

## The Death of Sprawl?

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 06 September 2005 18:00

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Thomas Hylton wanted to change things in Pennsylvania. So he made a picture book. About urban sprawl. It's the kind of idea that's at once radical and obvious. Radical because we expect books about sprawl to be academic and dry and concerned with public policy and statistics about pollution, commutes, lost farmland, and population density. Obvious because sprawl is really, really ugly.

"Sprawl is something that really lends itself to pictures," Hylton said. "I knew I wanted to do a book that people would *read*."

Hylton will be participating in a Partners in Horticulture symposium, "Shaping the Future: Planning for Sustainable Communities," in Davenport on Friday, September 16. Participants can choose between two three-hour sessions, beginning at 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Hylton will give a one-hour presentation that will be followed by a panel discussion featuring representatives of organizations such as the Bi-State Regional Planning Commission, the cities of Davenport and Rock Island, DavenportOne, and Scott County.

"Education is always the first step to make changes," said Becky Bray, county extension education director for the Scott County office of Iowa State University Extension (one of the organizations involved in Partners in Horticulture). "People aren't educated about what the possibilities are."

What Hylton offers is a fresh perspective on an issue that everybody is familiar with in an everyday way. In a phone interview last week, Hylton said he was struck by what he saw on postcards and in picture books. "You're not going to find pictures of sprawl!" in gift stores, he said. "What we have pictures of is what's disappearing" – scenic farmland, bustling, pedestrian-friendly downtowns, beautiful natural areas, and quaint, tightly knit neighborhoods.

Hylton also remembered reading that President Gerald Ford was once convinced to save part of an old-growth forest because of pictures. So he decided to make that picture book about sprawl.

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Hylton's 1995 book *Save Our Land Save Our Towns* contrasts those comforting neighborhood images with photographs of sprawl – congested freeways, parking lots, cold office parks and strip malls, and subdivisions with massive lots and cookie-cutter houses dominated architecturally by their garages. The comparison makes painfully clear what most of us instinctively know: that our development patterns create environments that are ugly. They are also, Hylton argues, unsustainable.

The book was an immediate success. It was distributed to every state lawmaker in Pennsylvania – “Can you imagine sending someone a planning book?” Hylton said – and the state passed bills allowing municipalities to join their planning efforts. Now 500 municipalities participate in joint planning and zoning. The state also passed brownfields legislation, paving the way for redevelopment of polluted properties.

While the book was geared toward his home state – its subtitle is “A Plan for Pennsylvania” – Hylton quickly recognized that its lessons were universal. “Virtually everybody has the same problem,” he said.

The book is now in its fourth printing. “Every time I print, I change it,” Hylton said. “I keep it up-to-date.”

The author is a journalist by trade, and he won a Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for his newspaper editorials. His prose is clean, direct, and blunt, as the book's opening paragraph shows: “Successful people and successful corporations set goals and make plans to achieve them. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has no plan. In Pennsylvania, the government spends billions of tax dollars annually and employs more than 650,000 people without having a clear notion of what it wants to achieve. Individual state agencies attempt to solve problems in their jurisdictions, but they often work at cross-purposes with each other, wasting enormous amounts of time and money in the process.”

It is in that context that cities, states, and the country have let sprawl get out of hand.

But how do you stop sprawl? Hylton thinks there are two ways: government regulation and culture change, with the latter being far more important. “The culture changes when somebody comes up with a better product and people decide they like it,” Hylton said. “And government tries to push the envelope.” Governments, he said, can engage in genuine comprehensive planning, using tools such as growth boundaries that limit sprawl and encourage infill development.

The trouble is that *cultural* change is hard to effect; it *happens* more than something *causes* it.

But the good news is that sprawl's heyday seems to be gone. Hylton noted that in 1993, when he started his *Save Our Lands Save Our Towns* project, there were only five “neo-traditional” developments – self-contained neighborhoods that provide residents all they need – in the United States. Now there are roughly 600. And after three decades of losing population, traditional downtowns started to once again gain residents in the 1990s.

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Those trends are reflected here, too. Davenport hopes to try its own neo-traditional development – Prairie Heights – and downtown development, from housing to business to cultural attractions, is a priority throughout the community. “The culture is slowly changing,” Hylton said.

Yet sprawl continues unabated on the outskirts of the Quad Cities, and the creators of the City of Davenport’s pending comprehensive plan refuse to set a barrier beyond which development won’t be allowed. (See “Davenport’s Comprehensive Plan Discourages Sprawl ... Vaguely,” *River Cities’ Reader* Issue 536, July 6, 2005.)

But anti-sprawl activists can take some solace in the fact that “demographics are now in favor of traditional towns,” Hylton said. The post-World War II suburban boom was spurred by family dynamics – a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and children – that are no longer prevalent. “The households that made suburbia work are now a minority,” Hylton said.

And often circumstances are as important as great ideas or great leaders. “There’s nothing more persuasive [as an argument against sprawl] than gas prices doubling,” Hylton said.

But if the culture is swinging back toward a traditional town structure on its own, what can the Davenport symposium hope to accomplish? After all, sprawl is a concept that’s been debated in the Quad Cities for years – with little resulting change in the community.

Bray said she hopes the symposium generates thoughtful discussion. “Everybody’s point of view has good and bad,” she said. “It is a volatile issue at times.” What’s uncertain is what the next steps are for her organization on the sprawl issue.

Partners in Horticulture is a fledgling group, four years old, and is just now developing its strategic plan. A draft of that plan sets organizational, rather than community, goals. The group’s motto is “promoting sustainable landscapes,” but its mission is education rather than advocacy. The Iowa State University and University of Illinois extensions, Vander Veer Botanical Park, the Quad City Botanical Center, and Clinton-Muscatine-Scott Community Colleges are partners in the organization.

“If it sounds like there’s not a well-developed philosophy, ... it’s because there isn’t” because of the group’s age, said Joy Thompson, a participant in Partners in Horticulture. “We have to start somewhere,” Bray said.

Hylton is proof that the first step toward fighting sprawl on a community and policy level is a clear understanding of the issue. “The real essence of this is not terribly complicated,” Hylton said. For millennia, humans have lived in close proximity to each other – with everything accessible by walking. In the middle of the 20th Century, “we completely changed the way we were living for thousands of years.” Now, it seems, society is slowly returning to that way of life, with its emphasis on compact, sustainable neighborhoods, aesthetics, and a true sense of community.

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*For more information on the symposium or to register, call the ISU Scott County Extension Office at (563)359-7577. The program fee is \$25.*