

Chapter 5: Urban Sprawl in North America – Where Will it End?



1. Introduction

Would you be surprised if you brought a picnic to a place called Hickory Woods, and there were no woods? Or if you took a drive to Partridge Farms, and there were no farms? What if you went for a walk through the Meadowlands and discovered that there were no meadows?

You might be confused at first, but you would soon grasp what these places had in common: houses—lots and lots of houses. Hickory Woods, Partridge Farms, and the Meadowlands are all housing developments. Across North America, housing developments have been named after the types of land that were cleared in order to build new homes.

For many decades, urban development in the United States and in Canada has been moving out from the cities into **suburbs**. A suburb is an area of housing built at the edge of a city. Developers create suburbs by buying up land outside a city. Developers replace this open space with mile upon mile of housing tracts, shopping centers, and office parks. Often the only way to get from place to place in a suburban area is by car on traffic-clogged roads.

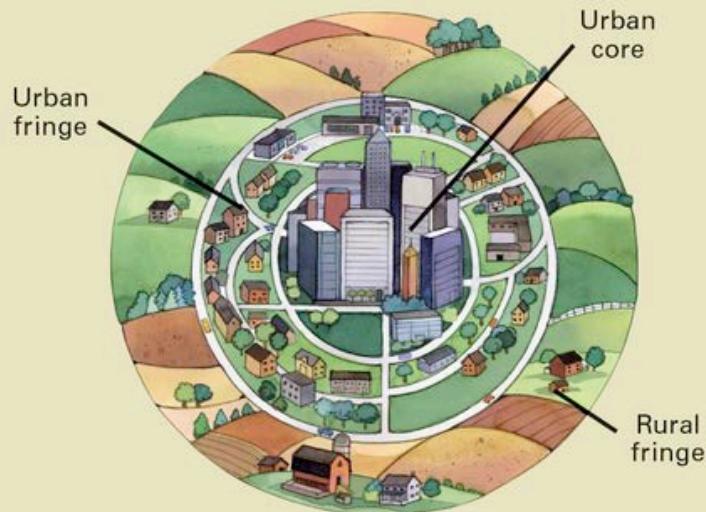
The rapid and often poorly planned spread of cities and suburbs is known as **urban sprawl**. In this chapter, you will learn why urban sprawl happens and how it affects people and the environment. You will also find out how people in three North American cities have dealt with it.

Essential Question

How does urban sprawl affect people and the planet?

Most cities begin as a small, compact urban core, as shown in the center ring of this diagram. As more people move to the city, development pushes outward to form an urban fringe. Beyond this is an area of rural, or open, land. This is called the rural fringe. Keep this diagram in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.

Graphic Organizer

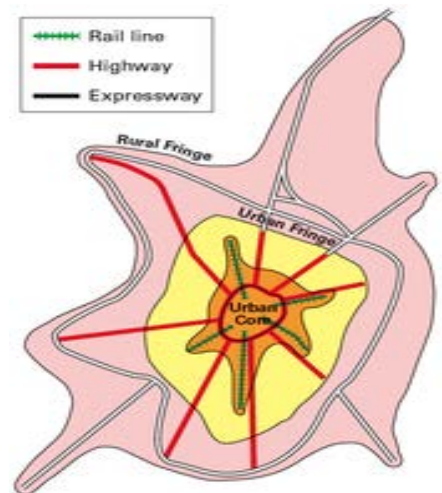


2. The Geographic Setting

“Welcome to LA!” announce signs in the Los Angeles International Airport. Most people seeing these signs are visitors who have arrived in Los Angeles for business or to see the sights. Some people, though, have come to stay. While growth has dwindled in recent years, the LA **metropolitan area** is still growing by more than 70,000 new residents a year. A metropolitan area is a major city and its surrounding suburbs.

Today 8 out of 10 people in the United States and Canada live in a metropolitan area. In the United States, New York City ranks first with more than 18 million people. In Canada, Toronto leads the way with more than 5 million residents. These two metropolitan areas have followed a similar pattern of growth.

The Old Walking City: The Urban Core



The oldest Canadian and American cities were founded during colonial times. At that time, cities were small enough for people to get around by horse or on foot. Homes and workplaces were in one compact geographic area. Because of the high cost of building materials, the front room of a home often served as the owner's workplace. Today that old "walking city" is a city's **urban core**. People often think of this urban core as their city's "downtown" or business district.

