

**Onondaga Citizens League
Syracuse 2010 Revisited: Land Use Planning
Notes from October 20, 2009, study session**

Presenters: Megan Costa, Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency; Steve Kearney, senior urban planner, City of Syracuse

Megan Costa—

Land development trends and decisions in Onondaga County:

- **Significant increase in new housing units** in suburban and rural towns—Occurring countywide. Since 2000, almost 7,000 new residential parcels created, including 147 major subdivisions over 2,600 acres. Averaging 160 new units outside sanitary district annually.
- **Houses and buildings are larger**—Average home size is up 40 percent in 20 years (even as family size decreases). Average lot size for units built inside sanitary district is almost one acre. Number of rural acres used per new housing unit is almost three times average for metro areas across the country.
- **Water infrastructure expansion**—Between 2001-2008, 290 miles of new water main, 15 new pumping stations, 13 new storage facilities, etc.
- **Sewer infrastructure expansion**—In 2007, more than 57,000 feet of new sewer pipe was installed for new developments. Since 1998, added more than 12,000 acres to the sanitary district. We also have massive network of aging water and sewer pipes, capacity and overflow issues, challenges serving rural areas, and new federal and state permitting requirements.
- **Road expansion**—Added 61 miles of road since 2000, mostly residential streets. Daily vehicle use is up 43 percent since 1990; average commute time is now more than 20 minutes.

Cumulatively: Expansion of our urbanized area. Urban land in Onondaga County has increased 92 percent since 1970. Increased by 50 square miles in 1990s alone. Now seeing suburbanization of third ring of outlying towns (i.e., Onondaga, Lysander). Expansion of water service to towns of Elbridge, Marcellus, and Spafford creating development pressures there.

No regional population growth. Onondaga County has not seen measurable growth since 1970; over last 40 years, seen a net loss.

Population trends: People are leaving city and moving to towns. City population from 1980-2000 went down 50,000; town populations went up 43,000. City has lost 1,000-2,000 residents per year for last 40 years. City households and housing units down; town households and housing units up.

Suburban flight from the city has created significant educational, racial, and wealth imbalances.

Continuing challenges as a result of trends:

- **Reduction in farmland, forests, and open spaces.** Lost 30,000 acres of prime farmland since 1980.
- **Difficulty supporting mass transit.** We need to build mass (community density) to support mass transit.
- **Larger carbon footprint.** Cannot significantly reduce energy without changing development patterns. Private cars make up more than half of our household emissions. Decisions on where

we live and how we live have resulted in much larger per capita carbon footprint than in most metro areas.

- **Demand for expanded facilities and public services.** New and expanded schools, school buses, recreational facilities, fire and police, streets lights, etc.
- **Abandoned neighborhoods, buildings, and job centers.**
- **Concentration of poverty in older urban areas.** More than half of city's housing stock is renter occupied; less than 10 percent of suburban/rural construction is intended as rental or affordable housing.
- **Economic competitiveness.** Need quality of place, attractive neighborhoods, etc., in order to attract new workers, businesses and industry. Poverty and social disparities exacerbated by sprawl hurt these efforts.
- **Limited tax dollars.** New housing and hydrants, hundreds of miles of new water and sewer lines, miles of new streets spreads revenue over larger area. **We are experiencing sprawl without growth, which is both expensive and unsustainable.**

Some good news:

- **Changing attitudes and practices.** Rethink the way we live.
- **Increased awareness of climate change.** Grassroots support for action.
- **Rising gas and energy prices and reliance of foreign oil.** Forcing us to look for alternative sources or change the way we live.
- **Obesity epidemic.** Promotes healthy choices, less car-dependent lifestyles.
- **Trend toward protecting/revitalizing waterways and open space resources.**
- **Community awareness/discussion of regional thinking and planning, government efficiency, etc.**
- **Smart growth principles taking hold.** Both at federal level and county-wide.

New County Land Use Plan will: Define good growth in terms of sustainability; advocate for smart growth; reinvest in existing communities; develop compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods; provide transportation options; discourage expansion of infrastructure; encourage green infrastructure; protect open spaces, farmland and water resources; promote energy efficiency and green building; discuss government modernization and efficiency.

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Steve Kearney—A look at the City of Syracuse

Land Use Plan 2025—began in 2005—was completed this spring and will be reviewed by community groups.

- Maps out 20 classifications for planning. Incredibly complicated process. How to define one area in relation to the areas adjacent to it? Sometimes difficult to make clear divisions, especially with neighborhoods changing and differing perspectives.
- Assessment of the city landscape—what it looks like and what we want it to look like. May support or may contradict existing zoning.
- Working on design guidelines (suggestions) and standards (laws) for various commercial corridor, i.e. South Salina Street, South Geddes, Butternut. Some basic standards throughout, but also adapting to street characteristics.
 - Butternut Street, i.e.—How to promote walkability in heavy-traffic area? Looking at scale of buildings at street level, building setbacks, location of parking lots. Working to

determine what to make guidelines and what to make standards. Working with companies (i.e., Walgreen's) to ensure building design preserves/enhances neighborhood aesthetics.

- Lakefront, i.e.—Changed over time and has begun to change back. How do we look at it in a new way? Has potential to become most valuable property in the city. Created plan for how area should be developed—densely, with mixed-use housing/retail, landscaping.
- Lots of unresolved questions: How to address areas that are successful but not what we want? How to handle heavily industrial areas? What about areas transitioning from industrial to residential? How do we temporarily use land until suitable long-term projects come up? How to influence what happens so that it doesn't become another parking lot?

Have to determine what we're trying to accomplish in a particular neighborhood/area. Walgreen's in Eastwood was a contentious project. Wanted business there but in such a way that preserved character of what neighborhood was striving for. Enforced development/design in a way that promoted walkability.

As city continues to change, land use planning is vital; as projects come in, city is looking at sustainability features.

People need to recognize implications and trade-offs when they opt for sprawl. Good signs: O'Brien and Gere, King & King coming back to city. General trend across country is to look at cities in more positive light.