

Get Involved With URBAN PLANNING

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As populations expand in the South, forests are increasingly affected by human activities. In the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), that area where homes or other structures are adjacent to or within forests, city planners and natural resource professionals face increased challenges. These challenges include wildfire control, natural landscape protection, soil, water quality management, and wildlife management as urban areas expand. As unplanned WUI areas increase, devastating wildfires will destroy homes and property (figure 1). These challenges have a direct impact on public safety, welfare, and quality of life.

Fire management is a challenge in every interface community, but it is not the only concern. Management of increasingly fragmented parcels of forestland is more difficult and less economical. The number of these parcels is increasing as people purchase small tracts in the WUI area – but this is the American Dream!

Clearly, there must be a balance between growth and protection. The only way to minimize the effects of urban growth is by getting involved in the planning process to ensure growth is well organized, concentrated, and provides adequate natural landscape in a manner beneficial to the environment and people.

Land use decisions have often been made without regard to the sensitivity of the landscape or its suitability for development. In communities across the nation, there is a growing concern by some that current development patterns, dominated by what some call “urban sprawl”, are no longer in our long-term interest. Forecasts predict about 12 million additional acres of southern forests will become urbanized by 2020. (Figure 2 shows the current incorporated towns and cities in Alabama.) Though supportive of growth, communities are questioning the economic costs of abandoning existing infrastructure in the city, only to rebuild it further out.

Sensitivity to the conservation of natural resources should be a major component of any community planning process, especially in the WUI, balancing what we want with the limitations of the resource. The first step to ensure that planners understand the vital need to incorporate WUI and natural resource management issues into the planning process is to be present at the table when the plans are being developed (figure 3). Other professionals that you can expect to encounter include: land developers, water quality experts, fire officials, home builder representatives, neighborhood coalitions, environmental preservation groups, real estate associates, and representatives from the

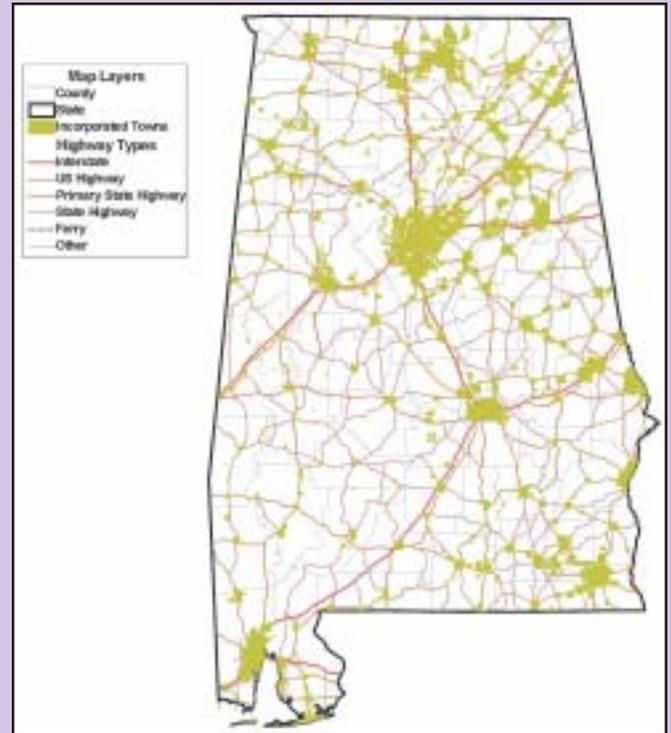


Figure 2: Incorporated Towns and Cities in Alabama

various media. Often these individuals will have specific interests and goals for the planning process.

Organizational Structure For Alabama Planning

Planning in Alabama is organized throughout the various levels of government and private associations. At the



Figure 1: Wildland-Urban Interface Scene
(Courtesy of National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration)



Figure 3: Urban Planning Meeting
(Courtesy Paul Kennedy)

state level, the Governor's office, the Alabama Development Office (ADO), the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), and similar offices serve as organized agencies that lead planning throughout the State. The Alabama Association of Regional Councils (ALARC) also serves in a statewide capacity. This non-government organization consists of twelve regional councils (see figure 4) that are key players in the planning process. These councils usually have a professional staff and resources to perform planning work.