► **Geoterm**

metropolitan area a major population center made up of a large city and the smaller suburbs and towns that surround it

rural fringe the small towns, farms, and open spaces that lie just beyond a city's suburbs

suburb a developed area at the edge of a city that is mainly homes. Many suburbs also have stores and businesses.

urban core the older part of a big city. Often the urban core serves as the downtown or central business district of a city.

urban fringe the ring of small towns and suburbs that surround a big city

urban sprawl the rapid, often poorly planned spread of development from an urban area outward into rural areas

By the 1890s, many cities were bursting at their seams with residents. Around that time, electric streetcars and commuter rail lines were developed. People began to build homes near the rail lines, taking trains or streetcars into the city center to work and shop. As a result, the urban core began to bulge outward along rail lines.

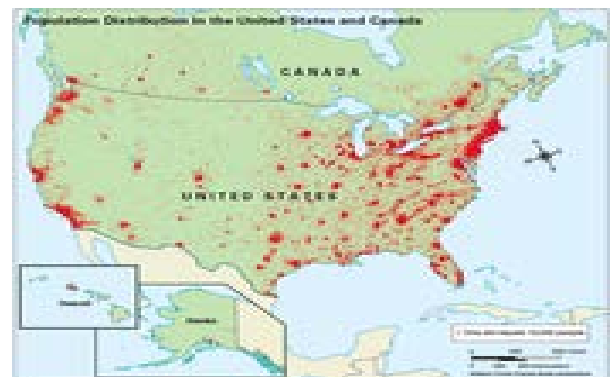
Suburbs Around the City: The Urban Fringe By the 1920s, cars were becoming part of American life, and highway construction boomed as drivers, now in the millions, demanded paved roads. No longer did city dwellers have to live near a rail line to get to their jobs—they could buy a car and commute. As cars became common, people began to build new housing areas farther away from the old urban core. In time, suburbs ringed most cities, forming a new **urban fringe**.

As people moved out of the urban core, some businesses moved out too. The loss of people and businesses led to decay in older city neighborhoods. Meanwhile, people in the suburbs built their own town centers. These new communities were complete with shops, businesses, theaters, and parks.

Where City Meets Country: The Rural Fringe

Beyond the urban fringe lies an area with fewer people. Here small towns mix with farms and open space. These less-developed areas form a **rural fringe** around a metropolitan area but stay connected to the city by roads and highways.

As populations grow, more and more of the rural fringe is developed. New homes, schools, shopping centers, and business parks seem to spring up almost overnight. Some people see this growth as a sign of progress while others see it as harmful urban sprawl. In this chapter, you will explore both points of view.



Metropolitan Areas designated in red

3. The Case for and Against Urban Growth

Suppose a developer wants to build a housing development at the edge of a city. In many cities, a planning commission would need to approve the project. This body is made up of citizens who are chosen to guide a city's growth. At public hearings, the commissioners listen to people who support and oppose a project. Here are some of the arguments that might be heard at such a meeting.

Urban Growth Creates Needed Homes

Everyone knows that when populations grow, new homes are needed. The question is where and at what cost to families.



Those who favor growth argue that the best way to meet the need for new housing is to develop empty land outside a city. In general, land in rural areas is less expensive than city land. Building costs, too, are lower in the country than in the city. These factors keep new homes affordable. In addition, many people want homes outside of cities because they believe that suburbs are better places than cities to raise a family.

Pro-growth people say that urban growth has other benefits as well. New housing projects create jobs for construction workers. And as people move into new homes, they spend money for furniture, garden supplies, and other things. All of this spending is good for local stores. In addition, new homeowners pay taxes, which help fund roads, schools, and other city services.

Urban Sprawl Damages the Environment

Everyone agrees that people need housing, say those who oppose urban sprawl. The question is where and at what cost to the environment.

These people argue that the worst way to meet the need for new housing is to develop open spaces outside a city. Open spaces are not empty land—they are **habitats** for plants and animals. When land is developed, that habitat is lost and with it the wildlife that lived there. The National Wildlife Foundation warns that more than a thousand animal and plant species are in danger of dying out because of habitat loss to urban sprawl.

Anti-sprawl proponents say that urban sprawl creates other problems as well. When housing is spread out, people rely on cars for transportation, and this creates traffic jams as well as air **pollution**. Urban sprawl can also be detrimental to people living in small towns. They often see their taxes rise when nearby land is developed. The extra tax money is needed to pay for roads, schools, and other services required when a small town suddenly grows.



