

Putting farms off-limits to bulldozers

How Iowans can win a brawl with sprawlers

By **BILL LEONARD**



"Urban sprawl" is far too tame a name for the plunder of our rural resources. The sprawl imperils our food supply, vandalizes our scenery, threatens the very character of our state. In parts of the eastern United States, the sprawl became so pervasively obnoxious that citizens finally took action. It's painful, but it works. It can work here.

From 1982 to 1992, a grim reaper skinning a bulldozer rather than swinging a scythe destroyed 50 acres of American farmland every hour, reaching ever farther into the countryside to devour land. It's the formula urban development has followed for a century: Buy the farms and the forests at the edge of the city, lay out streets and name them after the trees you cut down to make room for them, then throw up some ticky-tack and move on.

The formula fit the frontier mentality that has guided the nation since we first began swiping it from the Indians. It also harmonized with the fiction that all "growth" is good.

Current hot spots of the sprawl sickness are southern Wisconsin, northern Illinois, east Texas and the valleys of California. But Iowa has seen its share. Metro Des Moines, meaning the urbanites (200,000), plus suburbanites (another 200,000) has far outgrown the county lines. Dallas County, to the west, is now the fastest-growing area in the state. It won that dubious distinction by sacrificing 10,000 acres of farmland in one generation.

Feeding the sprawl sickness is an apparent misunderstanding of its economic impact. Developers commonly tell planning boards

that carving up farms into acre-or-more building lots means beefing up the county's tax valuation. It does, but not enough to offset the cost of the additional services those home sites need, according to some studies.

Also feeding the sickness is our eagerness to pander to the needs of automobiles. In Iowa, roads need not compete with education, health, social services, parks or other demands for scarce tax dollars; they enjoy their own tax sources, whose revenues are untouchable. More homes in central Des Moines are soon to be sacrificed to expand our speedway so that more commuters can

get in and out of town quicker.

Widening a freeway is no more a solution to sprawl than loosening your belt is a solution to obesity. The jam-free freeway simply facilitates the escape to a house in the far 'burbs.

A place in the country is every family's dream: a lake in the front yard and a forest in the back, a 20-minute drive to a city that's sufficiently distant to isolate you from its grime and crime. The dream offers big-city conveniences and rural amenities. You awaken to songbirds, breathe clean air and retire at night without triple-locking the doors and checking out the alarm system. You work hard; you've earned it.

Besides, population growth means we've got to go somewhere. By the middle of the next century there will be three Americans for every two today. That means three cars jockeying for the last two parking spaces at the mall, six people ahead of you at the grocery check-out line instead of today's four, a 90-minute wait for a restaurant table instead of an hour — or else more malls, more groceries, more restaurants, but with no more urban space to put them on.

The American Farmland Trust of Washington, D.C., says that growth spells a 13 percent cut in farmland, and that, in turn, means that America the Bountiful could be importing more food than it exports by 2060.

But even if the population boost somehow never materialized, sprawl could still pose a problem, the Zero Population Growth Reporter warns. Between 1970 and 1990, Cleveland lost 8 percent of its population — and its land area grew by 33 percent.

The sprawl into the countryside housing developments continues because a good share of our population can afford it. Whether