To find out more about these groups, visit their web sites: <http://www.governor.state.al.us>, <http://www.ado.state.al.us>, <http://www.adeca.state.al.us>, and <http://www.alarc.org>.

County commissions usually direct county-level organizations, such as county industrial development boards. They normally have several county employees to assist with development work. Cities usually have dedicated planners on staff and work in conjunction with a zoning board.

The Planning Process

Most planning is done at a regional-to-local level. Regionally, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently published a report, "Southeast Ecological Framework Project." Also, the Southern Group of State Foresters established the

Southern Forest Urban Interface Council, and is working with the USDA Forest Service to establish a center for Wildland Urban Interface Research and Information. There are also many other groups and organizations trying to address these issues. Many of these groups, which are often well funded and organized, have specific goals, which may not often reflect urban planners and landowner goals.

The planning process differs with each community, but generally involves a combination of local elected officials, paid planning staff (from planning, zoning, and inspection departments), and various standing advisory committees of appointed citizens. The planning process must incorporate a constantly changing list of federal, state, and local laws and regulations. Examples include the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (storm water discharge rule), the Farmland Protection Policy Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Endangered Species Act, and the National Environmental Protection Act. The list of people and regulations involved with the planning process is almost endless!

Local citizen advisory committees have a surprising amount of influence on the development of the comprehensive urban plan. Required by most states in communities with a population of 20,000 or more, or with a significant trend of



Figure 5: Aerial view of an Urban Development Area

(Courtesy Paul Kennedy)

growth or change, the comprehensive plan is a long-range guide for the physical growth and development of a community. It guides decisions on land-use zoning, expansion and location of major infrastructure (e.g., sewer, water, and transportation), and major public investments (e.g., schools, fire stations, and parks). Comprehensive plans are revamped every five to ten years, depending on the size and growth rate of the community.

A significant component of the comprehensive plan is identification of prime agricultural and forest land and water resources with the goal of conserving these resource uses as a viable part of the community's culture and landscape. Comprehensive plans that minimize growth to the smallest and least environmentally sensitive lands will do the most good in preserving large blocks of rural land for long-term forest and agriculture uses (figure 5).

How To Get Involved

The task for natural resource professionals and landowners is to get involved to influence the planning process to minimize the area of impact by urban development. You should help communities and planners understand ecological systems so they can make their planning and development decisions in an informed, science-based manner. Be sure to respond to their requests for comments.

Here are a few additional steps that you can take:

- Visit your local courthouse or city/county government services center. Go to the planning department and inquire about the planning process. Find out if there is a planning commis-

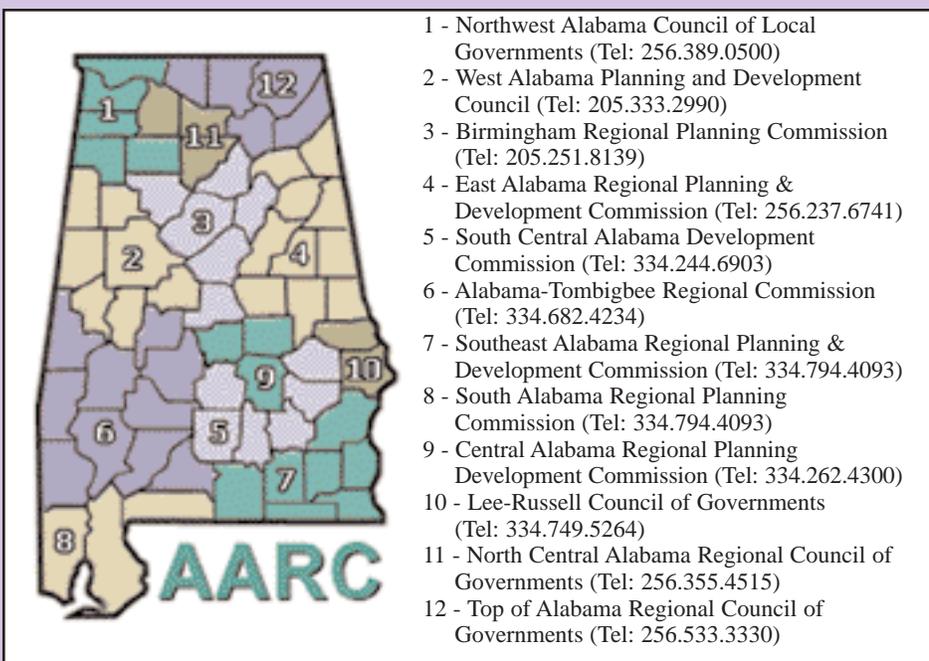


Figure 4: Alabama Association of Regional Councils

(Courtesy <http://www.alarc.org>)

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sion or zoning board. Find out when these groups meet.

