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Portland Is Winning the War on Sprawl

COLLEGE PARK, Md. – The growth management practices employed in Oregon’s largest city over the past 25 years -- perhaps the most comprehensive and sustained effort in the nation -- have proven effective in containing urban sprawl, according to new study by a team of University of Maryland researchers.

“In sum, Portland is winning the war against urban sprawl at the neighborhood scale, or at least appears to have won some important battles,” said the report written by Gerrit-Jan Knaap and Yan Song, researchers at the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education. The study, entitled, “Measuring Urban Sprawl: Is Portland Winning the War on Sprawl?” is published in the current spring edition of the *Journal of the American Planning Association* and is available on the APA web page at: <http://www.planning.org/japa/pdf/JAPAsong.pdf>.

While the researchers concluded that planners seem to be winning their fight against sprawl development in neighborhoods within Washington County, they also noted that “progress against sprawl remains elusive at the regional scale.”

The study, said Dr. Knaap, an economist and professor of Urban Studies and Planning, is significant because it confirms that specific, well-designed and sustained growth management strategies can have their desired effect of changing land use patterns.

The University of Maryland study is one of the first to examine how specific neighborhood characteristics, or “urban form,” change over time. The research focused on neighborhoods within Washington County, which comprises the western portion of the Portland metropolitan area and has been subject to the region’s growth management strategies. The researchers examined data on street design and circulation systems; density; land use mix; accessibility; and pedestrian access. What they found was that neighborhoods in Washington County generally have:

- Increased in single-family dwelling unit density since the 1960s
- Improved the connectivity streets within neighborhoods since 1990; and,
- Improved pedestrian access to commercial areas and bus stops since 1990.

In 1994, for example, new housing in the Portland area averaged five dwelling units per acre. By 1997 and 1998, the density of new development had risen to an average of eight units per acre, exceeding the level projected in the region's guiding "2040 Plan."

The Portland region has been the subject of a nationally recognized set of growth management laws and regulations since the late 1970s. The best known of Portland's land use innovations is its Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) – roughly a circle around the city that divides the growth area inside the UGB from the farming, forest and other natural resource areas outside. Portland's UGB, first established in 1979 and expanded little since then, encompasses 24 cities and parts of three counties. One goal of this land management strategy is to increase the development density inside the UGB in order to protect the area outside the boundary from sprawling development. Another sometimes overlooked goal, however, is to improve the quality of the neighborhoods within UGBs. This study shows that significant progress has been made toward this goal.

Improving the ability of residents to move within the city – by car, by transit or by foot – while simultaneously promoting denser residential development are goals of the Oregon land use effort. The Oregon program predates the more recent "Smart Growth" efforts in Maryland and in other parts of the country, but shares most of the same goals.

"This is a lesson to other states and cities that may be worried about sprawl that thoughtful planning approaches carried out over time can change development patterns for the better," said Dr. Knaap, who also serves as Executive Director of the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education. Dr. Song, formerly at the Maryland Smart Growth Center, is now Assistant Professor in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Despite these findings, the researchers also found that Portland's efforts to control sprawl still has shortcomings. For example, the study found that the level of external connectivity of neighborhoods continues to fall and that mixing of residential and commercial developments – important goals of the Oregon program – remains limited.

"These results ... are encouraging for the neighborhood, but less so for the region," the report concluded.