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Archives:

A sprawling community: A look at the effects of suburban sprawl on Oldham County

By Danielle Komis

Oldham County Resident Bill Lammlein remembers what Oldham County was like 30 years ago.

“You could actually stop on the street and roll down the window and talk to a guy for 10 minutes about the weather and nobody cared,” he said.

Those were the days before Interstate 71 expanded, courts ordered busing in Jefferson County schools and the Ford plant on Chamberlain Lane opened — before Oldham County became one of the top-five fastest growing counties in the state and began losing its farms and slow-paced lifestyle to subdivisions and traffic jams.

Before urban sprawl got its grip on Oldham County.

While urban sprawl has become a buzzword, it is a difficult term to define because it is defined by its effects, said Lauren Heberle, associate director of the Center for Environmental Policy and Management and co-director of the EFC Region 4 at the University of Louisville.

“Sprawl is typically characterized by uncontrolled, unfettered development that has negative effects,” she said. “It’s not something that everyone agrees on.”

So what are some of its effects? Residents don’t have to look far to find them — Harmony Elementary students riding the bus daily to the other side of town, drivers on U.S. 42, Ky. 22 and Ky. 53 struggling to pull out onto the road during high-traffic times, or residents with new lawns that were brown during the summer because they couldn’t water them during the water shortage.

Many residents and community leaders agree that Oldham County’s struggle to build schools, roads and other necessities like sewers and water lines fast enough has taken its toll on the county, its resources and its rural character.

Art Tobe, a 25-year Oldham County resident, called the summer's water shortage and mandatory outdoor water usage ban "ridiculous" and blamed the shortage on insufficient infrastructure, not on a lack of rainfall.

"They should re-assess how many people can build at a time so we have roads and water," he said.

Tobe said he remembers the days when the Melrose Inn, the Goshen General Store and the Chevron Gas Station were the only developments that broke up the landscape along U.S. 42.

"What everybody was drawn to originally was the rural character of this county and now it's gone," he said.

But Oldham County Planning and Zoning Commissioner Kevin Jeffries said it's difficult to slow development when the demand is there.

"When you've got an area that's popular you've got a lot of folks who want to move here," he said.

But things don't have to continue in the same direction, Heberle said. By educating the community about wise land use and encouraging residents to participate in the planning process, she said, places like Oldham County can still be saved from the gray concrete tide of sprawling developments.

Poor past planning

Oldham County community leaders hoped to avoid growing pains when they created a planning and zoning commission in 1969. But the way the commission zoned the entire county was not ideal, said Joe Schoenbaechler, former planning and zoning administrator and interim executive director for the Oldham County Economic Development Authority.

"Literally you could throw a dart at a map and you could develop anywhere it lands," he said. "It was a matter of where the developer could talk a farmer into selling."

Oldham County's zoning laws allow houses to be built on one-acre lots even in agriculture and conservation zones, as well as residential zones, Schoenbaechler said, which has allowed housing to sprawl across the region.

In contrast, some communities have urban service boundaries that limit development to an inner circle, which helps lessen infrastructure costs and problems, but may increase housing costs. Lexington's urban growth boundary is almost 50 years old, making it the oldest such boundary in the nation. Other counties, like Boone County, are trying to develop in only one area of the county to manage growth.

To combat infrastructure problems, the planning and zoning commission has become more focused on capacity planning, Planning and Zoning Administrator Louise Allen said.

The commission recently created a school capacity ordinance that allows it to deny any development that would make the school in that district exceed its capacity, but allows developers to build a school site themselves if necessary. The commission is also working on a sewer capacity ordinance. Without ordinances like these, commissioners are sometimes forced to approve a development they don't think is a good idea simply because it meets regulations.

Bill Lammlein, a former planning and zoning commissioner, said this was the reason he resigned from the commission two years ago after being a commissioner for nine months in 2004.

"These poor people on there they have to vote and approve this stuff just because it meets whatever guidelines are out here," he said. "I couldn't do that and sleep at night."