- Obtain a copy of your local comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances.
- Obtain information on where utility projects are planned or ongoing. Many of these are federally funded. They indicate where growth is occurring.
- Attend the planning meetings to see how the process works.
- Volunteer your time to a community-planning group.

Tools For Implementing Urban Planning

The process of urban planning is extremely complicated with many different organizations and agencies involved using a multitude of programs. A few of these programs and other considerations are presented in the following section to show a sample of what is available. Many other programs across the nation provide additional resource tools.

“Firewise” Communities

Firewise is sponsored by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG). Its goal is to encourage and acknowledge action that minimizes home loss to wildfire. The program includes planning and development resources and various publication information that planners, developers, and homeowners can use to make their communities and homes fire safe. The program provides this information through various publications and workshops using state-of-the-art mapping and wildfire simulations. Once a community becomes “fire safe” it can be recognized for this accomplishment by becoming a Firewise Community/USA. The Alabama Forestry Commission is actively supporting wildland-urban interface councils, partially funded through the USDA Forest Service grants. By reading Firewise publications or attending workshops participants will learn how to:

- recognize interface fire hazards
- design Firewise homes and landscapes
- deliver fire education materials, and
- incorporate Firewise planning into existing and developing areas

To learn more about Firewise, go to the web site <http://www.firewise.org> or contact the Fire Division of the Alabama Forestry Commission.

“Smart Growth” Network

In 1996, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) joined with several non-profit and government organizations to form the Smart Growth Network. The Smart Growth Network was formed in response to increasing community concerns about the need for new ways to grow that boost the economy, protect the environment, and enhance community vitality. The Smart Growth partners include environmental groups, historic preservation organizations, professional associations, developers, and local and state government representatives.

Smart Growth includes mechanisms to identify priority and development areas, and limit growth to these areas. This creates more compact and efficient communities and preserves open space and environmentally sensitive areas. The Smart Growth partners pool their experience and follow several key principles as a framework for urban growth:

- Mix land uses (residential, retail, etc.)
- Take advantage of compact building design (multi-unit housing/retail stores)
- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
- Create walkable neighborhoods
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
- Strengthen and direct development towards existing and historical communities
- Provide a variety of transportation choices to reduce automobile mileage
- Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective

- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions

Christine Todd Whitman, former Governor of New Jersey, says the following about Smart Growth, “With Smart Growth we will save acres, save money on roads, and sewers, keep homes more affordable, and make our cities and town centers thrive. That’s good growth.”

Maryland implemented Smart Growth for the entire state in 1998. Under their program, they have limited growth by only allowing federal and state development grants, such as water and sewer construction, to go only in priority funding areas. Only these designated areas get federal and state funds (figure 6). To learn more, visit the website at, <http://www.smartgrowth.org>.

Not all agree with the principles of Smart Growth. Portland, Oregon, was the first city to incorporate Smart Growth, with the response from increased regulation producing a decrease in the quality of life, increases in traffic congestion, air pollution, and taxes. People were not willing to move back into densely populated cities with multi-purpose housing/retail stores and give up the freedom of automobiles for mass transit transportation. While

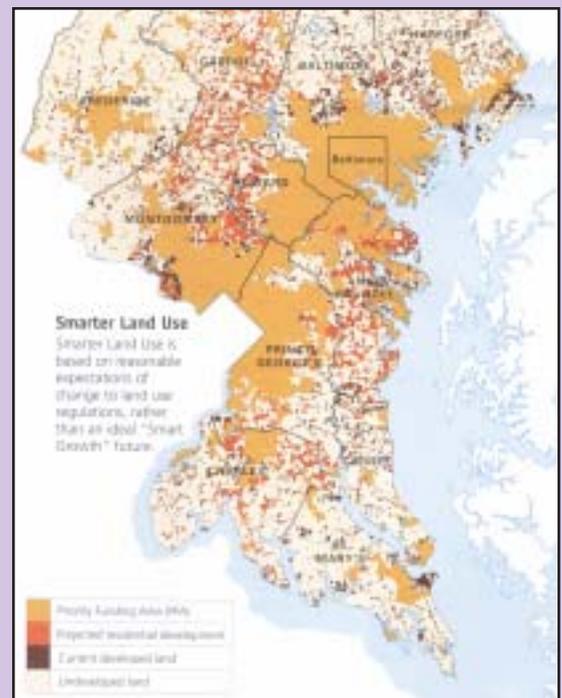


Figure 6: Smart Growth Priority Funding Areas in Maryland

(Courtesy <http://www.smartgrowth.org>)

