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Sprawl isn't only in the eye of the beholder

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--Obscenity is difficult to define, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart once wrote, "But I know it when I see it." Rob Wassmer feels the same way about urban sprawl.

Planners, environmentalists and just plain folks have been complaining about sprawl for at least a generation. They think they know it when they see it: strip malls, highway gridlock and row after row of identical homes without the services needed to support them.

But Wassmer, a public policy professor at Sacramento State, has always wanted a more precise definition. "The whole idea of sprawl is a value-laden judgment," he says. "You have to be very careful thinking about it."

Wassmer, who has been working as a consultant to the state Senate Office of Research, was quietly completing a unique economic analysis of California sprawl when the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution made a big splash with a study of its own. Brookings found that the fastest growing cities in the West, contrary to popular belief, have less sprawl than their counterparts elsewhere in the country. Measuring average population densities, the study found that six of the nation's most densely populated metropolitan areas were in California. Los Angeles - the poster child for urban sprawl - is actually more densely populated than the greater New York metropolitan area.

Higher density is supposed to suggest less sprawl, because low densities mean that cities are chewing up land at a faster rate than their population is growing. But Wassmer thinks that density, while important, is at best a crude measure of sprawl, especially when applied to a huge metropolitan area.

Portland, Ore., for example, is considered a model of urban planning. The area has an urban limit line within which most new growth is concentrated. Outside that line, the land is undisturbed, and population densities remain low as the rural lifestyle is preserved. But if you measure the entire metropolitan area as a whole, the overall density seems lower - and thus more sprawling - than many other cities. The snapshot is misleading.

"Portland's density is lower than Sacramento's, but anyone looking at Sacramento would consider us more sprawling," Wassmer said. "You can't just look at one measure."

To get a more refined fix on the topic, Wassmer studied trends in population, farmland and retail activity. Unlike Brookings, he didn't look at only one moment, but at the change over time. From these numbers he developed a "sprawl scorecard" for California's metropolitan areas in the 1990s.

For population, rather than looking simply at density, Wassmer studied the change in the population of central places compared to the change in the population of the entire metropolitan area. If the central place, say the city of Sacramento, were growing at a slower rate than the greater region, that would be one indication of sprawl.

Wassmer also examined the percentage change in the amount of farmland in a region compared to the amount of land overall. A relative decline in farmland would be another symptom of sprawl.

Finally, looking at business activity, Wassmer measured the change in retail sales in central places versus the change in sales overall. Stronger retail activity in the central places meant less sprawl on the fringes.

Using these measures, Wassmer found that the Central Valley cities of Sacramento, Stockton, Fresno and Merced were among the state's leaders in sprawl over the past decade. Los Angeles, Riverside, Oakland and San Luis Obispo also were in that category. There weren't as many on the other side of the ledger, and they were mostly smaller places such as Chico, Redding, Santa Rosa and Santa Barbara.

The biggest surprise might have been San Jose. Though widely considered an example of uncontrolled growth, San Jose, while losing farmland, saw its central places hold their own in population and retail sales when compared to the greater metropolitan area. That probably makes sense when you consider the recent resurgence of the city's downtown.

Wassmer's methods, if updated over time, would provide an interesting way to evaluate the growth in places such as Roseville, Elk Grove and Folsom, which tend to be cited most often as examples of sprawl. To the extent that those cities' shopping centers and auto malls lure people away from their central-city homes to buy clothes and cars in the suburbs, that would be true. But as these "edge cities" become central places of their own, with retail and population growth that stays in balance, Wassmer thinks it's wrong to label them as sprawl.

"I consider it sprawl when people live far from where they work or shop and travel across open space to get where they need to go," he said. "If people are working out in Roseville, it doesn't make much sense to have them living in Sacramento. Once these retail and business centers spring up, it makes sense for people to live close to them."

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