



Land Use and Planning Report

Colorado
State
University

Extension

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<http://dare.colostate.edu/pubs>

INFORMED GROWTH FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

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- *Growth in population does not necessarily improve human welfare; development does.*
- *Growth in population does not necessarily increase per capita consumption of natural resources; sprawl does.*
- *Informed growth maximizes the positive and minimizes the negative aspects of growth.*

Introduction

In the 1999-2000 Colorado legislative session some two-dozen pieces of legislation related to growth management were proposed. Depending upon who is counting, two relatively minor considerations passed. In August 2000, polls indicated that two of three Coloradoans supported Amendment 24: Voter Approval of Growth. On November 7, 2000 Amendment 24 was defeated at the ballot box by about two of three voting Coloradoans (1,193,432 to 516,947). Does this imply that issues of growth are no longer of concern to Coloradoans? Not likely. On November 28, 2000 Governor Bill Owens announced a growth management plan with strong similarities to Amendment 24 to be crafted for potential consideration in the next session of the Colorado legislature.

In this brief article some of the common costs and benefits of growth are discussed with special consideration to families and communities. Growth is distinguished from development and from sprawl. Finally, general strategies to maximize the positive aspects of growth while minimizing its negative attributes are discussed.

What is growth?

Growth is an increase in size. In this context, growth is an increase in population driven by relatively favorable economic conditions in Colorado. Growth should not be confused with development or with sprawl. Growth in population does not necessarily imply an improvement in human welfare: that is called development. Growth in population does not necessarily imply an increase in per capita consumption of natural resources, including land: that is called sprawl. Growth creates both opportunities and challenges for families and communities. Some of the benefits and costs of growth are easily quantified (e.g., miles driven, cost of community services) and some are not (e.g., cultural diversity, choice, air quality). Some are directly observed in the market place (e.g., jobs, income) and some are not (e.g., rural lifestyle, family dynamics, volunteerism).

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Colorado is the fifth fastest growing state in the country. Six of the ten fastest growing counties in the United States are found in Colorado. Strong local economic conditions and our abundant and unique natural resource base drive Colorado's remarkable population growth. Colorado ranks second (to Washington D.C.) in the number of residents with a college education. Money magazine ranks Denver its fifth best city for doing business in 2000. Population growth in Colorado is driven by increases in high tech service jobs, second homes, telecommuters, and retirees. Our natural amenities coupled with the business climate are what bring this growth to the state.

What can be good about growth?

Population growth can be associated with improvements in a number of measures of family and community welfare. Such improvements may include: greater cultural and demographic diversity, more and better employment opportunities, higher average income and wealth, better and more variety of public services (e.g., parks, schools, libraries, recreational facilities, roads, sewers, telecommunications, transportation, government programs, fire and police protection), better and more variety of private services (e.g., retail establishments, health care, religious and social organizations), and lower average tax burden.

What can be bad about growth?

Population growth can also be associated with a deterioration of a number of measures of family and community welfare. Growth can spur deterioration in the natural resource base, including water, air and land. If deterioration in the natural resource base is proportional to the rate of increase in population, then neither the existing population nor newcomers are living within the regenerative capacity of their resources. If the deterioration occurs at a greater rate than the increase in population, then newcomers are using more resources than current residents. This is a case of sprawl. For example, population growth may imply more people driving on local roads, more traffic congestion, more accidents, more road repair expenses and more air pollution. If each person is also driving more miles, or these measures increase by more than the rate of population increase, it is likely that sprawling growth is the culprit.

Sprawling growth can also directly influence human relationships at different levels. More time spent driving implies fewer hours for other pursuits including:

work, recreation, sleep, time with family, and volunteer activities. The children of parents squandering more time commuting may spend more time in day care facilities than they might otherwise spend, affecting family relationships. Parents expending more time commuting may invest less time nurturing relationships with their neighbors and community. People working in one community and living in another will have less time and affinity to volunteer as soccer coaches, library assistants, and mentors where they live. Engaged, vibrant communities are created and nurtured through the investment of time, skill, energy and money by their residents. Bedroom communities and neighborhoods, typical of sprawl, are more likely to lack features of healthy communities.

Informed Growth:

What can we do to maximize the good and minimize the bad aspects of growth?

Growth that simply pays for itself should be considered neutral to new and current residents alike. Growth that more than compensates for itself should be encouraged and growth that does not should be discouraged. That is, the tax burden each resident bears for providing a given level of services should not increase with population growth. When growth implies increases in the average affluence of residents and by taking advantage of economies of scale in public service provision, it could be hoped that the tax burden per resident would decrease for a given level of services or that more services could be provided for the same tax burden.

However, as has been described above, the level of taxes and services are not the only, or perhaps even the most important, implications of growth affecting families and communities affected by growth. In order to plan for informed growth, families must take into account the full costs and benefits of change in their communities. Increases in choice and opportunity must be weighed against increases in resource use, air pollution and time spent in automobiles. Such accounting will increase the likelihood that carefully planned matrices of higher density, largely self-sustaining and less automobile dependent neighborhoods embracing public values for natural amenities and human services as well as private property rights will create more desirable communities than will sprawling growth driven by short term financial gain now commonly encountered on Colorado's landscape.