

Sprawling, Sprawling . . .

Move to a suburb—and the world moves out with you.
A case study in hypergrowth.

BY DANIEL PEDERSEN, VERN E. SMITH AND JERRY ADLER

THE SALES BROCHURES DON'T LIE, BECAUSE they show you a picture, a sweeping aerial view of forest stretching toward the distant skyline of Atlanta from the vicinity of VININGS ESTATES, FROM HIGH \$200s-500s. The table of travel times puts downtown 20 minutes away (a footnote points out that "times may vary in rush-hour traffic"), and the photos of "historic Vinings" in the sales office are not meant to suggest that homebuyers will actually be shopping in a quaint general store. The houses are as crammed with luxuries as a Pharaoh's tomb; the lots are wooded; the road a peaceful two-lane blacktop. It all conspires to make you fall in love with the place—which requires only that you close your mind to what it might look like in five years, when you're battling your way toward it past the Wal-Marts and Waffle Houses that its very existence will call into being.

Here, just outside Atlanta's I-285 beltway, is the front line of the great lifestyle struggle of the next century. It is taking the paradoxical form of a war not on poverty, but on affluence—or the way affluence is typically realized in America, in suburban enclaves that eat away at the countryside and promote the triple evils of sprawl: air pollution, traffic congestion and visual blight. Al Gore has made an anti-sprawl "livability agenda" the centerpiece of his presidential campaign, warning darkly of commuters who arrive home "too late to read a child a bedtime story." Most of the \$8.8 billion the administration was seeking for the next fiscal year—for projects such as mass transit, green-space acquisition and road improvements—has already been approved by Congress. New Jersey Gov. Christine Whitman, a moderate Republican, has ambitious plans to spend almost \$1 billion to preserve undeveloped land in the most densely populated state in the union. Even builders here in Atlanta, those prodigious cultivators of affluence, are scrambling to meet an unexpected demand for "simplicity."

But translating this shift of sentiment into lines on the map and trees on the ground is

a daunting task. Anyone who has flown over it can see that there is no shortage of empty land in the United States, 95 percent of which is undeveloped. Activists like to cite figures for the overall loss of rural countryside that vary from about 400,000 to 1.4 million acres a year. Those on the other side often repeat a statistic from Steven Hayward of the conservative Pacific Research Institute, which puts the rate of land development for the United States, excluding Alaska, at an infinitesimal 0.0006 percent a year. Last week Hayward admitted he had made "a stupid math mistake" and that the real figure is .07 percent, more than 100 times greater. That's still not a lot, although it means that over the lifetime of a child born today, the developed area of the nation will more than double.

But the problem is that this development is concentrated in a relatively few areas close to big cities—such as Atlanta, whose 10-county metropolitan area population has

grown by roughly a quarter just since 1990, to about 3.1 million, as of a year ago. Reversing or even slowing this trend will require a whole new way of thinking by local planners, federal regulatory agencies, developers and homebuyers. Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, thinks that's going to happen: "People are willing to pay [for mass transit and open space]; they are willing to accept regulations," he says, "because this issue more than any other affects the quality of life in communities today." On the other side of the issue, Samuel Staley, an economist with the Reason Public Policy Institute in Los Angeles, points out that "suburbanization by other people is what's unpopular; people love living in the suburbs, they just don't want anyone else out there with them." He adds: "You can't develop a public policy around stopping people from moving to the communities and homes they want to live in, at least not in the United States. Not yet."

Atlanta will be a test of those competing views, and its citizens, business leaders and government officials provide a good window on how this struggle might be waged over the next few years. One who will be watching closely is Julie Haley, a 39-year-old mother of two who moved to a subdivision in Alpharetta back when the neighborhood was mostly horse farms and trees. That was in 1994. Today, she says, "people who visited us five years ago say, 'I couldn't find your house.' The roads have all gotten wider, they've knocked down all the trees, there's a million shopping centers." On business trips, her husband, Michael, leaves the house at 5:30 for a 9 a.m. flight to beat the traffic to Atlanta's Hartsfield airport. Her children, Kaitlin, 9, and Conor, 5, both suffer from asthma, which she attributes to sharing the air with cars whose drivers make the longest average round-trip commute in the country, 36.5 miles. "The kids cry when they see the bulldozers," she says. "They say, 'When I grow up, I'm gonna be president and I'm not going to let them cut down any more trees.'"