some principles are extremely useful, it is important to weigh any program's guidelines with expected outcomes.

“Your Town Alabama” Program

One way you can learn more about urban, suburban, and rural planning is by attending a “Your Town Alabama” Workshop. The Your Town Alabama Program is a first step in meeting the development needs in rural Alabama. The workshop format is an intensive engagement of citizen leaders and professionals. The three-day workshop is highly participatory with lectures, case-study presentations, and interactive group problem solving, including work on realistic issues in a hypothetical small town. The goal of the program is to provide advanced leadership skills supported by information and planning tools that can be taken home to all corners of our state and applied to the process of “Designing Our Future.”

Your Town Alabama was established in 1998, spearheaded by Paul Kennedy, a Your Town graduate, of the Cawaco RC&D Council. With the help and support of several planning and development groups in the state, Your Town Alabama has held seven adult workshops, reaching nearly 330 people from 90 towns in the state. The citizens of the Alabama small towns that have participated in the program include: Brighton, Chelsea, Gadsden, Lanett, Lineville, Marion, Montevallo, Slocumb, and Valley.

For more information on this program visit <http://www.yourtownalabama.org>.

Watershed Management Plans

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) operates under the guidance and direction of the EPA. One of their top priority tasks is the development of Watershed Basin Management Plans for the ten main watersheds in Alabama. The Alabama Clean Water Partnership, a coalition of public and private individuals, companies, organizations, and governing bodies is working with ADEM on this project. The plans will have a direct impact on urban development in each basin, and natural resource professionals and landowners should be involved in their development.

To find out more about activities in your area, visit one of these websites:

<http://www.cleanwaterpartnership.org>
or <http://adem.state.al.us>.

Green Infrastructure Planning

Many planning programs have been developed. One course textbook that details the planning process with emphasis on protecting important green space was published in 2002 by The Conservation Fund, “Green Infrastructure: A Strategic Approach to Natural Resource Planning and Conservation.” The workbook shows a user how to set up an urban development plan using GIS (Geographical Information Systems) mapping technology. First, a planner must identify and establish landscape features, both natural and man-made. Then the planner must identify what areas would be beneficial for development (hubs), what areas need to be protected (green space), and how the landscape “links” the various sites together.

The workbook uses the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Program, developed by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), to determine the quality of land for agricultural uses and to assess sites for their agricultural economic viability. It also uses other resource GIS data, such as wetland sites, as layers of information to create a scientifically based analysis of the landscape and its development potential. For more information about this program, visit <http://www.greeninfrastructure.net>.

Conservation Easements and Land Purchases

Increasing pressures of urban development around a landowner's property increases the property value. Many times landowners sell their land for “higher and better” uses. To reduce these pressures and prohibit development of rural land for “the good of the public,” tax incentives and credits, as well as private and government funds are becoming available to purchase property or conservation easements.

Conservation easements allow a land trust or government agency to accept a transfer of land rights through a deed. The conservation easement identifies conservation values on a specific property and restricts activities that may diminish those values. Conservation easements most often limit subdivision or urban

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SMART GROWTH Legislation in Alabama

Two Smart Growth legislative bills passed the House of Representatives during the recent session, House Bill 309 and House Bill 116. “Both (bills) are considered smart growth initiatives as they encourage economic development while protecting the special places that Alabamians have come to love and appreciate,” said Pete Conroy, Chair of House Speaker Seth Hammett's Smart Growth Working Group. “It's described differently as smart growth, sustainable development, and long range planning, but most call this week's actions taken by the Alabama House of Representatives as nothing more than good old-fashioned common sense,” stated Speaker Hammett.

