

# At Taxpayers' Expense

## How Government Policies Encourage Sprawl in Erie and Niagara Counties

2006 Revised Edition



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in Erie and Niagara Counties**

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## INTRODUCTION

The word *sprawl* brings several images to mind—new housing developments farther and farther from the city core, big box stores on busy suburban streets, and loss of green space. The physical manifestations of sprawl are easy to see. What one might not immediately consider, however, are the high municipal costs associated with uncontrolled, low-density suburban development.

While sprawl has many ramifications—economic, environmental and social—we'd like to examine in particular how current government policies encourage sprawl, and look more closely at whether such policies are fiscally prudent in light of the burdens they bring to the taxpaying public.

In evaluating any proposal for development, it is important to understand the true costs involved. Sprawl is expensive—for governments and, ultimately, for taxpayers. Whether it is money spent directly on projects such as building new roads or widening old ones, or money lost when development agencies provide tax breaks and incentives to businesses to relocate to suburban office parks, sprawl has financial ramifications that must be examined in depth and accounted for in full. New residential development requires additional municipal services—new schools, police and fire protection, roads, sewers and water lines—that are only partially funded by development fees and property taxes for those new homes. The balance is paid by municipal budgets, subsidized by residents already living in the village, city or town providing the service.

While some of the subsidies that promote sprawl are at the federal level (most notably in federal highway spending), there are many ways that decisions made by local governments add to the problems of unchecked growth even as they subtract something vital from the quality of life of their communities.

Planning and managing growth are fundamental responsibilities of any local government. It should be recognized that sprawling development can actually be more costly in the long run, not only to a particular municipality but also to those around it that may be affected by its decisions. Inter-municipal collaboration could curb costs and prevent actions that are detrimental to neighboring communities. These are complex issues, and sprawl is just one of several components involved; however, the role it plays must be examined and evaluated.

*The Erie Niagara region, with a declining population, is requiring fewer people to bear the costs of a larger area of government services.*

*Sprawl is defined as uncontrolled, low-density, fragmented, automobile-dependent development that rapidly spreads on the fringes of existing communities, often consuming agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands.*

*“In the 1990s, housing construction in the Buffalo metropolitan area exceeded household growth by nearly four-to-one,” according to a national study. “New housing and growth were greatly imbalanced: for every additional household living in the area, four new homes were built. A housing ‘surplus’ was the inescapable result.”*

(The Brookings Institution, The Living Cities Census Series, “Vacating the City: An Analysis of New Homes vs. Household Growth,” December 2003, p. 5)

## ROADS AND HIGHWAYS

If less money were appropriated to roads and highways, and more to public transportation, would there be as much sprawl?

*According to the Town of Orchard Park Highway Department, there were 47.61 miles of road in the town in 1970; that figure increased to 86.96 in 2003.*

Roads and highways are a major factor in the movement of people and commercial enterprises, encouraging both population and economic growth in a region. Federal and state governments have long had policies of subsidizing highway construction.

Construction of major roads destroys open land and encourages sprawl. The Thruway, which opened in 1955, provided the impetus for more access roads and interconnecting highways to be built. Cities and towns became hubs for region-wide commuting. The growth of the auto industry made it possible for more people to afford cars, move away from municipal centers and public transportation, and build homes on residential streets away from commercial centers and jobs.

The amount of federal money available for widening roads and constructing new highways increased dramatically in the 1950s, when the Interstate Highway Act provided \$50 billion over 10 years to build 41,000 miles of interstate highways.<sup>1</sup> Large amounts continue to be allocated; the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA), signed into law in 2005, sets out federal transportation spending for six years and authorizes \$193 billion for highways.<sup>2</sup>

*Sprawling development requires the building and maintenance of new roads, and this is costly to taxpayers.*

The proliferation of highways and cars is seen to be responsible for a growing “car-only” culture, with its associated problems of wasted fuel and time as well as an increase in air pollution. In 2004, Americans drove about 2.96 trillion miles, over four times as many miles per capita as we did in 1960.<sup>3</sup> The Surface Transportation Policy Project calculated that from 1983 to 1990, almost 70% of the increase in driving was due to sprawling development, forcing us to drive more frequently and make longer trips.<sup>4</sup>

