

## How Can Urban Sprawl Be Controlled?

As the world becomes increasingly urbanized, individual cities are growing (see p. 553) in area as well as population. Residential areas and shopping centers move into undeveloped land near cities, impinging on natural areas and creating a chaotic, unplanned human environment. More than 7.6 million ha of rural land were developed in the United States between 1970 and 1990, a process that is continuing at the rate of 160,000 ha per year. Urban sprawl has become a serious concern in communities all across the United States. In 1998, voters said "yes" to over 200 state and local ballot initiatives designed to control urban sprawl.

The city of Boulder, Colorado, has been in the forefront of this effort since 1959, when it created the "blue line"—at an elevation of 1761 m (the city itself is at 1606 m)—above which it would not extend city water or sewer services. Boulder's citizens felt, however, that the blue line was insufficient to control development and maintain its scenic beauty in the face of rapid population growth. (In the decade before 1959, Boulder had grown from a population of 29,000 to 66,000 and would reach 96,000 by 1998). To prevent uncontrolled development in the area between the city and the blue line, Boulder began in 1967 using a portion of the city sales tax to purchase land, creating a 10,800 ha greenbelt around the city proper.

In 1976, Boulder went one step further and set a limit of a 2% increase a year on new residences. Two years later, recognizing that planned development requires a regional approach, the city and surrounding Boulder County adopted a coordinated development plan. By the early 1990s, it became apparent that further growth control would need to come in the area of nonresidential building. The plan finally adopted by the city reduced the allowable density of many commercial/industrial properties; in effect, limiting jobs rather than building space.

The benefits of Boulder's controlled growth initiatives have been a defined urban/rural edge; rational, planned development; protection of sensitive environmental areas and scenic vistas; and large areas of open space within and around the city for recreation. And, in spite of its growth control measures, its economy has remained strong. But with restraints on residential growth, many people who found jobs in Boulder were forced to find affordable housing in adjoining communities. As a result, for example, the population of Superior, Colorado, grew from 225 in 1990 to 6,500 in 1998.

As commuting workers—40,000 a day—tried to get to and from their jobs in Boulder, traffic congestion and air pollution increased. In addition, developers had not built stores in the outlying areas, so shoppers flocked into Boulder's downtown mall. But when plans for a competing mall in the suburbs were announced, Boulder officials worried about the loss of revenue to the city if the new mall drew shoppers away from the city. At the same time, sprawl from Denver (only 48 km from Boulder), as well as its infamous "brown cloud" of polluted air, began to spill out along the highway connecting the two communities.

### Critical Thinking Questions

1. Is a city an open or closed system (Chapter 3)? Use examples from the case of Boulder to support your answer.
2. As Boulder takes steps to limit growth, it becomes an even more desirable place to live, which subjects it to even greater growth pressures. What ways can you suggest to avoid such a positive feedback loop?
3. Some people in Boulder think that the next step is for the city to increase residential density within the city. How do you think people living there will accept this plan? What advantages and disadvantages are there to increasing density?
4. To some, Boulder is the story of a heroic battle against commercial interests that would destroy environmental resources and a unique quality of life. To others, it is the story of an elite group building an island of prosperity and the good life for themselves, while shifting the more unpleasant aspects of modern life elsewhere. How do you view Boulder's story, and why?

### References

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