4. Portland, Oregon, 1973

The Willamette Valley in Oregon is 120 miles long and 25 to 40 miles wide and has Oregon's richest farmland. More than 170 crops are grown there. Orchards produce pears, plums, apples, and nuts while fields of sweet corn and green beans mix with colorful flowerbeds and vineyards. The Willamette Valley is not all farmland, though. Oregon's largest city, Portland, is located at its northern edge.

Growth Threatens the Willamette Valley

Portland is known as the “City of Roses” because of the fragrant rose bushes that fill its parks and gardens. Still, Portland is very much a big city, with a downtown and many businesses. Its attractions include colleges, museums, shopping areas, and a beautiful geographical setting. And, like all big cities, Portland has a lot of people.

It was Portland's growing population that first began to worry people in the 1960s and 1970s. They feared that urban sprawl would soon gobble up the farms and forests of the Willamette Valley.

A Difficult Decision: How Best to Grow?

In 1973, Governor Tom McCall called on the state legislature to deal with the issue of population growth. “We are in dire need of a state land-use policy,” McCall said. Oregon lawmakers agreed, but they weren't sure how best to control urban growth.

There were many options that the lawmakers might have considered. For example, one might have been to allow urban growth to continue, but with a condition: for each acre of land that was developed, the state government would require that another acre be set aside to be preserved as open space.

A second option might have been to create firm boundaries around cities. Once this was done, no new development would be allowed outside these boundaries.

A third option was to ban all development in some rural areas, such as the Willamette Valley. Growth could be allowed in other areas that did not seem so valuable.

Whatever lawmakers decided, one thing was clear. Their actions would affect the future of Oregon's people and environment.

5. Portland Plans for Smart Growth

In 1973, Oregon became the first state in the United States to create a set of [land use](#) planning laws. These laws promote an approach to land use planning known as *smart growth*. The basic idea of smart growth is to control sprawl by making better use of land that has already been developed.

