

Sprawl

Madison has been pushing
its own boundaries
since the beginning

By MARV BALOUSEK

Beyond Madison's first 1830s settlement in a tiny area along King Street, the rest of the city could be characterized as urban sprawl at one time or another.

Sprawl, the conversion of farmland into urban home sites, has concerned local residents since the 19th century. Urban expert David Rusk says urban sprawl is a lot like pornography — tough to define, but you know it when you see it.

Madison's growth began slowly as the city — then a village — added only a few hundred residents during its first decade. The railroad's arrival and effective real estate promotion by Leonard Farwell changed that in the 1850s, when the population surged to more than 9,000. At that time, nearly everyone applauded the city's growth.

The first real sprawl concerns arose in the 1880s when suburban property became popular. Many of the suburbs that sprang up at the time, like Fair Oaks or, later, the village of Nakoma,

eventually were annexed and became Madison neighborhoods.

By the dawn of the 20th century, Madisonians were divided into pro-growth and anti-growth camps, a phenomenon that continued through most of the 20th century. The pro-growth faction supported industrial development while the anti-growth faction wanted to keep industry out.

Early in the 1900s, the two groups reached the Madison compromise in which the city would seek high-end industrial development, but it would be limited to the East Side.

In the 1960s, concern about the loss of farmland to development spurred local governments to draft land-use plans, hire planners and establish the Regional Planning Commission. By the 1970s, local officials began talking about moratoriums on rural development, a concept that persisted into the 1990s.

The focus on rural development mostly ignored Madison annexations that turned vast areas of farmland into city lots. Between 1950 and 1990, Madison's urban

population grew by 122 percent while the amount of urbanized land grew by 299 percent.

By the late 1980s, farmers close to Madison saw benefits in keeping open the option to sell their land to developers. A proposed green space plan that set development boundaries spurred an outpouring of opposition. People began talking about a political urban-rural split. Rural residents wanted to be free to develop their land while city residents wanted them to preserve it so they could ride their bicycles on country roads or hike on trails.

Pursuit of both development and preservation brought some resolution to the urban sprawl issue by the end of the century. Dane County began buying the county's most precious natural areas to preserve them. At the same time, development ramped up as Madison's boundaries jumped the Interstate to the east and the city hammered out an agreement to annex a large portion of the town of Middleton on the west. On the south, the city limits crept closer to Verona.

Today, sprawl may seem out of control despite efforts by local officials to battle it. Fortunately, several current trends may help slow it enough so Madison doesn't reach its current development boundaries in less than 20 years.

Condominium sales, especially Downtown, are booming while sales of single-family homes have slowed. Developers are heeding local officials in proposing more compact, pedestrian-friendly subdivisions. And "green" buildings that are energy efficient and environmentally friendly are more popular than ever before. ■



Craig Scheiner