House Bill 309, sponsored by Representative Bill Dukes, makes technical changes to the state's municipal planning code. The revised code would allow individuals to serve on a planning commission who reside either inside a municipal area or within the jurisdiction boundaries (5 miles) of the municipality. It would also require that a planning commission prepare and recommend a comprehensive plan for the physical development of the municipality, including any areas outside of its boundaries, which, in the commission's judgment, bear relation to the planning of such municipality. The municipality would then formally adopt a plan prior to constructing roads, public buildings, or utilities.

House Bill 116, sponsored by Representative Terry Spicer, supports the cleanup and development of old industrial sites. The bill provides for a local tax abatement for Brownfield development properties that are voluntarily cleaned up, pursuant to the Alabama Land Recycling and Economic Redevelopment Act. This bill allows county and municipal governments to provide substantial tax incentives to recover and restore abandoned property in urban areas. ♣

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development on enrolled property. The entity pays landowners for agreeing to the restrictions. In addition, the value of a qualified conservation easement donation may be deducted from your taxes. The federal tax code for conservation easements is found in section 170(h). Alabama conservation easement policies are also identified in the Alabama Conservation Easement Law (AL Code Sec. 35-18-1). Other economic incentives and compensation to landowners for public benefits from their forests include setting aside riparian buffers, habitat for endangered species, carbon sequestration, and greenspace.

There are many non-profit organizations and government agencies that are actively purchasing sensitive lands that are in danger of being converted through urban sprawl. For example, according to the Land Trust Alliance, in 1999, out of 102 local initiatives voted on in the United States to devote public funding to protect open space, 90 percent won approval, committing \$7.3 billion. The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, EPA, ADEM, and the State Lands Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources are a few of the many government agencies that have funds available to purchase conservation easements. Non-profits include the Alabama Forest Resource Center, Alabama Land Trust Alliance, and The Nature Conservancy. Thousands of acres in Alabama have already been purchased and set aside as conservation easements.

Tax Implications

Depending upon how they are structured, taxes can accelerate development at the wildland-urban interface or help shape development to meet the needs of a growing population while retaining as much land as possible in a rural condition. Generally, lower property taxes, taxation based on current use, and lower inheritance taxes provide the greatest incentives for landowners to retain their property. These can be offset by greater severance taxes if needed.

Under the Alabama severance tax law, the timber is not taxed until it is harvest-

ed. The deferred tax on the timber most often is based on the amount, or yield, of the harvest. The economic effect of severance taxes is minor – it has the minimum effect on a landowner's management or decision to sell land. It may, however, sometimes provide a disincentive to harvest timber.

Laws and Regulations

Local governments have traditionally held the authority to make land use decisions because, in addition to being seen as more sensitive and responsive to local concerns, they are perceived as having more expertise in implementing fair and efficient land use policy. These local land use policies, however, often have the effect of increasing development and expanding the wildland-urban interface. Local governments receive most of their funding from property and sales taxes. Therefore, they have little incentive to attempt to limit land development in their jurisdictions, except perhaps to reduce infrastructure costs.

While the states generally delegate their authority over land use to local governments, state legislatures can review or supersede local zoning where statewide interests are at stake. The State's police powers are usually delegated through enabling statutes, frequently patterned after the Standard State Zoning Enabling Act (SSZEA) of 1924. A 1997 survey conducted by the American Planning Association revealed that many southern states lack modernized planning statutes. This deficiency makes it more difficult for these states to effectively manage growth and change in the interface.

There are also many federally mandated laws which must be followed. As previously mentioned, the Clean Water Act, for instance, contains provisions for area-wide land use planning to address pollution from non-point sources. The EPA mandates some development regulations through this law. In addition, under the Clean Air Act, states create air-quality control regions and prepare State Implementation Plans (SIP) that are designed to enable each region to attain federally set numerical limits for ambient concentrations of specific pollutants. If a region fails to meet its SIP obligations or

fails to prepare an adequate SIP, federal highway funds can be jeopardized and new construction can be halted. The Coastal Zone Management Act attempts to minimize adverse impacts of development in coastal areas by providing federal funding and guidelines for states to develop coastal management plans tailored to fit their specific needs. The Endangered Species Act is another example of a federal law with a purpose to conserve and protect natural resources. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has funds to purchase critical habitat areas to protect endangered species, but can also regulate land use to protect endangered species.