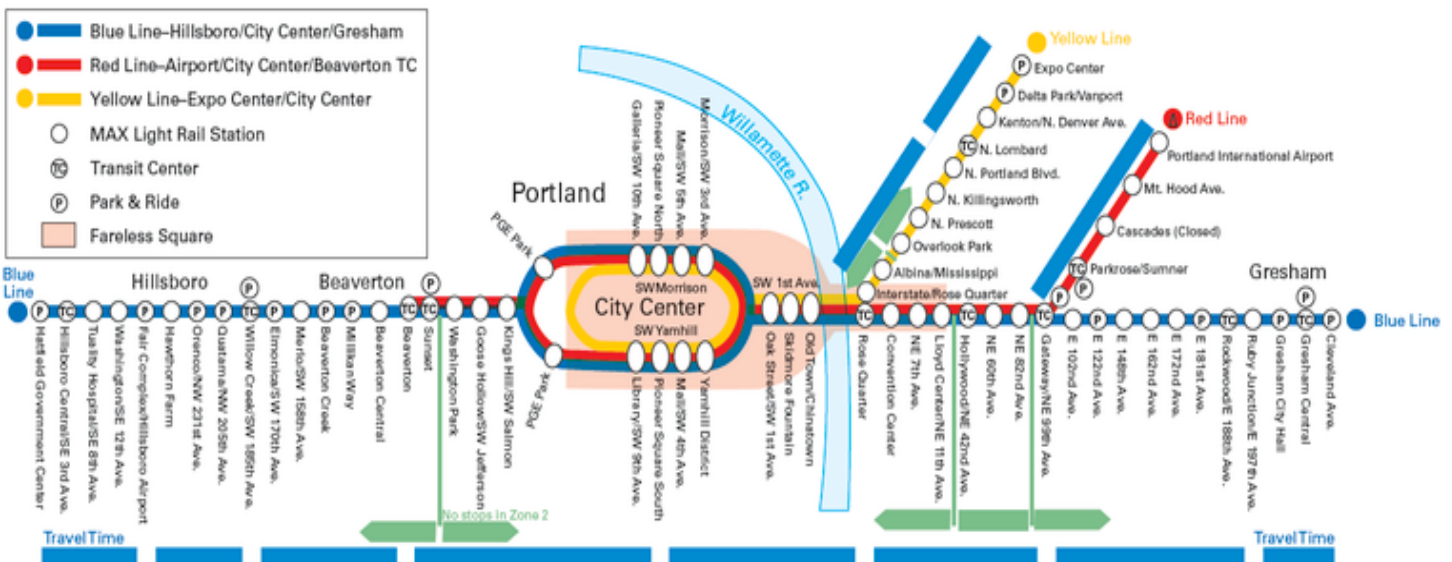
Urban Growth Boundaries Limit Sprawl

Smart growth in Oregon began with a law creating [urban growth boundaries](#). An urban growth boundary is a legal border that separates urban land from rural land. New development is allowed inside the growth boundary but is not allowed on rural land outside the boundary. An urban growth boundary was drawn around the Portland metropolitan area. It included not only the city of Portland, but also several suburbs. To control growth inside this boundary, voters created a new regional government called Metro. Its main job is to plan growth inside the growth boundary.

Mixed Use Helps Portland to Grow Up, Not Out

Oregon's land use planning laws have worked well. Today Portland is a compact city with controlled growth. Its downtown area is friendly to pedestrians and has hundreds of beautiful parks and open spaces. Portland also has a well-planned [public transit system](#). As a result, its buses and streetcars make it easy to get around without a car. These improvements have attracted many new residents to Portland. To provide housing for more people, the city is developing up, not out. Older, run-down neighborhoods have been revived with new [mixed-use developments](#). This is development that combines housing and businesses in one area, somewhat like cities founded during colonial times. For example, a building today might have shops and offices on the ground floor and apartments above.

Supporters of mixed-use development argue that it encourages people to live, work, and shop in one neighborhood. In addition, people can walk to jobs or shops instead of driving, and this reduces not only traffic, but also air pollution. Opponents, however, argue that mixed-use development limits the kind of new homes that can be built. People who want a big house on a large lot will not find their dream home in a city apartment over a business.





6. Toronto, Ontario, 1999

Toronto, Ontario, is Canada's largest metropolitan area as well as its primary business center. Toronto leads Canadian cities in printing and publishing. Television and movie production are important as well. With more than 5 million people, the city has been growing for decades. For a time, Toronto managed this growth by stretching up, but soon it began to sprawl out.

Building Up and Filling In Limits Sprawl

Toronto has a long history. It began as a French fur-trading post in colonial times. Later, Americans who had been loyal to the British in the American Revolution and fled to Canada founded a city there. In the 1800s, Toronto became a factory town and later still it developed into a banking center. By the 1960s, though, its urban core was run down. Something had to be done to keep the downtown alive.

In 1965, Toronto announced a plan to renew its urban core. The plan encouraged **infill** over sprawl. Infill involves filling in empty or run-down parts of a city with new development. Building an apartment high-rise on an empty lot is an example of infill. So is building a shopping mall on the site of an old amusement park.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Toronto rebuilt its urban core. The new buildings included some of the world's tallest skyscrapers. These towers had offices, shops, museums, parking, and housing.

Rapid Growth on Toronto's Rural Fringe

Toronto kept growing in the 1980s and 1990s. Instead of building up, though, it began to spread out. Urban sprawl took over farmland, forests, and wetlands. Traffic clogged suburban highways, increasing air pollution. Traffic and air quality both got worse as the years went by.

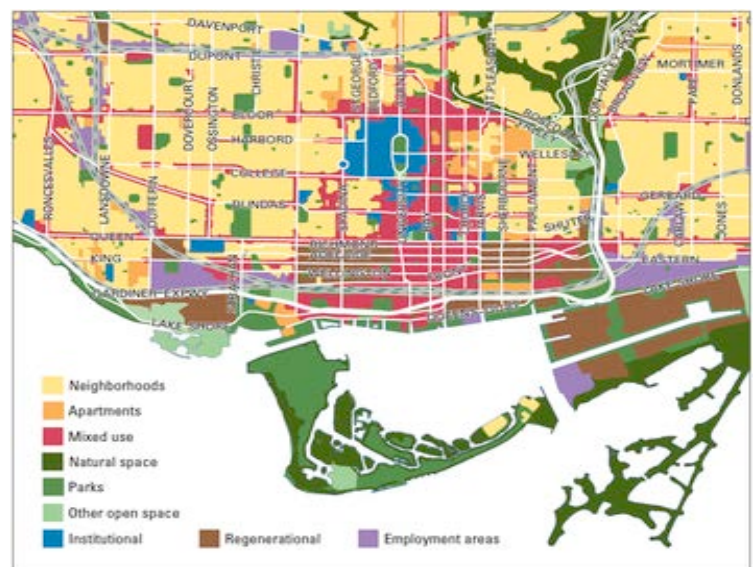
By 1999, officials in Toronto knew they had to do something to control sprawl. They considered many ideas. One was to reduce sprawl by encouraging smart growth ideas like mixed-use development. Another idea was to ban all growth in rural areas. A third was to allow a lot of growth in part of the city while limiting it in the rest. Whatever was decided would shape Toronto's future.