Solutions

Yet some developers are doing things that may help concerned residents like Lammlein rest easier.

Rod Henderson, managing director of Traditional Town LLC, the group developing a 595-acre new urbanist development in Prospect, is one of those developers.

New urbanism refers to an architectural design that emphasizes walkable, compact, integrated, mixed-use communities, rather than today's spread-out, car-based developments.

Planners and other officials do not do always react well when they are presented with a development that breaks the mold, he said.

Schoenbaechler agreed.

"If you try to do something different it throws just enough of a change in the system," he said. "None of that's easy."

Henderson and his partners fought Jefferson County planning and zoning regulations for more than a year to get approved for higher-density lots, skinnier streets, smaller setbacks and higher curbs than current regulations allowed, he said.

The developers didn't even try to get these things approved in Oldham County. After their experience in Jefferson County, Henderson said they were too tired to fight another commission, so the houses in the Oldham County section of Norton Commons are all on one-acre lots.

While it's easier to stick with the same designs, Heberle said conventional neighborhoods are not giving the public a fair choice because they're all cookie-cutter developments. Many of today's developments are "opportunistic" developments, Heberle said, ones that put control and money into the hands of developers. Planned developments, on the other hand, put control and money into the hands of the community, she said.

But planners say developers have no motivation to change their approach, because homeowners continue to buy the houses they build.

"People tend to like what they see and out here what they see is a nice white picket fence and one-acre, half-acre lots," Schoenbaechler said.

Henderson said the problems with infrastructure and their solution lie with housing density.

"One of the great myths of suburbia is its too dense," he said.

Sprawling, low-density suburbs cost a lot of much money, he said, because they are difficult for utilities and other amenities like hospitals to serve.

Heberle agreed, and said despite popular belief, standard sprawling developments actually cost communities money.

"People assume property taxes will pay for sewer, gas, electric and schools," she said. "But that's just not true. It actually ends up costing more than you actually get in taxes."

In December 2003, a cost of community services study conducted by the American Farmland Trust found that for every \$1 of revenue received in Oldham County from residential properties in fiscal year 2003, \$1.05 was spent providing services to these properties. More than 95 percent of county expenditures went to provide services for residential properties. Oldham Ahead, a nonprofit citizen's group advocating wise land and resource use in Oldham County, commissioned the study.

Smart growth advocates hope that the shift toward new urbanist developments will preserve greenspace by using less open land and also integrating low-impact development techniques.

However, Heberle warned that depending upon their location, new urbanist developments like Norton Commons may not actually help ease nearby traffic problems because residents may commute to downtown Louisville, rather than work within the development.

Tobe, who owns his own landscaping business, said he doesn't drive during rush hour or allow his workers to work along U.S. 42 during that time because it is too dangerous. He also no longer takes any new jobs in Prospect, because he wants to avoid the congestion

spreading from Louisville.

“This place is like a quagmire with the traffic and congestion,” he said. “There’s no country left in the country, that’s for sure.”

Along with giving residents headaches, sprawling development also directly costs individuals money.

Families in sprawling neighborhoods spend \$1,300 more each year on transportation than those in denser areas, according to the Surface Transportation Policy Project. This has led the average American driver to spend an average of 443 hours a year behind the wheel, according to the Federal Highway Administration; AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety — the equivalent of 55 eight-hour workdays

Lammlein, owner of WJL Design in La Grange, designed several houses in Norton Commons. Lammlein said along with creating a sense of community, new urbanist developments help communities by creating more taxable property.

“If you can group 1,000 homes on 10 acres and then 1,000 on 200 acres, where’s the best tax value?” he said.

Fran Scott, principal at Scott/Klausing & Co. and master planner of a recently-approved 1,000-acre new urbanist business campus in La Grange, said the “new” in “new urbanism” is not really accurate.

“It should really be called old urbanism,” he said. “It’s going back to the way communities used to be.”

He cited Paris and Rome as examples of these model cities — both built before the invention of the automobile.

