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Researcher warns about the negative impact of sprawl

From staff reports

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About three-quarters of the growth in housing units during the next several years nationally will occur in the South and West, and the vast majority of that will stretch neighborhoods and subdivisions into previously rural and suburban areas.

That's according to a presentation given Friday by Robert Burchell, co-director of the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University. During a nearly 90-minute presentation, Burchell outlined the effects uncontrolled growth have on communities across the country and different ways counties and cities are attempting to mitigate those challenges.

Sprawl, as it's commonly known, has some good attributes, Burchell said. The automobile is a part of American life, and sprawling communities allow for near-unlimited use of that form of transportation. And sprawl alleviates commuting congestion from inner suburban areas to urban ones.

Sprawl, however, costs counties and cities money, which has to be offset by other forms of development. When looked at on a national average, the costs associated with a new residential development actually outweigh the revenue generated for governments by those residents, creating a deficit that often is made up through commercial and industrial development.

Roads, too, cost governments a considerable amount of money.

Burchell said about 50 percent of capital expenditures by governments in the United States fund roads and road improvement projects.

Governments are trying to control sprawl by attracting people back to city centers. Spartanburg, for example, is trying to draw people downtown with a creative movement and through the construction of

the Chapman Cultural Center.

"In order to attract people back to a center, it has to be a center that people will be attracted to," Burchell said.

Some communities also are establishing growth boundaries and impact fees to encourage higher-density development closer to a city's core.

Assistant County Administrator Chris Story said one message he took from the lecture was that government officials could do a better job of communicating and documenting the cost of unplanned growth to residents so they can make decisions about land-use policy. "We need to do a better job of doing that analysis and sharing it with the community," he said.

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