7. Toronto Plans for 30 Years of Growth

On May 27, 2002, the mayor of Toronto gave a speech about urban growth. "Toronto is a great city, and we want it to stay that way," he said. "Where we go from here depends on all of us." Then he introduced a document known as the Official Plan. It contained a plan for controlling Toronto's growth for the next 30 years.

Planning for Future Growth

The Official Plan took three years to complete. The effort was led by Toronto's city council, which wanted to hear what residents had to say about the plan. Town hall meetings were held around Toronto to give people an opportunity to express their thoughts. An invitation in French, Polish, Chinese, Portuguese, and English was published for people's suggestions and ideas. The council also received advice from land use experts from Toronto and elsewhere in the province. The result was a plan that allows some growth in some places.



The Official Plan allows growth to continue in 25 percent of the city. Most areas targeted for growth are in the urban core and include the old downtown and the waterfront area on Lake Ontario. Growth is also allowed in four "centers" in outlying parts of the city. Public transportation is to be expanded in order to link these growth areas together.

In the remaining 75 percent of the city, development is to be limited. This area includes the city's residential neighborhoods. It also includes waterways, parks, and open space.

The Official Plan also lays out what kind of growth Toronto should encourage. New developments are to be mainly infill and mixed-use projects. Such projects will bring new homes, shops, and businesses into the urban core.

Concerns About Infill

Supporters of the Official Plan believe that it offers a sensible approach to controlling sprawl. But while infill sounds like a good idea, not everyone supports it. Developers raise concerns about its hidden costs, such as the extra time and money needed to clean up abandoned sites. This work must be done before new development can begin. And if a site is polluted with toxic chemicals, these costs can rise very quickly.

People living in neighborhoods marked for growth raise a different concern about infill. They worry that building new developments on empty lots will make the urban core more crowded.

8. Atlanta, Georgia, 1998

In 1996, Atlanta, Georgia, hosted the summer Olympic Games. People came from around the world to watch the events. They filled hotels and restaurants and cheered the athletes in new stadiums and arenas. Few visitors, however, traveled outside the city. Only those who did could see why Atlanta has been called “the fastest-spreading human settlement in history.”



Rapid Growth Leads to Traffic Jams

During the 1990s, the Atlanta metropolitan area boomed. Atlanta led the nation in new jobs, homes, and highways. It also led the nation in urban sprawl. Hundreds of acres of forest were cleared each week to make room for new residents. Without controls on development, housing tracts pushed deep into the rural fringe, destroying habitats for plants and animals.

The people who bought these new homes relied on cars to get around. Atlanta's commuters drove more miles every day than drivers anywhere else in the world. If you added up all the miles that Atlanta commuters drove in just one day, they would stretch all the way to the sun. There were traffic jams night and day.

Air Pollution Threatens Highway Funds

All those vehicles traveling along Atlanta's roads also led to air pollution. The air became so polluted that it caused asthma attacks and made people suffering from other respiratory ailments much worse.

Atlanta's dirty air also violated the Clean Air Act. This is a federal, or national, law that sets limits on air pollution. In 1998, the federal government ordered Atlanta to meet the law's clean air standards. If it did not, Atlanta would lose federal highway funds, which the federal government gives to cities to improve roads.

Atlanta had to make a decision. One option was to do nothing to control growth, but this would mean giving up federal highway funds. Another was to continue growing but to create a regional transportation system. Such a system could cut pollution by getting people out of their cars. A third option was to limit sprawl in some areas while requiring mixed-use development in others. Over time, this option could also reduce car travel and air pollution.

9. Atlanta Fights Pollution with Public Transit

In 1998, Roy Barnes was elected governor of Georgia. In his campaign, he promised to do something about the problems caused by sprawl. He made it clear, though, that he was not an enemy of development. “I'm no tree hugger,” he said. “I'm a businessman who thinks you can't let your prosperity slip through your fingers.”

