



CONNECTICUT PARTNERSHIP FOR
BALANCED GROWTH

Balanced Growth Starts with Balanced Facts

The following are a number of statements (Sprawl Myths) we regularly hear that support the argument that we are sprawling. Each Sprawl Myth is followed by a Balanced Growth Fact.

Sprawl Myth: Connecticut grew its “urban footprint” by 15% in only 17 years.

Balanced Growth Fact: UConn’s satellite mapping of the entire state shows that **“developed” land cover grew from 16.3% to 18.7%** from 1985 to 2002 (i.e., 17 years). Yes, this is almost a 15% increase but it does not mean 15% of CT was developed during that time. Also, more than half of this new developed land cover took place in the 5-year boom period from 1985 to 1990.

Sprawl Myth: We are sprawling across Connecticut and eating up all our remaining open space.

Balanced Growth Fact: Connecticut’s home owners and businesses are “sprawling” but doing so within relatively close proximity to our major transportation lines – not across the state. UConn’s satellite mapping shows that most development has occurred within transportation corridors and most of the state (80% of our 3.5 million acres) is still undeveloped.

Sprawl Myth: We’re losing all our farmland at a rate of 9,000 acres per year.

Balanced Growth Fact: The source of this statement is the agricultural census (a written survey every five years of every known farmer) conducted by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA).

- ◆ The farmland loss numbers for Connecticut come from comparing the 1997 census to the 2002 census. BUT, the USDA in 2002 “recalibrated” its 1997 census because of poor survey returns. With the statistical recalibration, the loss for that 5 year period was only 2,159 acres (432 acres/yr). The same census shows also a gain of agricultural land in CT between 1992 and 1997.
- ◆ Also, the USDA census “data” on “lost farmland” does not track land that is in agricultural use, but tracks “land owned by farmers.” The data shows that 46% of the land owned by farmers is not farmed – it’s in forests and buildings, so land that is reported to be lost by farmers is just as likely to be forest land or buildings as it is to be farmland.
- ◆ UConn’s land cover satellite data shows that between 1985 and 2002, **agricultural land cover type GREW from 11.1% of CT to 12%**. Is that an 8% increase in farmland?

Sprawl Myth: Residential use of land or urbanized land has grown by 102% percent (i.e., doubled) over the thirty-year period of 1970 to 2000, while population increased by only 12%.

Balanced Growth Fact: This statement is often based on the Connecticut Metropatterns report. The report analyzes the growth in “census tracts” defined as “urban.” It accurately counts the number of such census tracts, which did grow by 102% from 1970 to 2000. But this is far different than the statement that “residential use of land” or even “urbanized land” doubled.

- ◆ The statement implies that we are building more houses than population increases. However, it does not recognize that homes are not built to accommodate population growth; they are built to accommodate household formations. Population may have only increased by 12% between 1970 and 2000, but housing units and households both grew by 40%. Even with zero population growth we could experience residential growth.
- ◆ It is unfortunate that these misrepresentations of data occurred because the CT Metropatterns report also highlights serious issues, such as the growing income gap between urban and suburban populations and significant economic issues faced by our cities.

Sprawl Myth: Connecticut is growing too fast and in all the wrong places.

Balanced Growth Fact: Connecticut is one of the slowest growing states in the nation. In 2006, the nation saw 1.82 million new housing units built, but CT’s share was only 9,600 units. From 2000 – 2004, CT ranked 48th in the nation in terms of the number of housing units built per growth in population. We are simply not growing, and our lack of housing growth has caused higher home prices and affordability issues, a key reason why young people, ages 18-34, are leaving the state. (CT leads the nation in the percentage of its young people leaving the state.)

Sprawl Myth: Property taxes are driving poor land use decisions because new housing development does not pay its own way as a result of increases in school age children. As a result, towns chase after commercial development for property tax revenue, furthering sprawl.

Balanced Growth Fact: A comparison of U.S. Census data related to the school age population and the State Department of Economic and Community Development housing permit data demonstrates that housing development and school age children cannot be driving sprawl. For example, the Capitol Region (Hartford and the 28 surrounding communities) in 1970 had 249,229 persons between the age of 0-19 (school age and younger), making up 37.2 percent of the region’s total population. In 2000, the 0-19 age cohort had declined to 195,943 persons making up only 27.1 percent of the region’s total population. That is a 21.5% decline in this population cohort, or a loss of 53,286 school-age and younger children. Yet, from 1970 to 2000, the Capitol Region added 81,802 housing units to its existing housing stock. If new housing had been generating the large numbers of school age children, even at a rate of 1 child per new housing units, the region should have gained 81,802 school age children, not a loss of 53,286 school age children and younger. Based on this data it is hard to say that housing development and school age children are driving increases in property tax or sprawl.

Conclusion: If we, as a state, want to better plan for and encourage economic growth, then we need to start with sound research, agreed upon definitions, and a clear vision for our desired outcomes. Connecticut can balance growth and preservation. For smart growth to truly be responsible, Connecticut must grow.