Urban Forestry Programs

Even after growth reaches an area, the work continues. Urban growth places tremendous pressure on the surrounding natural resources. Reduced tree cover and an increase in impervious surface area take their toll on air and water quality and energy consumption. For example, a recent study showed that the greater San Antonio area has lost 45,000 acres of heavy tree canopy over the last 15 years, costing its citizens \$9 million a year for air pollution abatement and \$146 million for storm water management. They also lost \$17.7 million in residential summer energy savings, according to the study.

The Stormwater Management Authority (SWMA) is conducting a study of 26 cities that places a dollar value on tree canopy (<http://www.swma.com>). In March 2001, SWMA, Trees for Alabama, CAWACO, and Southern Environmental Center at Birmingham Southern College received a grant from the USDA Forest Service to establish a baseline of information on the forest cover and related information in Jefferson County Alabama, and to inform the local governments and the public at large on the findings of the study. The project will apply current technology to forestry applications in a deteriorating urban and suburban forest. Benefits of this study include documentation of the existing forest cover, education of the general public, and establish the environmental and utility value of the forest canopy in Jefferson County.

The urbanizing forest becomes more valuable because it reduces heat islands and air conditioning needs, slows and absorbs storm water, and improves air and water quality. Individually, every tree provides benefits and, cumulatively, the forest provides enormous services that can reduce the need for regional power generation stations and equally costly water treatment and processing facilities. Some people still have the notion that tree benefits are purely aesthetic. Urban planners can use the new technologies to show how trees will impact their city and plans for new development.

For example, CITYgreen is a GIS software application, developed by American Forests, which merges science and technology to help calculate the values of trees. It allows users to calculate the environmental and economic benefits of forests and trees. City planners use CITYgreen to map and measure tree cover changes and to calculate the benefits urban trees and forests provide, including reduced stormwater runoff, energy savings, carbon sequestration, and the removal of pollutants. CITYgreen is part of a method of land assessment used by American Forests called Regional Ecosystem Analysis. To learn more about this program visit the web site: <http://www.americanforests.org>.

Current Research In WUI

To understand the impact of expanding human populations on multiple forest resources and, ultimately, our quality of life, two dozen researchers affiliated with Auburn University are participating in a research project about the many ways a landscape changes when it is developed. Each scientist is working on an individual aspect of the project, which eventually will be tied together in a single model.

These scientists are studying the influence of urbanization on local economies, faunal and floral biodiversity, water quality, and community sociology. The specific study area is a forested landscape in west-central Georgia, in an area of rapid population growth. This site was chosen over sites in Alabama because of its proximity to the scientists. However, both the soils and the rates of growth are similar to those in the rapidly growing Birmingham and Atlanta areas.

Their goal is not to halt development; rather, to understand the effect of devel-

opment. If they can identify what that threshold of greenspace might be, then that information might be useful to residents of the area, policy makers, planners, and others interested in the development. They are trying to learn what is occurring and then give that information to people who might be able to make some use of it. This will allow direct comparison of a broad array of urbanization influences through conversion of each biological value to a monetary scale.

The USDA Forest Service and other organizations are building resources to further address these issues. You can learn more by visiting their web site, <http://fs.fed.us>, or the Interface-South web site, <http://www.interfacesouth.org/>.

Summary and Action Plan

There are more than 69 million acres of urban forests associated with the nation's 45,000 communities, and in which reside nearly 80 percent of the nation's population. The forests provide tremendous ecological, economic, and social benefits vital to everyone. It is everyone's responsibility to do a better job of directing urban sprawl to ensure that there is a balance between growth and the protection of our natural landscape.

The location of where you live and your perception of the severity of the urban sprawl situation will no doubt influence your beliefs on what, if anything, needs to be done. Past surveys indicate that most landowners do not want regulations. On the flip side, they would like to have some input on development in their area. As citizens of this great State of Alabama, you have a right to be involved in important public planning policy decisions currently being made by your elected officials and urban planners.

You must get involved with this process. Find out how you can participate in your community. Attend planning meetings and workshops. Support and promote citizen-based volunteer organizations. Form partnerships with urban planners and resource professionals to prepare landscape-level urban development plans. Determine ways to grow without fragmenting forested landscapes. Identify the most important, imperiled ecosystems to conserve and manage and plan urban growth in more condensed areas away from these sensitive ecosystems. 🌳

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