A Regional Transportation Authority Is Born

Governor Barnes wanted Atlanta to continue to grow. At the same time, he believed it was important for the city to meet Clean Air Act standards, so he focused on public transit.

Under Barnes' leadership, the state created the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. This agency had three goals. First, reduce traffic jams. Second, reduce the amount of air pollution caused by cars. Third, reduce poorly planned development.

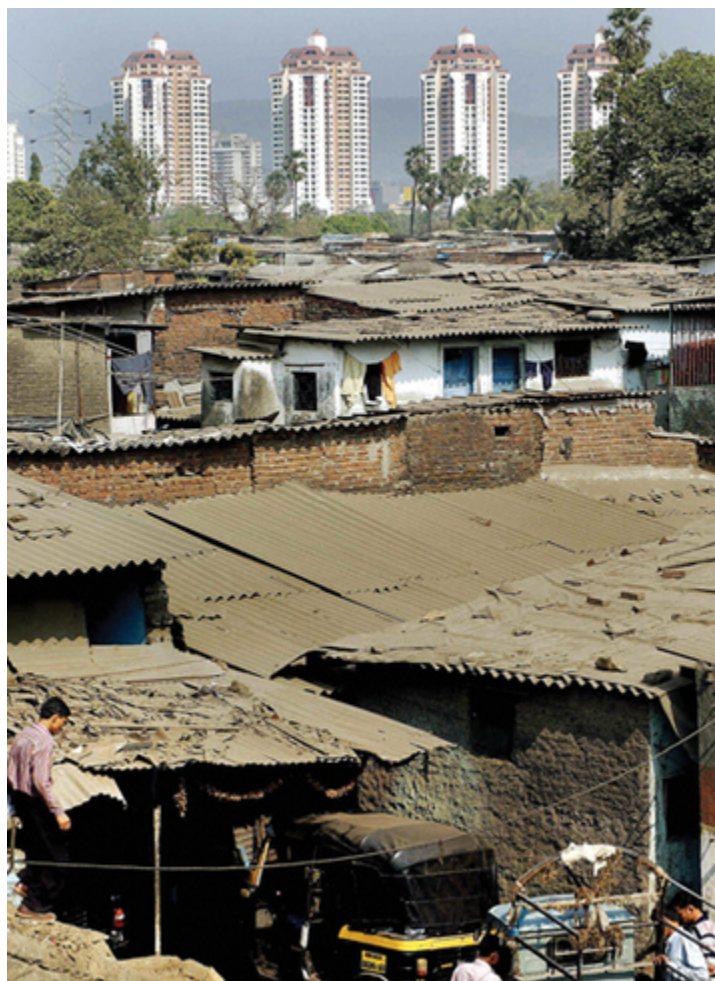
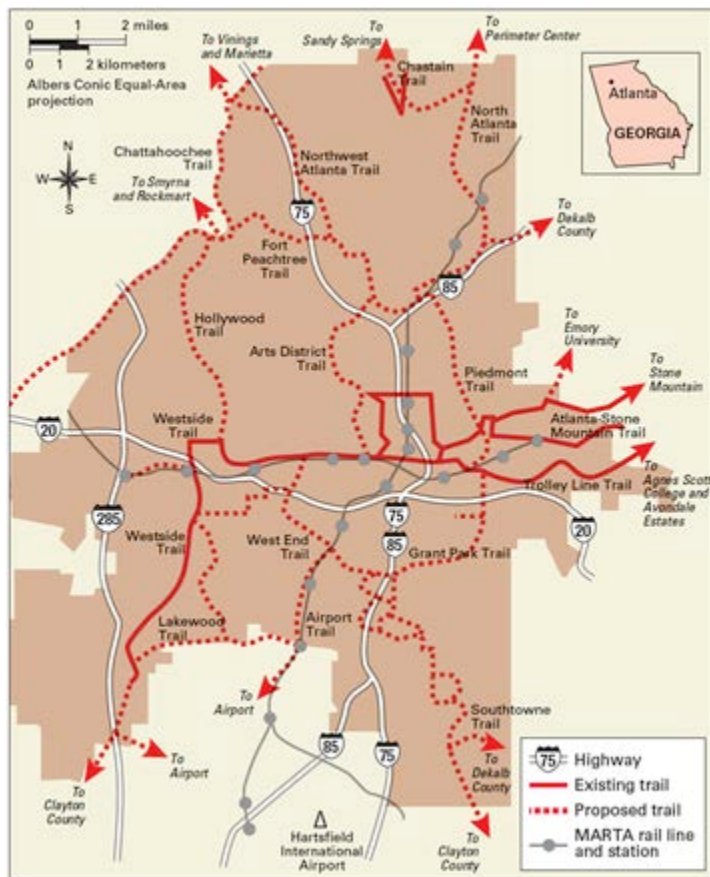
The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority works in conjunction with other government agencies to encourage people to get out of their cars. One approach has been to promote mixed-use development. As you read, in mixed-use neighborhoods, people can walk to shops and jobs. Another approach has been to encourage people to walk or bike instead of drive. New bike trails and walking paths have been constructed for just that purpose.

