



Anti-sprawl housing laws may hurt poor

By Virginia Bridges, The Herald-Sun
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DURHAM -- Imagine Durham as bread and housing growth as peanut butter.

If you spread the peanut butter across the bread in one smooth stroke that would be suburban sprawl, said Frank Duke, director for the City/County Planning Department, trying to put the complicated issues of population growth, the environment and anti-sprawl efforts into layman's terms.

But with anti-sprawl ordinances or what is often called "smart growth" the peanut butter is spread out in chunks, where sensitive areas and different community resources are protected, Duke said.

Currently Durham has a traditional land-use plan. It treats all areas the same and ends up encouraging suburban sprawl, Duke said.

Durham is in the process of defining a unified development ordinance to guide growth and deter sprawl, Duke said. The plan would prohibit housing developments in environmentally sensitive areas and promote cluster developments, where housing units are grouped together so that other areas can remain undeveloped.

But smart growth has its downside, said David Almasey of the National Center for Public Policy and Research.

A recent report commissioned by the center shows that anti-growth policies hurt the poor and minorities by increasing housing costs and decreasing housing options. The center is a Washington-based conservative foundation that researches public policy.

The study, "Smart Growth and Its Effects on Housing Markets: The New Segregation," examined restricted growth policies in Portland, Ore., said Almasey, who spoke at a Triangle Community Coalition luncheon this week. The Triangle Community Coalition is an association with a mission to promote public policy that supports a balance between economic growth, environment and protects the rights and interests of property owners.

The study examined what would happen to housing costs if Portland's policies were applied nationwide.

It found more than 1 million disadvantaged families — 260,000 of them minority families — would have been unable to buy homes because the cost of the average home would have risen \$7,000. The study found the cost of renting would have risen 6 percent.

Instead of restricting growth, the anti-sprawl policies caused housing prices in restricted areas to rise and people who could not afford the costs to move, Almasey said.

But anti-sprawl efforts are more than site restrictions, said Cara Crisler, executive director of the N.C. Smart Growth Alliance, which is based in Carrboro. The center's report was a misrepresentation about what "smart growth" is, she said.

Duke, who wasn't familiar with the report or the organization, said "any zoning and land development regulation that is not approached with sensitivity is going to adversely affect affordable housing."

Durham's current ordinances promote segregation, said Duke, who added that he's working to create anti-sprawl policies that will not inhibit growth but instead will recognize that different regulations are needed to protect distinct areas.

Durham County Commissioner Joe Bowser, who was recently elected the president of the Durham chapter of the NAACP, said the civil rights organization hasn't taken a position on "smart growth" but plans to talk about it in the future.

Bowser questioned whether "smart growth" really "ends up pitting community against homebuilders" by raising housing costs. He said it would be more appropriate to link lack of home ownership with lack of job-training opportunities rather than anti-sprawl efforts.

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