

Building Invisible Walls

URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARIES

by Beth Humstone

Just as walls once created clear distinctions between town and countryside, today's urban containment strategies aim to keep urban places urban and rural places rural.

Urban containment – the constraint of growth to limited geographic areas – is of great interest to planners for its potential benefits of preserving open space, saving money on public services, reinvesting in cities, and providing a more predictable permitting process. In fact, the American Planning Association estimates that over 100 metropolitan areas have some form of urban containment strategy.¹

Of the three principal kinds of urban containment strategies – urban service areas, greenbelts, and urban growth boundaries – in this article, we'll be focusing on urban growth boundaries.

What is An Urban Growth Boundary?

An urban growth boundary encompasses an area defined on a map where:

- development is permitted at a higher density or intensity than surrounding areas,
- mixed uses are typically encouraged, and
- a full complement of public services is provided.

The size of the area within the boundary typically is configured to provide sufficient land to meet population and land use needs for a 20-year period. Over time, the boundaries may be adjusted – either by expansion or contraction – to meet changing conditions. In the United States, urban growth boundaries have been established through local

1 Arthur C. Nelson, FAICP, and Casey J. Dawkins, *Urban Containment in the United States: History, Models, and Techniques for Regional and Metropolitan Growth Management*, APA, PAS Report 520, March 2004, p. ix. While their report analyzed 131 urban containment plans, the authors noted their study did not cover all such plans in the U.S.

ONE PURPOSE OF AN URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARY IS TO ACHIEVE COMPACT CONTIGUOUS DEVELOPMENT.

initiatives, regional strategies, and state mandates and/or incentives.

Why Plan for Growth Boundaries?

Communities and regions plan for urban growth boundaries in order to meet the goals of their comprehensive plans, because they are mandated or encouraged to do so by state government, or because they have a particular need such as downtown revitalization or protection of important farmland.

Within a comprehensive plan, places are delineated both where growth will be encouraged and development limited. The plan typically contains projections for population, employment, and housing so the community knows how much land is needed for different uses. The plan also identifies existing development, the location and capacity of services, and important environmental and natural resource features.

By designating a growth boundary, a community or region can provide for infill and contiguous growth that reinforces and reinvests in existing settled areas, limits urban services to avoid costly extensions to rural areas, and protects environmental or natural resources outside the center. A few examples:

Lexington, Kentucky uses an urban growth boundary to meet its planning goals. The Lexington urban growth boundary, which includes Fayette County,

was first adopted in 1958 – the oldest growth boundary in the United States. Its primary purpose was to protect the blue-grass and horse farms for which the region is famous by requiring most development to take place within the boundary and severely limiting development outside the boundary.

Over the years, the boundary has been adjusted, and planning and zoning for the area has been altered to meet changing needs and political pressures. The urban growth area was initially 67 square miles (comprising 22 percent of the county's total land area); it is now 75 square miles (30 percent).²

In New Jersey, the State (in conjunction with the National Park Service) established the Pinelands National Reserve in 1979. Within the 1.1 million acre Reserve, a comprehensive management plan guides the management and protection of environmentally sensitive and agricultural lands threatened by sprawling land development. A joint county-state-federal Pinelands Commission reviews local ordinances for consistency with the management plan.

The plan also delineates regional growth boundaries. The Commission uses a transfer of development rights (TDR) program to protect important open space and natural areas, as well as encourage more development in

2 See 2007 Lexington-Fayette County Comprehensive Plan (Appendix, p. 287).

3 TDR provides land owners with development rights (or credits) which can be transferred or sold to allow for increased density in areas where growth is encouraged. For more on TDRs, see Rick Pruetz, "Putting Growth In Its Place With Transfer of Development Rights" in *PCJ* #31 (also included in *Taking a Closer Look: Food, Farmland, & Open Space*; for details: www.plannersweb.com/reprints.html).

4 For more on PDRs, see Gayle Miller & Douglas Kreiger's "Purchase of Development Rights: Preserving Farmland and Open Space," in *PCJ* #53 (also included in the *Taking a Closer Look* publication cited above).

Pinelands' town and village centers.³ To date, over 58,000 acres have been protected and nearly 4,500 development rights have been



A row of housing abuts farmland along the edge of the urban growth boundary in the Portland metro area.



Map of area within the Portland Urban Growth Boundary.



Belmont Dairy in Portland is a mixed-use, mixed-income brownfields redevelopment. Its scale is similar to neighboring homes.

transferred to projects proposed within "Regional Growth Areas." A \$6 million Pinelands Conservation fund also allows for the permanent protection of land through the purchase of development rights (PDR) and easements.⁴

Other examples of regional growth containment strategies can be found in Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Howard County, Maryland; and Broward County, Florida.

Several states either mandate or provide strong incentives for communities (or regions) to designate growth boundaries. Oregon and Washington both mandate that local governments (cities and counties in Oregon; urban counties in Washington) establish growth boundaries, and that land within them be sufficient to accommodate projected growth for a 20-year period. The lands outside the boundary may only allow limited growth and must protect important resource lands, such as farmland and environmentally sensitive areas.

