

# Responsible growth key for N.J.

By John Hasse

**A**s the most densely populated state in the nation, New Jersey is faced with the challenge of addressing unparalleled pressures for development. Geospatial analysis of urban growth in the 1990s, conducted by our research team at Rutgers and Rowan Universities, reveals a remarkable development rate of more than 16,600 acres per year.

As land is developed, corresponding amounts of important resources are lost. During the 1990s, New Jersey gained the equivalent of 41 football fields of new urbanization every day, while losing 20 football fields of farmland daily, nine football fields of forest, and six football fields of wetlands. Impervious surface was created at the rate of nine football fields a day.

Recent residential growth has consumed even more land. Our research

shows the majority of residential development during the '90s was for low-density, rural, single residential units, typically on large lots of 1 to 3 acres. This pattern occupied the majority of newly developed land but housed proportionately fewer people.

While population growth is responsible for some development pressures, the consumption of land for large-lot housing units is largely attributable to growing wealth in the state and the strong market for housing upgrades.

At the other end of the sprawl equation are New Jersey's deteriorating cities. Ironically, the wealthiest state contains several of the nation's poorest cities. Sprawl and urban decay are intricately interconnected: Policies that encourage rural development also have the effect of disinvestment, neglect and abandonment of older urban areas and inner-ring suburbs.

New Jersey is at a challenging crossroads as it attempts to shift from

sprawl to "smart growth." Sprawl development is particularly problematic because it carries a much greater impact for each unit created, while housing relatively fewer people. By contrast, smart-growth patterns offer efficiently designed housing and relatively low impact to the landscape. Their scale of settlement encourages community cohesion and enhances neighborhood quality of life.

Many of New Jersey's older towns and villages already demonstrate a "smart-growth" type of development, but unfortunately, current land regulations largely prohibit the creation of similar mixed-use towns and villages today.

With only 1.6 million acres of open space remaining, New Jersey will be the first state in the nation to run out of land. The sobering responsibility of this point in history is that the policies put in place today will be the DNA that determines how that future build-out

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## Responsible growth is key for the state

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will occur. Gov. McGreevey is right to focus so much attention on land development in New Jersey. It is a matter of social and environment responsibility that we create the land-management policies that will guide the future development of New Jersey to occur in the most responsible manner.

John Hasse, Ph.D., is a professor of geography at Rowan University in Glassboro. His team's report may be seen at [http://users.rowan.edu/~hasse/nj\\_urbangrowth/index.html](http://users.rowan.edu/~hasse/nj_urbangrowth/index.html).