All this traveling leads to greater congestion on the roads. In turn, congestion stimulates more money being spent for more highways and for widening of existing roads. The National Wildlife Federation estimates that it cost approximately \$4 million per mile to construct a new single-lane roadway in the year 2002, and \$4,800 per mile each year to maintain highways.<sup>5</sup>

Here are two local examples. The widening of Wehrle Road near Transit is expected to cost about \$13 million (80% federal money, 5% from the state, and the rest from the cash-strapped county).<sup>6</sup> And the New York State Thruway Authority recently spent \$62.5 million to widen 2.5 miles of the Thruway between exits 53 and 54. According to Governor Pataki, motorists will experience improved

safety and better air quality as well as shortened travel time.<sup>7</sup> However, many city planners have known since the 1940s that widening roads or building new ones to solve traffic problems is only a short-term solution and, in what is known as the Braess Paradox, may actually increase traffic problems.<sup>8</sup> The Sierra Club has done studies that show that three or more years after the building or widening of a highway, the increase in traffic volume stimulates more sprawl, with a corresponding rise in traffic that ultimately reaches that new road's larger capacity.<sup>9</sup>

While the Buffalo Niagara region loses population, it continues to build roads. The New York State Department of Transportation 2000 report for the years 1970-2000 illustrates how the number of miles of roadway in Erie and Niagara Counties has increased even as population has declined:

Year	Population Erie & Niagara	Year	Total miles of all roads, state and local Erie & Niagara
1970	1,349,200	1970	5,410
1980	1,242,900	1982	5,906
1990	1,189,600	1990	6,018
2000	1,170,130	2001	6,155

Erie County's spending on road construction and maintenance has increased steadily over the years as the total number of miles of roadways has risen.<sup>10</sup>

Even as the County's spending increases, however, more money continues to be earmarked for highways than for public transit. The 2006-2010 Transportation Improvement Program in Erie County shows that over four years, the total cost of highway/bridge projects was estimated to be \$685 million, while the total cost of transit projects was estimated at \$141.4 million over the same period. Nearly \$5 will be spent on roads for every \$1 spent on transit.

The solution to greater traffic problems is not merely to increase the number or capacity of roadways. Recent data from the Texas Transportation Institute indicates that public transportation helps reduce traffic delays and costs in America's 85 largest urban areas. The study reports that regular bus and train services in these cities saved drivers more than one billion hours in delays in 2003. Without mass transit, nationwide delays would have increased by 27 percent, costing residents an additional \$18 billion in lost time and fuel. Public transportation lessens congestion—and with the cost of congestion in the cities studied at about \$63 billion, it is an alternative for both commuters and government officials to consider.<sup>11</sup>

*The Braess paradox was elucidated in a paper by Dr. Dietrich Braess in 1969. He noted that "there may be the situation that a new road deteriorates the situation for all customers."*

(<http://homepage.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/Dietrich.Braess/Index.html#paradox>)

*In Erie County, nearly \$5 will be spent on roads for every \$1 spent on public transportation.*

*Everything that happens to land use has transportation implications and every transportation action affects land use.*

(Edward Beimborn and Robert Puentes, "Highways and Transit: Leveling the Playing Field in Federal Transportation Policy," The Brookings Institution Series on Transportation Reform, December, 2003, p 9.)

*Good public transportation can reduce traffic congestion and pollution.*

Local decision-makers can influence how federal and state transportation funds are spent by working with the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council (GBNRTC), which provides a regional decision-making forum for the development of an integrated transportation system that best fits the Niagara Frontier. Funding is provided by both the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration. The GBNRTC, in cooperation with the New York State Department of Transportation, is responsible for selecting projects to be included in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which encompasses all federally funded transportation projects being considered for implementation in a five-year period.

People will turn to an effective system of public transportation that enables them to avoid the problems and costs of traffic congestion and proliferation of highway construction. Much more money is needed for mass transit, while the expenditure on roads should be limited mainly to repair, not new construction.

Local officials need to understand the impact of their decisions about roads and highways. They may use their influence to curb the construction of new roads and the widening of old ones, thus reducing sprawl and its attendant government costs. If they actively support the provision of good public transportation, they can reduce traffic congestion and pollution in their communities. They will be taking positive steps toward improving the quality of life for their constituents.