Of course, Haley, a nonpracticing lawyer, knows it's more important to have the local

"I'm no tree-hugger . . . my pitch to the business community is, this is about money for schools and cities, to grow this state"

Gov. Roy Barnes His new agency can stop development anywhere in a 13-county area

Oh No, It's Spreading!

More than 3 million people are spread throughout Metro Atlanta. Studies show that 1 percent in population growth results in 10 to 20 percent growth in land consumption. In Atlanta, momentum is so great that the North Georgia mountains, by one estimate, could become part of Metro Atlanta by 2002.

VANISHING FORESTS

- Area with 50% or more tree cover
- Area with less than 20% tree cover

As Atlanta gains ground in miles, it loses ground of the green variety. Between 1974 and 1996, areas with 50 percent or more tree cover decreased by more than 44 percent, while areas with less than 20 percent tree cover increased by more than 60 percent.

ATLANTA URBANIZED AREA

Come on Down

Atlanta's welcome-y'all hospitality has contributed to a more than 25 percent increase in population since 1990. The city just keeps on growing.

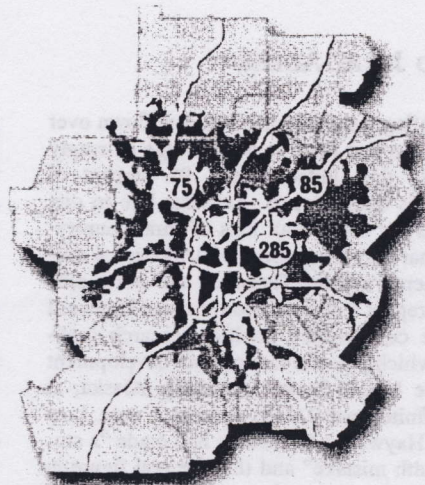
Atlanta has grown "faster than any human settlement in history"—from 65 miles north to south to 110 miles since 1990. Some effects of the growth:

- **Longest Commute** Atlantans drive 36.5 daily miles round trip to work, more than Dallas's 29.5 and Los Angeles's 20.5
- **Land Use** Every day, more than 50 acres of green space in the metro area is plowed under
- **Pollution** Atlanta is in violation of clean-air standards

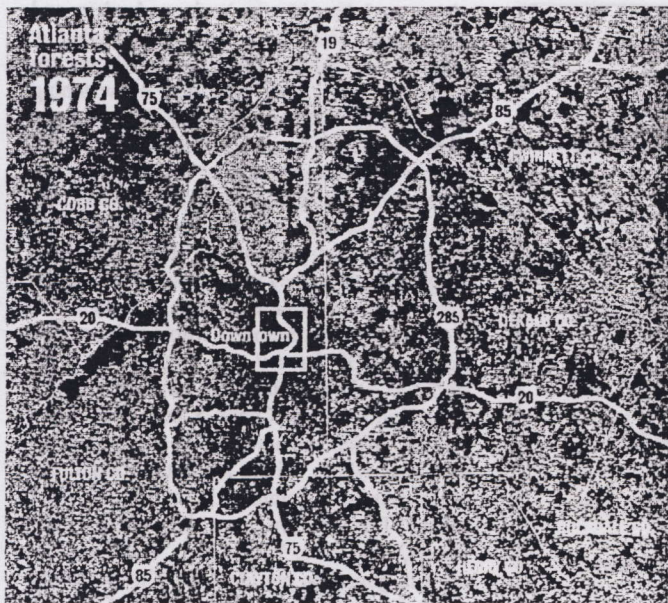
EFFECTS OF SPRAWL

As people leave the city, they develop the rural areas. Consequences of the sprawl:

- **Environment** Fragments landscapes, disrupts wildlife habitats, alters rivers and streams, increases pollution
- **Cities** Concentrates poverty in urban centers, hurts downtown commerce by pulling shoppers from locally owned stores and restaurants to large regional malls
- **Traffic** Longer commutes that take time away from families and work
- **Taxes** Increases taxes to pay for police and fire-department services, schools and infrastructure such as new roads and sewer construction



- 1950
- 1970
- 1990
- County boundaries



OVERLAY OF CURRENT HIGHWAY SYSTEM PLACED FOR GEOGRAPHIC ORIENTATION



LANDSAT IMAGERY—AMERICAN FORESTS

SPRAWL AROUND THE COUNTRY

Atlanta isn't the only U.S. city falling to sprawl. Other examples of large and medium-size sprawlers:

■ **Washington, DC.** Between 1982 and 1994, 69 percent increase in time commuters spent stuck in traffic

■ **Cincinnati, Ohio** Land area increase from 335 square miles in 1970 to 573 square miles in 1996

■ **Kansas City, Mo.** More freeway lane miles per capita than any other city

■ **Denver, Colo.** Farmland falling to sprawl at a rate of 90,000 acres per year

■ **Seattle, Wash.** More cars than people; twice the number of automobile trips each day per household than in 1990

■ **Austin, Texas** From 1982 to 1992, 35 percent increase in open space lost to development

■ **Las Vegas, Nev.** Fastest-growing population in the United States

■ **West Palm Beach, Fla.** Between 1990 and 1996, 25 percent decrease in urban population density

■ **Akron, Ohio** Between 1990 and 1996, 37 percent decrease in population density and land area increase of 65 percent

Sprawl-Threatened Cities



RESEARCH AND TEXT BY ELLEN FLORIAN.
SOURCES: SIERRA CLUB, ATLANTA REGIONAL COMMISSION, AMERICAN FORESTS

zoning board on your side than the president. But that body, she has found, responds mostly to the well-connected developers. She has won a few battles, only to lose the wars. Fulton County officials recently declared a moratorium on new development in an area where the sewers were overflowing. But a day later the moratorium was lifted for developers who already had a "land disturbance permit." It turned out there were hundreds of them, she says; "We're in the middle of a moratorium, and there's twice as much building as before." She joined a boycott of a supermarket whose builders, she says, chopped down several oak trees of a protected species. The store went out of business, but that didn't bring the trees back.

Haley, though, may have a powerful ally in the statehouse. Gov. Roy Barnes, a moderate Democrat, was elected last fall after promising to do something about sprawl, and he promptly did, creating a new agency with unprecedented power over zoning, roads and transit in a 13-county area. Surprising even the governor, the law authorizing the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority rolled to a quick passage—despite some grumbling that the agency's initials should stand for Give Roy Total Authority. (Barnes gets to appoint all 15 members of the board.) But the legislature had little choice, since the 13 counties were out of compliance with clean-air standards and about to lose federal highway funds. Now the new agency faces the task of extending Atlanta's feeble mass-transit system to the suburban counties that have always resisted it, and deciding whether to proceed with the "northern arc" freeway connecting I-75 and I-85 25 miles beyond the existing beltway. The creation of GRTA was praised by Gore as a model environmental initiative, although Barnes is quick to disavow the idea that he acted out of concern for anything as intangible as the atmosphere. "I'm no tree-hugger," he insists. "I'm a busi-

"People who visited us five years ago can't find our house. The roads have gotten wider and they've knocked down all the trees."

Julie Haley When her children wheeze from asthma, she blames air pollution

nessman who thinks you can't let your prosperity slip through your fingers. The pitch I made to the business community is that this is about money for schools and cities, to grow this state."

