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Issue Overview...

...Urban Growth Boundaries

Urban growth boundaries (UGBs) are borders around cities or towns where growth is expected or encouraged. The idea is to limit or discourage development in outlying areas and thus reduce the problems associated with suburban sprawl.

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As of October 1999, three states (Oregon, Tennessee and Washington) and over 100 local governments had adopted some form of urban growth boundaries. Although the particulars differ in each place, generally urban growth boundaries (UGBs) are borders around cities or towns where growth is expected or encouraged. Most UGBs are set for a twenty-year period. The idea is to limit or discourage development in outlying areas and thus reduce the problems associated with suburban sprawl. These limits are sometimes imposed through zoning restrictions or in other cases by prohibiting the extension of infrastructure, such as sewer and water lines, necessary for residential or business development.

The idea of placing boundaries on growth really took hold in Oregon during the early 1970s and has since spread across the West Coast and in selected states east of the Mississippi River. However, there were some isolated examples of restricted municipal development, usually for preservation reasons, prior to Oregon's adoption of UGBs in 1973. Lexington, Kentucky, for instance, has imposed boundaries on growth since 1958 in order to help protect the outlying bluegrass country.

Pennsylvania law does not provide for UGBs along the Oregon model, but recent changes to the state's Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) have introduced a similar concept. Under Act 67, signed into law on June 22, 2000, Pennsylvania municipalities that choose to plan together are now allowed to designate growth areas where they can set aside core regions for dense development. Under this legislation, dense development is defined as residential, mixed-use and commercial development at densities of one unit per acre or more. This provision actually represented a hard-fought compromise between environmental groups, who initially supported Oregon-style UGBs and developers, who fiercely resisted any fixed limits on growth. At an Hourglass forum in May 2000, state Rep. David Steil explained the growth areas concept, by pointing out that "if you want to build [outside the designated areas], you can still build," but that municipalities will not be required to support development outside these core regions with roads or infrastructure.

Actually, even before the passage of Act 67, there have been UGBs in Pennsylvania --in Lancaster County, specifically. Local officials took advantage of what they perceived as a loophole in state law and introduced the concept to the Keystone state in the early 1990s. Within urban areas in Lancaster, the suggested density is five units per acre. But unlike the limits imposed around places like Portland, Oregon, urban growth boundaries in Lancaster are completely voluntary. According to some, the result of voluntary compliance has been less than satisfactory. Franklin & Marshall professor David Schuyler conducted a study where he discovered that between 1994 and 1996, local officials allowed about 60 percent of the county's land development to occur outside designated boundaries (New Era, 12/4/98). However, probing the numbers from another angle, the Lancaster New Era determined that in the 23 county municipalities that had established UGBs, 90 percent of the new growth had been within designated areas. On the other hand, 25 rural townships without any boundaries had allowed 80 percent of their new development in farmland or open spaces (New Era, 12/4/98).

Critics of urban growth boundaries warn that artificial marketplace controls will inevitably drive up housing prices. Several recent studies have highlighted a lack of affordable housing in Portland, Oregon, home to one of the nation's oldest UGBs. Builders also claim that consumers have repeatedly shown that they are not interested in living in high-density areas.

Yet the idea of restricting growth does not appear to frighten most Lancaster County residents. In fact, the opposite is true. In 1998, the Hourglass Foundation conducted a public opinion survey among county residents which indicated that 82 percent of all respondents supported restrictions on growth to reduce sprawl-related problems.

Related Links:

ACT 67 www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/BI/BT/1999/0/HB0014P3711.HTM *groundbreaking Pennsylvania anti-sprawl statute*
 CEI Urban-Sprawl Net www.urban-sprawl.net/ *state-by-state reports that sharply criticize urban growth boundaries*
 Lancaster County Planning Commission www.co.lancaster.pa.us/Planning.htm *county leader in establishing urban growth boundaries*
 RPPI Urban Growth Boundaries Report www.rppi.org/pb11central.html *harshly critical study by right-wing think tank*
 Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse Best Practices www.sprawlwatch.org/bestpractices.html *useful summaries by anti-sprawl group*