## **CORPORATE SUBSIDIES**

Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of how local governments encourage sprawl is in the way their development agencies provide tax breaks and incentives to businesses in an effort to either relocate them to or retain them in their municipalities. Is this an effective policy in the long term? Or can it actually harm the very communities that hope to benefit?

Local industrial development agencies (IDAs) reason that a new company will bring much needed jobs to the community and add to the tax base. The fear is that if the IDA does not offer substantial incentives, the company will respond to a better offer from another community and locate elsewhere. However, studies have shown that labor force, transportation, utilities, and various quality of life factors are more important to relocating companies than tax incentives.<sup>12</sup> Citizens should ask whether allocating funds to improving these factors would prove beneficial in bringing more business to the area.

In 2005, the six IDAs in Erie County gave over \$27 million in tax breaks. The three in Niagara County gave more than \$9 million.<sup>13</sup> The kinds of incentives IDAs in the area offer are<sup>14</sup>

- State and county sales tax exemption for construction materials, equipment and fixtures purchased through the agency in connection with an approved project.
- Mortgage recording tax exemption.
- Financial support from Industrial Revenue Bonds issued by the IDA, some of which are exempt from federal taxes.
- Property tax abatement. The IDA will usually enter into a Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) Agreement with a project developer in regard to real property tax. Typically, a PILOT Agreement will require the developer (and its successors) to make payments to a municipality and/or school district in accordance with a graduated scale over a certain period of time, based upon a percentage of the taxes that would otherwise be due on the value-added portion of the tax assessment.

*Incentives offered by IDAs often encourage sprawling development and are costly to taxpayers.*

Who pays for these tax exemptions and abatements given as incentives? Ultimately, other businesses as well as tax-paying residents must compensate for the cost of lost revenue.

In what is known as venture/spec development, IDAs offer incentives to developers to build new projects—often on undeveloped, less expensive open land—that can then be made available immediately to a business wanting space. In November, 2005, the Erie County IDA voted to give \$885,000 in tax breaks to Ciminelli Development Corporation to build a spec building at Colvin Woods Business Park in the Town of Tonawanda,<sup>15</sup> even though the need for such space was questionable as area vacancy rates were rising.<sup>16</sup>

In 1997 Uniland Partnership LP saved nearly \$420,000 in property taxes, \$14,343 in sales tax payments and \$32,650 in mortgage recording taxes on its new office building at 33 Dodge Road as a project of the Amherst IDA.<sup>17</sup> That's a \$466,993 sprawl subsidy, at the expense of the taxpaying citizens of Amherst.

*Competition among IDAs prevents effective planning for economic development that benefits the whole region.*

That building is now occupied, but if the IDA support had not enabled the owners to charge a lower rent, the occupants might have found space in existing buildings.

In August, 2003, the Amherst IDA gave Excelsior Orthopedics \$1 million in tax breaks to build a new office and surgery center on Sheridan Drive. Doctors and staff moved from current offices in

Buffalo and Tonawanda.<sup>18</sup> Instead of encouraging the doctors to find suitable space in an existing building, the IDA subsidized sprawl by supporting a move that simply relocated offices without increasing jobs. It may improve the tax base in Amherst, but this will be at the expense of Buffalo and Tonawanda.

Efforts such as this can actually be against the law. New York State's Court of Appeals ruled that the Amherst IDA and Uniland Development Co. violated an "anti-pirating" law when they brought a communications firm to Amherst from downtown Buffalo in 2000.<sup>19</sup>

Although the benefits of more jobs and an increased tax base may be worth the loss of some open space, often the promised reward in jobs from an incentive-supported project doesn't materialize. State Comptroller Alan Hevesi's 2006 audit of six IDAs in New York State found that the Amherst IDA gave incentives in 2000 and 2001 to businesses that projected increasing jobs by a total of 1,205, but by the end of 2004 they had actually reduced the number of jobs by 324 (14 percent).<sup>20</sup>

An encouraging development is an apparent shift in emphasis of the Amherst IDA. According to their *2005 Annual Report & Business Survey*, "Over the past six years redeveloping older portions of Amherst has become a top priority for the Amherst IDA."<sup>21</sup> Also encouraging is the fact that a "Countywide IDA Eligibility Policy" has been developed as a step toward reducing competition among local IDAs.<sup>22</sup>

Local officials can work to reduce the costs to taxpayers of the incentives offered by IDAs by supporting further efforts to reduce competition between IDAs and to encourage strategic partnerships among development agencies in Western New York, by questioning the necessity of large incentives, by making sure that incentives are not offered for buildings that contribute to sprawl, and by recognizing that a thriving urban core affects the health of the entire region. The best incentive for attracting businesses to a municipality may be to plan effectively for an attractive community and a superior quality of life.

