

# An analysis of the public discourse about urban sprawl in the United States: Monitoring concern about a major threat to forests

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## Abstract

Urban sprawl has been identified as a serious threat to forests and other natural areas in the United States, and public concern about the impacts of sprawling development patterns has grown in recent years. The prominence of public concern about sprawl is germane to planners, managers, and policymakers involved in efforts to protect interface forests from urban encroachment because the level of concern will influence the acceptance of policies and programs aimed at protecting forests. A new indicator of public concern about urban sprawl is presented, based on computer content analysis of public discussion contained in the news media from 1995–2001. More than 36,000 news stories about sprawl were analyzed for expressions of concern. Overall concern about sprawl grew rapidly during the latter half of the 1990s. The environmental impacts of sprawl were the most salient concern overall, and concern about loss of open space and traffic problems has increased since 1995 as a share of all sprawl concerns. The method described in this paper provides a new approach for planners and policymakers to monitor change in public attitudes about a wide range of social issues over time.

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## 1. Introduction

Urban sprawl may be characterized as relatively low-density, noncontiguous, automobile dependent,

residential and nonresidential development that converts and consumes relatively large amounts of farmland and natural areas (Burchell et al., 1998). Concern about sprawl is not new—archaeological evidence suggests that cities of the ancient Mayans may have suffered from sprawl (Chase and Chase, 1994). However, the intensity and nature of concern about sprawl has evolved over time. In fact, sprawl is

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now considered a “bread and butter” policy issue, similar in importance to crime, education, and the economy (Pew Center for Civic Journalism, 2000).

Urban sprawl has been linked to an array of economic and social costs, including higher costs for provision of public infrastructure such as roads and utilities, more vehicle miles traveled and less cost-efficient transit, and a variety of negative quality of life and social impacts (Burchell et al., 1998). Additionally, the environmental costs of sprawl are becoming increasingly clear. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth (2003) has identified sprawling, land-consumptive development patterns as one of the four main threats to public and private forests in the United States. Of particular concern to forestry and other natural resource professionals, sprawl has been identified as the most significant factor affecting forest ecosystems in the southern United States (Wear and Greis, 2002). In North Carolina, for example, forest cover has declined by more than 1.0 million acres (about 5%) since 1990, with urban development as the predominant cause of the net loss (Brown, 2004). Further, sprawling development has been implicated as the leading cause of habitat loss and species endangerment in the mainland United States (Czech et al., 2000).

Public concern about the social and environmental impacts of sprawl has grown in recent years, as shown by a variety of indicators including surveys and polls, referenda and ballot measures, and the increase of both public and private growth management programs. Surveys are an important indicator of the public’s increasing concern about the social and environmental impacts of sprawl. A series of five surveys commissioned by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism (2000) indicated that the negative effects of sprawl and growth are now edging out more traditional issues, such as crime, in terms of overall impact on the quality of life in local communities. This was a significant increase from a 1994 Pew Center poll.

The growth in referenda and ballot measures also suggest a surge in concern about sprawl and interest in managing growth. For example, Myers (1999) found a more than 50% increase in the number of state and local referenda on smart growth, preservation of open space, and preservation of farmland and historic resources in the 1998 elections over 1996. Voters

approved 72% of the 240 state and local ballot measures related to growth management in 1998, among the highest rates of approval for capital measures put before voters. On Election Day 2000, there were 553 state and local referenda on growth management and related issues, and once again about 72% passed (Myers and Puentes, 2001).

Finally, growing interest in “smart growth” and other approaches to growth management in the United States (Chen, 2000; Weitz, 1999), the rising number of local, regional, and national land trusts, and increases in the acreage conserved in land trusts (Land Trust Alliance, 2001) also signal a shift in attitudes toward sprawl.

The prominence of concern about sprawl is germane to planners, managers, and policymakers involved in efforts to protect urban, rural, and interface forests and other natural resources from urban encroachment. The level of public concern will influence the social and political acceptance of policies and programs aimed at protecting forests, including state forest protection programs (Williams et al., 2004) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service Forest Legacy Program (USDA Forest Service, 2002). In the absence of data that highlight specific concerns about sprawl, planners will be hard pressed to develop politically acceptable management plans, and policymakers are unlikely to take action without an understanding of regional and demographic differences in concern, and how they have changed over time.

This paper describes a new indicator of concern about the impacts of sprawl that allows policymakers and planners to easily, efficiently, and continuously monitor temporal change in attitudes about sprawl, as well as regional and demographic variance. This social monitoring system is based on computer content analysis of the public discussion about sprawl contained in the news media. Sprawl has sparked an extensive public debate in the United States in recent years that is being carried out in a number of forums in society, including public meetings and hearings, legislatures, the courts, demonstrations and protests, and the news media. The media play a dual role in these debates, serving as a direct forum for public discourse on sprawl (through editorials, letters to the editor, etc.) and reporting on discussion occurring in all other forums. Social theorist Jurgen Habermas has

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