Americans. More and more, they prize walkable working and living. This trend has become so prominent that developers in places such as the Washington, D.C., suburbs in Virginia and Maryland are less interested in picket fences and big houses and are instead concentrating on projects such as building condos close to train stations.

Indeed, this trend has become so prominent that a handful of cities—including Washington, D.C., New York, and Boston—are said by urban scholars to be “witnessing the end of sprawl.” The far-flung suburban

office parks are becoming less and less attractive to employees who want a different lifestyle than having a house in one place, a job in another, a long commute in between, and no sense of community in either.

The benefits of more compact and connected metro areas are backed by a number of studies. One study by the University of Utah's Metropolitan Research Center found that the more compact a metro area, the greater the economic mobility in that area. There are also other benefits. People who live in more compact and more connected places tend to have lower rates of obesity and higher life expectancies. When you spend less time sitting in a car and more time outside walking and talking, apparently not just your job prospects improve but also your health.

All this is not lost on an increasing number of people who are turning away from traditional suburban lifestyles, with their clear separation of home, work, leisure, and community, and toward something that combines all this into a more geographically compact area. This sort of trend undercuts most of the classic characteristics of sprawl discussed in the text. These sorts of spaces are much more likely to be high-density developments with multiuse zoning that require much less reliance on an automobile to get through the day.

So are we really “witnessing the end of sprawl”? That question is impossible to answer, at least in the foreseeable future. Are we seeing some important shifts in urban development patterns? That question is much easier to answer: Yes. How those development trends evolve over the next decade or two will ultimately tell us whether sprawl is ending or just taking a postrecession pause.