*Preserving open space, reducing traffic congestion, and making other quality-of-life improvements can be more important than tax breaks as incentives for businesses to settle in a community.*

*Sprawling development increases the need for new schools and emergency services, thereby increasing the tax burden for everyone.*

## **SCHOOLS & ESSENTIAL SERVICES**

As population shifts from the urban core to first-ring suburbs and farther outward, municipal governments are left with shifting needs for essential services such as fire, police and emergency medical services as well as for schools. These are basic services that a local government provides its residents.

Inadequate planning, however, leaves some communities with an overcapacity of services and facilities as they lose population, while others must scramble to keep up with demand or suffer the consequences of inadequate provision. At the same time that the tax base declines in areas where people are leaving, leading to budget shortfalls or an increase in taxes, taxpayers in areas of sprawling development are burdened with additional costs.

## Schools

From 1970 to 2003, the public school enrollment in Erie and Niagara Counties decreased by 104,911 students<sup>23</sup>, but with the movement of families from the cities to the suburbs, school costs accelerated. Sprawl has had a major impact on school districts, creating the need to build new schools or additions to existing facilities to accommodate the increase in students. The New York State Education Department estimates that the construction and incidental costs of adding a new classroom to an existing facility equal \$10,044 per student between kindergarten and sixth grade. This figure rises to \$15,694 for students in grades seven through twelve. The cost of expanding capacity in existing schools is assumed to be 75% of the cost of building a new classroom on an entirely new site.<sup>24</sup>

The problem of shifting demand can be exacerbated by a lack of communication between municipal planners and school districts. In the town of Lancaster, for example, where the population has increased 26% over the past decade, the district has recently constructed a two-story wing with twelve classrooms at the high school, a twelve-classroom addition and improvements to the cafeteria and gymnasium at one elementary school, and a new twenty-eight classroom wing at another elementary school. School administrators were caught off guard by the unexpectedly rapid pace of development as town officials approved new subdivisions. Town council members have responded at various times by proposing a moratorium on new homes or a cap on the number of new single-family homes.<sup>25</sup>

Local governments can take a proactive stance by studying the impact of development on the cost of service provision. A study prepared by CGR (Center for Government Research) for the Town of Eden on the fiscal impact of land development alternatives provided several development models. These included scenarios of both slightly and significantly increased residential development, decreased residential development, the addition of non-residential development and the purchase of development rights (a technique for saving agricultural land from development). It forecast the net change in taxes paid by current residents and tax rate trends over a twenty year period for both the Town of Eden and the Eden Central School District, recognizing that the capacity of the schools and the potential for new construction were significant factors in determining

*“Judith Howard, the Niagara-Wheatfield school chief, says she's frustrated because growth in the tax base isn't balancing out the cost of education.*

*Many of the newly built homes in Wheatfield are well into the \$200,000 range - the sort that draw mid-career professionals with children, rather than young families or retirees.*

*The district spends \$11,660 per student. The owner of a \$250,000 home pays less than half that much annually in school taxes.”*

(Mary Pasciak. “Uneasy marriage,” *The Buffalo News*, April 5, 2004.)