Almost everyone in the region has a stake in how GRTA does its job, especially the leaders of the city of Atlanta, which has been mostly a bystander in the great land rush of the '90s. Until recently, Realtors helping families relocate would show off Atlanta's parks, museums and stadium, says Mayor Bill Campbell, but then head to the suburbs to look at houses. "Now, when they take them out there, they're getting stuck in traffic," he says gleefully. "We've had more construction building permits issued in the

last three years than any other time in our history." Campbell tends to regard the suburbs as a giant Ponzi scheme, in which taxes are kept low for the first arrivals by deferring the cost of roads and schools. "Now they're choking on their growth and they don't have the infrastructure to provide for it," he says—while the developers have moved on to the next interstate exit.

And there are powerful business interests lining up with Campbell, such as the developer John A. Williams. His company built thousands of suburban garden apartments up through 1987, but since then has worked almost exclusively inside the I-285 beltway, often on "brownfield" sites recycled from other uses. He has moved toward "live/work/walk" projects that mix housing with shops and offices, and housing for different economic classes. "I was sort of poor when I grew up," says Williams, an Atlanta native and Georgia Tech grad, "but there were people poorer than me, and I didn't think anything of it"—an attitude that, if it ever spreads, could subvert a major unspoken premise of suburban developments priced FROM THE HIGH \$200s-500s.

Yet the businessman who may have the most impact on Atlanta's development over the next few years isn't a developer at all; he's F. Duane Ackerman, CEO of BellSouth, the second largest local employer after Delta Airlines. At a cost of some \$750 million, Ackerman has ordained the relocation of 13,000 employees from 75 suburban offices to three new complexes within the beltway, each walking distance from a transit stop. The company will build four giant parking lots at the suburban ends of the transit lines, equipped with small business centers so that employees can keep working on the train and send off their e-mails and faxes before driving home. Ackerman, a hard-driving businessman whose personal formula for avoiding traffic is to get up at 5 a.m. and

work until 6:30 at night, insists he is only trying to get more productivity out of a work force that was in danger of disappearing into daylong traffic jams. "I'm not a member of the Sierra Club," he assures interviewers. "But we are a company that's aware of its environment."

And there are others, of course, who are watching Barnes's great plans with more skepticism, like builder John Wieland, the brusque, tough-minded developer of Vinings Estates and dozens of other suburban projects over the last 29 years. He says what many probably think: that it's easy to be against "sprawl" in the abstract, until you're asked to weigh the logical alternative, which can only be "density." "I ask people, would they like to see sprawl controlled, and they answer, 'That would be good,'" he says. "Then I ask, how would they like town homes next door? That wouldn't be so good." As for GRTA, he's in less awe of its dictatorial power than you might think. "As soon as somebody tells a well-connected developer he can't build where he wants to build," he predicts, "the governor's going to get a phone call."

"As soon as a well-connected developer is told he can't build where he wants, the governor is going to get a phone call"

John Wieland *He thinks home buyers in the end would choose 'sprawl' over 'density'*

there are, of course, a few holdouts against the whole concept of state intervention in local planning. "The people in my neighborhood aren't complaining about dirty air," says Don Balfour, a Republican state senator who opposed Barnes's plan. "They're saying, 'Man, it takes me an hour and a half to go 30 miles.'" The solution for that problem, he contends, is not more density—but more highways.

Which is just the attitude that drives Julie Haley nuts. "People keep saying we don't want to be another Gwinnett County," she says, referring to Balfour's home district, "because they've seen how ugly and desolate a landscape can look, devoid of trees and full of strip malls." Sometimes, she thinks of moving even farther out—say, to Athens, 55 miles from Atlanta—but she doubts she can outrun sprawl. "They're starting on what we've already been through," she muses. "I'm thinking, 'I've battled around here for so long, why don't I stick it out'"—and fight.

With STEPHEN TOTILO

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