Vermont has put in place strong incentives for municipalities to designate "growth centers" – comparable to urban growth boundaries.⁵ The incentives

⁵ Editor's Note: For more on the Vermont growth centers law, see my interview with Beth Humstone at www.plannersweb.com/vtgrowth.html.

include state permit relief for small projects, priority funding for some state financed services, and tax increment financing districts for these areas.

Since the law was enacted in 2006, six growth centers have been approved. To be eligible to apply, communities must undertake a detailed planning process demonstrating how they will promote development within growth centers as well as restrict development outside of these areas. Vermont places a strong emphasis on growth centers that support existing downtowns and village centers.

Growth Center Issues:

Establishing and managing an urban growth boundary requires careful planning. Issues can arise over boundaries, protecting land outside the boundaries, housing prices and land values, reinvestment within the growth area, develop-

⁶ Mandatory cluster subdivisions are a regulatory tool through which smaller lots are required, with open space and natural areas within the subdivision set aside for protection.

⁷ For details, see "Growth Management In Boulder, Colorado: A Case Study" at: www.bouldercolorado.gov/ (search for "growth management").

ment patterns within the boundaries, and permitting.

1. Boundaries: Just establishing boundaries is a complicated process. In most cases planners determine how much land is needed to meet growth needs for twenty years. This requires assessing:

- how much infill development can take place in existing developed areas.
- what lands are appropriate for new development.
- at what densities or intensities development will occur.

Once the boundaries are in place, there can be pressures to adjust them to meet specific project proposals, land protection strategies, or economic development goals.

2. Protecting Land Outside the Boundaries: Many growth boundaries are established to protect important resource lands that lie outside. However, often the protections put in place by the community are inadequate and low density

sprawl occurs. Among the more successful strategies pursued to limit development in these areas are:

- land acquisition.
- purchase, transfer, or donation of development rights.
- mandatory cluster subdivisions.⁶
- very low density zoning (40 acres or greater minimum size for one home).

In some regions, the county is responsible for land use controls in peripheral areas, while the growth boundary is in the city's jurisdiction. This situation requires coordination between the community and the county. For example, in Colorado, Boulder City and Boulder County have entered into intergovernmental agreements for managing growth in their jurisdictions.⁷

3. Housing Prices and Land Values: Without projections for future growth and adequate land to accommodate that growth at reasonable densities, the establishment of a growth boundary could cause housing prices and land values to

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rise. Pressures to limit growth may come from residents who are concerned about too much density in their neighborhoods. However, if the density isn't high enough, it may be difficult to provide affordable housing and a range of housing types – as well as meet growth targets.

Some communities have required developers within growth boundaries to set aside a certain percentage of units for affordable housing. Others have increased densities within some parts of the growth boundary and moderated growth in other neighborhoods. Most seek to take advantage of federal and state programs offering financial assistance and incentives for affordable housing.

4. Reinvestment Within the Growth Boundary: To accommodate and encourage projected growth within the boundary, communities need to provide adequate services and amenities, as well as incentives for private investment. These need to be in place in conjunction with any limitations on the extension of public services and facilities in areas outside the boundary.

Among the kind of improvements or programs that may be needed:

- repairs to existing facilities, such as sidewalks, water and sewer lines, and parks.
- expansion of transit lines, bike paths, and similar infrastructure.
- rehabilitation of brownfield sites to accommodate new development.

• programs to facilitate the construction of affordable housing.

To pay for these, communities have used tax increment financing or special assessment districts, or have turned to state or federal funding sources.

5. Development Patterns Within the Growth Boundary: One purpose of an urban growth boundary is to achieve compact, contiguous development – minimizing sprawl. However, residents within the boundaries may be resistant to

⁸ For more on accommodating higher densities, see my article, "Getting the Density You Want," *PCJ* #74, Spring 2009.

higher densities. To meet growth targets and address residents' concerns, communities must pay close attention to the regulations for these areas. Techniques such as building to the sidewalk, lowering setbacks, requiring parking in the back, and allowing accessory apartments can help ensure more compact development that retains neighborhood character.⁸

6. Permitting: Predictability and Efficiency: To attract developers to areas within an urban growth boundary, communities need to offer a predictable and efficient permitting process. Some predictability is already built in by the very designation (in the urban boundary planning process) of areas where growth is encouraged and adequate public facilities are in place.

Further incentives can also help. Some communities have eliminated certain requirements (e.g., impact studies or impact fees) for developments planned within the growth boundary. Others have decreased the time it takes to process applications by putting projects within the boundary at the head of the line or giving planning staff more authority to approve these projects.

However, communities should only make these concessions after fully weighing their fiscal and political implications. Perhaps the most important thing communities can provide to developers is a clear and concise set of standards for development review that are consistently followed.

SUMMING UP:

Urban growth boundaries act to focus growth in designated areas while protecting surrounding rural lands from sprawl. They provide an economical and efficient way to grow that also encourages reinvestment and revitalization of downtowns and community centers. ♦

Beth Humstone regularly writes for the PCJ. Over the past 35 years, she has worked as a planning consultant on a wide range of projects in rural communities and small towns.