*Placing new schools on sites removed from population centers contributes to sprawl, automobile dependence, and increased busing costs.*

service costs. In other words, once the town grows to a point where existing classroom space is filled, substantial expenditure would be necessary to increase that classroom space to allow for further growth.<sup>26</sup>

*Taxpayers in existing communities are footing much of the bill for extending public safety services to new areas.*

New suburban schools are expensive to build. They tend to be constructed on open land at a distance from neighborhoods, public transportation and existing infrastructure, so spending on bus service increases as more vehicles are needed to accommodate longer routes. Between 1990 and 2000, for example, school transportation expenses in Erie and Niagara Counties increased 60%, while the number of students increased less than 7%.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, sprawling development in outer-ring suburbs results in the closing of schools in good condition in older communities. From 1970 to 1990, the first-ring suburban district of Kenmore-Tonawanda closed eleven schools due to population loss.<sup>28</sup>

Education is the most expensive service government provides. Citizens should ask whether government policies and the failure of the region to address the costs of sprawl—which results in the need to build new schools while shuttering schools in already-built areas—should continue.

*In a 1972 decision involving the Town of Ramapo, the New York Court of Appeals upheld the right of a town to restrict development through the use of a detailed comprehensive land use plan. It paved the way for subsequent decisions that favored public regulation over the developer or landowner's immediate right to develop property, and was cited in several federal court decisions upholding the constitutionality and public purpose of linking the adequacy of public facilities to infrastructure planning.*

(Robert H. Freilich, *From Sprawl to Smart Growth*, American Bar Association, 1999.)

### **Essential Services**

As a community sprawls farther outward, more fire and police stations are demanded so that residents are adequately protected. While fire and police stations are less expensive and land-intensive than schools, they entail sizable operating costs (including central radio dispatch) in order to remain on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Because time is of the essence in emergencies, population density becomes a significant factor in the size and placement of emergency services. The American Farmland Trust compared police, fire and emergency response times in four different communities in and around Chicago. On average, the fire department took almost three times longer to reach new, sprawling development than it did to reach development closer to existing communities. The difference in response times for most police calls was even more pronounced.<sup>29</sup>

In the Erie/Niagara region, essential services are delivered by a combination of public, private and volunteer entities. Residents may be served by local police forces, the County Sheriff, state police, housing authority police, transit authority police, or university patrols. Some cities and towns have full-time police forces; some towns and villages have part-time police forces, while still others contract out for law enforcement with the State Police or County Sheriff.<sup>30</sup>

There are 93 volunteer fire companies and three paid companies organized into 33 independent fire districts and 26 additional fire protection districts in Erie County. The combination of the high cost of new fire equipment (for example, as much as \$625,000<sup>31</sup> for a fire truck or \$100,000 for a rescue vehicle), relatively sparse population, and limited tax bases prompts rural towns and villages to rely to a great extent on mutual aid agreements that permit them to share volunteers and equipment to continue to provide fire services.<sup>32</sup> Emergency medical services (EMS) are provided by a host of independent private and public sector entities as well as the more traditional volunteer companies.<sup>33</sup>

While the costs of more police, fire and emergency services are borne by both existing and new residents, the extra coverage usually benefits new residents alone. Taxpayers in existing communities are footing much of the bill for extending public safety services to new areas.

Local officials should recognize that if they approve sprawling development, they are also approving increased costs for schools and other essential services. At the same time, they may be encouraging population shifts that reduce the use of existing schools and services in older areas. This leads to inefficient use of community resources and increased taxes for the region.

## UTILITIES

While new water, sewer lines and stormwater drains are often installed at the developer's expense, the costs of ongoing maintenance, repair, treatment, disposal, and purification ultimately revert to the municipality.

While it is difficult to determine the exact cost of sewer lines, we can make some rough estimates. The yearly sewer budget for Erie County, including the cost of staff, equipment, repair supplies and all other sewer system expenses relating to approximately 800 miles<sup>34</sup> of county sewer lines, is approximately \$37.5 million.<sup>35</sup> This makes the average cost about \$46,250 per mile, or about \$8.76 per linear foot.

Looking more specifically at the expense of expanding beyond existing infrastructure, Amherst estimates that extending sewer lines in that town costs between \$40 and \$90 per linear foot. Taking \$65 as an average, that works out to be about \$343,200 per mile--a figure that should cause cash-strapped local governments and taxpayers to clamor for more compact development.

