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Maps Tell Sprawl Story

Sprawl seems to be Topic A in Connecticut these days. Observers note with justifiable alarm that finite natural resources are shrinking fast under the pressures of growth and a tax policy that promotes poor land-use decisions.

So it is timely that policy-makers have an important tool to sharpen the conversation - computer maps made available by the University of Connecticut's Center for Land use Education And Research (CLEAR).

The maps, created with great patience from satellite images overlaid on road maps, topographical maps, aerial photographs and other data, chronicle land cover in Connecticut from 1985 to 2002. The color-coded pixels present a sobering picture of sprawl. High-density development such as buildings, parking lots and roads have covered 12 acres of Connecticut landscape every day for those 17 years. The state lost 170 square miles of forest during that period.

Since 1995, the pace of development has accelerated even as Connecticut has lost population.

Although buildings and parking lots account for just 19 percent of the state's overall land cover, and forests more than half, the maps show a trend in the wrong direction. Areas most affected by sprawl stand out in clear relief. Burlington, Glastonbury, Tolland, Manchester and South Windsor are among the communities most altered. Oxford has experienced a 43.9 percent increase in developed land since 1985.

The maps demonstrate as no words or numbers can the pace and type of change in the state with a reputation for stasis. At this rate, there won't be much left of the renowned beauty of the Land of Steady Habits.

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This extraordinary glimpse of Connecticut can be viewed online at www.clear.uconn.edu/projects/landscape/index.htm. The maps speak louder than an army of “smart growth” advocates for the benefits of regional planning and property tax reform in protecting the environment, economy and quality of life.

The university center plans to incorporate the newly completed maps into an education program for municipal decision-makers. For its visionary work, it is owed the state's gratitude, and possibly a healthy grant to continue its outreach work.

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