Scott said the new generation of young professionals have higher expectations than past generations, because they haven’t had to experience an economic recession or depression in their lifetime.

“They want a lifestyle,” he said. “We have to provide lifestyles.”

The mixed-usage communities in the business campus would allow residents to live, work, play, worship, eat and exercise without ever getting in their cars, Scott said.

Heberle said new urbanist developments have been slow to spread to the Midwest, especially Kentucky. Currently, there are only three in Kentucky, compared with 16 in Tennessee and 13 in Ohio, according to the registered developments on the Web site of the Congress for New Urbanism, a Chicago-based non-profit organization founded in 1993.

Saving farmland

There is another way to stop sprawl, besides building “smarter” developments, said Jill Schwartz of the American Farmland Trust. Preserve farmland.

Not only is it cheap — only 44 cents of every dollar of revenue was spent providing services to farmland, according to the Oldham cost of services study — but it is also aesthetically pleasing.

“You really need that one person or group who says this is what is important to do,” Schwartz said.

Oldham County has lost an average of 600 acres of farmland to development in the past two years, Property Valuation Administrator Ron Winters said.

Nationally, the United States lost more than 6 million acres of farmland, an area roughly the size of Maryland, between 1992 and 1997, according to a 2002 report released by the American Farmland Trust.

The inefficient land use of this converted land is perhaps the most concerning part of the trend, the report found. While the U.S. population grew by 17 percent from 1982 to 1997, urbanized land grew by 47 percent.

Oldham County farmland became so valuable, that people began buying it as an investment, Winters said.

Yet some residents don't see greenbacks when they look at the green spaces in the county.

Sue Tomes, a 12-year resident of Prospect, said she misses the rural beauty of the U.S. 42 corridor.

Hillcrest, the large neighborhood she moved to two years ago from Countryside subdivision, has, along with other new residential developments in the area, created a lot of traffic, Tomes said. But she's not looking to blame anyone.

“We moved out here and we're part of the problem,” she said.

Farmers in Oldham County have two options if they wish to preserve their land, Oldham County Planning and Zoning Commissioner Kevin Eldridge said.

They can donate their land as a conservation easement, he said, which is usually only done by farmers who have another income source, or apply to have the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement Corporation buy their land. The program was created in 1994 funded by federal and private funds that pays farmers a one-time average sum of \$881 per acre.

However, the cash-strapped program has never bought land in Oldham County because it is generally too expensive, said Brent Frazier, spokesman for the PACE program, although Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown donated 244 acres of Woodland Farm in Goshen last September to the program.

Heberle said farmers are left in a tight spot.

“Their money is tied up in their land. They’ve got no other option in their eyes for living or putting their kids through college,” she said. “They’ve got a real valid point.”

If residents don’t want to see farms or woodlands go, Eldridge said, they really only have one choice — buy the land themselves.

Other anti-sprawl tactics that other areas have tried such as development impact fees, downzoning, government “taking”, and urban growth boundaries are nearly unheard of in the state.

Heberle said Kentucky historically dislikes planning in general.

“I think we’ve got an ideology of private property and market-driven development that makes planning feel like government control going on,” she said. “It gets phrased that way.”

While residents could have an impact on planning along with developers and community leaders, few residents get involved in the planning process.

Recently, the Oldham County Planning and Zoning Commission held a meeting for the public to help create the new comprehensive plan, Eldridge said. No one came.

He attributed the absence to general apathy and busy lifestyles, but said without the public’s participation, government leaders cannot possibly know what residents want, nor can they do it all on their own.

Heberle said this problem is common, and that it is the reason so few communities work together to create a real community but that it is possible.

“If you get folks to buy into it and feel like they have some kind of control over it then you’ll get people participating,” she said. “It’s about convincing them they’ve got the ability to control it.”

But she also noted that strong leadership is necessary to lead the change.

“It takes government leadership definitely,” she said. “You’ve got to have people in power with power to take a stand for what the community wants.”