*When the Town of Guilderland, New York, attempted to levy impact fees to shift the increased burden of paying for infrastructure necessitated by new development, the Court of Appeals held in 1989 that those fees were preempted by the state's regulation of highway funding in the Town and Highway Law. The Town of Colonie, on the other hand, imposes mitigation fees on new development in which Environmental Impact Statements were undertaken. These fees offset the additional transportation, water, solid waste and recreation costs resulting from that development.*

(Kelly L. Munkwitz, "Does the SEQRA authorize mitigation fees? (New York State Environmental Quality Review Act)," *Albany Law Review*, Dec. 22, 1997.)

*Limiting the extension of water and sewer lines is a way to limit sprawl and reduce expenses.*

*A citizen in Clarence wrote a letter to The Buffalo News in December, 2003, (“Only a few will benefit from sewer upgrades”) about the Erie County Legislature’s plan to approve the expenditure of approximately three million dollars to improve Sewer District #5, the cost of which will be assessed against the entire district’s residents. The writer questioned whether the expenditure would benefit him. “I have no problem paying my fair share,” he wrote. “However, this seems to be a veiled attempt to burden existing taxpayers to benefit the few and to subsidize further development in Clarence.*

*(The Buffalo News. Dec 17, 2003. p. B.9.)*

Sometimes sprawling development proceeds without the installation of new water and sewer lines, using wells and septic tanks instead. But when the well water supply is threatened or septic tanks become an environmental hazard, homeowners put pressure on the municipality to extend water and sewer lines. In Clarence, for example, only about 9% of households were served by sewers in 2000.<sup>36</sup> Representative Thomas M. Reynolds secured a total of \$2.3 million in federal aid for sewer improvements so that the town could run about 45,000 linear feet of sanitary sewers to 500 parcels.<sup>37</sup> The project is underway, and the Town Engineer estimates that it may cost as much as \$3 million. Careful planning could reduce these costs—costs that are borne not by the developer or the affected homeowners but by all taxpayers in the sewer district.

An area of concern that has come to the attention of communities in recent years involves stormwater management practices. In response to 1987 amendments to the federal Clean Water Act, the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) has developed rules concerning stormwater discharges, the most recent of which is the Stormwater Phase II Final Rule. That requires communities to take steps to reduce pollution from stormwater to local bodies of water, and many local communities have joined the Western New York Stormwater Coalition to develop a regional approach to complying with Phase II.<sup>38</sup>

The EPA recognizes that sprawling development with large road surfaces, parking lots, and lawns causes more runoff and more pollution and makes the handling of stormwater more complicated and expensive. They recommend smart growth techniques as the "Best Management Practices" for reducing stormwater problems.<sup>39</sup> Local officials who are aware of this can save the taxpayers money by insisting that new development conform to smart growth principles.

There are success stories. Consider the example of Genesee County, which was faced with a major overhaul and rebuilding of their water system. Though developing a countywide water system was relatively straightforward from an engineering standpoint, bringing together the many villages, towns and cities within the county, each with its right to home rule, was much more complicated. It was a project that resulted in 32 inter-municipal agreements, including a sales tax revenue sharing agreement between the City of Batavia and Genesee County. Genesee County also developed and adopted a Smart Growth Plan that designated the areas in which new development could hook up to county water. Any development outside these areas would not be permitted to connect to municipal water, thus encouraging growth to overlap with existing infrastructure. This collaborative effort has had a profound impact on the county’s water system and has actually encouraged better planning amongst the different layers of government.<sup>40</sup>

This Genesee County example shows that local leaders can use their understanding of the connection between sprawl and the expense of expanding utilities to reduce costs. Communities that refuse to extend water and sewer lines into new areas save money as they encourage more compact development in areas where the utilities are already in place.

Calculations done in 2005 by the HOK Planning Group for the Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth project support this view. HOK considered three scenarios for regional growth, reinvestment and development—a 1980-2000 Trend Scenario (continuation of the current pattern), a Strategic Investment Scenario (Intermediate between the first and third), and a Reinvestment Scenario (development mainly in areas of existing infrastructure).

This study predicts that the cost of the infrastructure (water and sewer) over twenty years would be \$911 million for the 1980-2000 Trend Scenario, \$334 million for the Strategic Investment Scenario, and \$112 million for the Reinvestment. The HOK report concludes, "As the chart reveals, expected infrastructure costs associated with the Strategic Investment and Reinvestment Scenarios pale in comparison to the Trend Scenario. The approximately \$800 million in capital costs—not to mention potential ongoing operating costs savings—available to the regional economy if it can exert discipline in its development patterns is an extraordinary resource available to Erie and Niagara counties."<sup>41</sup>

Local governments can heed the results of studies that show the cost of increasing infrastructure. With every decision about future development, local officials can opt to limit the expansion of sewer and water lines and encourage growth in areas where infrastructure already exists.