In addition, the region's public transit system had been expanded. The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) is a system of trains and bus lines that serves the entire Atlanta region. New rail lines have been built, and a regional subway system has been expanded. New buses and bus routes have also been added. And the new buses don't pollute the air as much as older ones.

Atlanta Continues to Grow

The growth of public transit has helped Atlanta meet federal air-quality standards. It has not slowed growth, though.

Urban sprawl remains a hot issue. Many people think the region should do more to control sprawl, which has increased pollution and has strained the water supply. In contrast, others say that Atlanta is doing just fine. They point out that there is new mixed-use development for those who want it. But they also think that people who want to buy new houses on the rural fringe should be allowed to do so.



Summary - Beginning to Think Globally

In this chapter, you learned about urban sprawl. You learned that cities grow outward, expanding from the urban core to the urban fringe to the rural fringe. You also visited three metropolitan areas in the United States and Canada and saw how those areas are trying to deal with growth.

Cities Continue to Sprawl

The United States and Canada are still growing. As their populations increase, so does their need for housing. Even though sprawl isn't good for the environment, development continues to push into the rural fringe.

As you have seen, sprawl continues for many reasons. Land and building costs are lower in the rural fringe than in the urban core. Some people prefer suburban homes to city apartments. And others simply don't like laws that limit where people can choose to live.

Sprawl Is a Worldwide Problem

Cities around the world are struggling with the issue of urban sprawl. The Indian city of Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) is a good example. In 1950, Mumbai had barely 3 million people. By 2007, the city's population had expanded to more than 20 million people. All of those people could no longer fit into the old urban core. By 2025, Mumbai's population is expected to increase to 26 million people. The only way the city will be able to house so many people is by sprawling outward.

Mumbai is not alone. Over the last century, the percentage of people living in urban areas around the world has rapidly increased. In 1900, about 14 percent of people worldwide

made their homes in cities. By the end of 2008, roughly half of the world's population was living in urban areas. Think about these statistics as you examine the map of urban populations around the world in the next section.



Global Connections

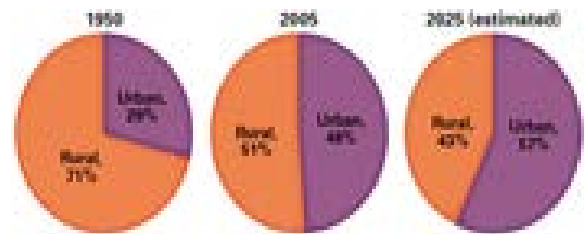
This map shows metropolitan areas around the world. Cities with more than 5 million people are marked with large black dots. The circle graphs show the change in percentages of urban and rural world populations over time. The bar graph shows how the populations of six cities have grown over time.

Why might some regions have more metropolitan areas than others?

Wealthy regions tend to have more large cities than poor ones. That's because the majority of jobs in wealthy countries are found in cities. Climate, landforms, and vegetation zones also play a role. There aren't many big cities in extremely cold or arid regions. Nor are there many urban areas in mountains or rainforests.

Why are there so many cities with more than 5 million people in Asia?

The simple answer is this: Asia has more people than any other continent. More than 3 billion people live in Asia. Together, China and India are home to 4 out of 10 of the world's people. Also, the economies of many Asian countries are shifting from farming to manufacturing and trade. Such economic activity generally takes place in urban settings. As a result, metropolitan areas are growing rapidly in Asia.



What special problems might urban sprawl create for poor countries?

Poor countries often have little control over how their cities grow. People moving to a city simply build homes wherever they can find space. In addition, the governments of such countries lack funds to provide growing cities with basic services, such as clean water, sewers, paved roads, electricity, medical care, and schools.