## **PUBLIC HEALTH**

Thoughtful planning has even more far-reaching effects than previously realized. Recent studies have linked Americans' increasing rates of obesity to sprawl. Studies have also shown high rates of asthma near major roadways.<sup>42</sup> The connection between the built environment and public health is receiving greater scrutiny as health costs become an ever greater part of municipal budgets.

One study found that those living in sprawling counties were likely to walk less, weigh more, and have a greater prevalence of hypertension than those living in more compact counties.<sup>43</sup> In addition to health problems associated with a lack of physical activity, there are other health issues that stem from an increase in

*Citizens may not be aware that obesity, air pollution and traffic accidents are all related to public policy decisions that encourage sprawl. Sprawl has encouraged an automobile centered environment in which the air we breathe is polluted, the lakes which provide the water we drink are contaminated by toxic storm water runoff, the roads we drive are unsafe, and the lifestyle we live contributes to obesity and ill health.*

vehicle use, such as degraded air quality from exhaust, and a greater incidence of traffic accidents.

The United States has one of the highest traffic fatality rates per capita among developed nations, with over 41,000 Americans dying from car crashes every year,<sup>44</sup> as more time is spent in cars, riding more and more miles. A study by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute suggests several mobility management tools which, taken together, will measurably reduce traffic, and thereby traffic fatalities. These include offering more rapid transit; ending subsidized parking; offering distance-based insurance; reforming land use planning to increase density and encouraging ride-sharing, bicycling and walking.<sup>45</sup>

Erie County's proposed budget for 2006 indicates that nearly half of the County's state-mandated expenditures is designated for Medicaid costs. These costs have risen from \$127 million in 2000 to more than \$193 million in the 2006 budget.<sup>46</sup> Clearly, steps to improve public health could be considered fiscally prudent in light of these figures.

*“Sprawl has many harmful effects. By many definitions, sprawl has been shown fairly consistently to degrade wildlife habitat, threaten agricultural productivity, and raise the cost of public services at all levels of government. Measuring sprawl, identifying where it is worsening, and moving ahead with measures that will reduce it are thus all important public policy issues for Upstate.”*

(Rolf Pendall, “Sprawl Without Growth: The Upstate Paradox,” The Brookings Institution Survey Series, October, 2003.)

Characteristics of a community such as proximity of facilities, street design, housing density, public transportation, pedestrian or bicycle paths and trails can all promote more physical activity. Local planning that encourages these so-called “active community environments” could go a long way in improving public health and ultimately, in reducing public health costs.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that high municipal costs result from sprawl. We see this in the greatly increased building and widening of roads, the frequent offering of tax incentives to get businesses to relocate, the building of new suburban schools while many in older communities sit vacant, the multiplying of services such as fire and police, the expensive extending of sewers and water lines, and the escalating costs of public health.

To avoid these burgeoning costs, we need careful consideration and action by local officials as well as inter-municipal collaboration. Good public transportation can reduce both traffic congestion and pollution. Consolidation and cooperation, rather than competition, among economic development agencies can benefit the entire region. Limiting the extension of water and sewer lines and encouraging growth and development in areas with existing infrastructure will limit sprawl and reduce expenses. Planning decisions that promote an active lifestyle can improve public health

and save Medicaid dollars. Poor planning—or a lack of planning—is expensive for everyone.

Managing growth in order to avoid the ill effects and high costs of sprawl is urgent for the present and future well-being of our communities.

### **For further information:**

League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara Education Campaign on Sprawl:  
<http://www.lwvbn.org/sprawl/sprawl.html>

Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth: <http://www.regionalframework.com/>

Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council: <http://www.gbnrtc.org>

Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth: <http://www.regional-institute.buffalo.edu/>

Sierra Club Report, “Sprawl Costs Us All”: <http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/report00/>

### **ENDNOTES**

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