

## Conclusion: A “Business-As-Usual” Future?

The West will continue to grow faster than the nation as a whole for the foreseeable future. The region is attractive to people and to capital investment, especially in an economy where both are mobile and quality of life increasingly guides business and individual decisions about location. The economic and political forces behind the growth of recent decades are powerful, and most community leaders continue to see growth as success, and to view any decline of housing starts or jobs as somehow a “failure.”

Our projections offer a view of the future that we think of as “business-as-usual.” But will growth inevitably result in suburban and rural sprawl that eats up open space and wildlife habitat and blurs sense of community? This depends, of course, on decisions made by each state, each community, and each land owner. Tools are available for making growth “smarter.” Open space protection, downtown revitalization, alternative transportation, and comprehensive plans that reflect residents’ visions of good communities (and that are actually enforced) can all alter the outcome. In some Western places such tools have already made a difference, and our projections understate their success. Oregon and a few Western communities have effective growth management. But we think these projections still capture the overall growth patterns of most of the West.

Nevertheless, our projections are certain to be wrong, in one way or another. Our population estimates might be

too conservative, or the way our model spreads development on the landscape may not adequately account for the growing demand for rural residences, larger lots, and multiple homes. Alternatively, some political, economic or cultural change might slow regional in-migration or reduce the region's fertility. Maybe more Westerners will discover the joys of living "downtown" rather than out on the suburban edge.

Growth and land use are largely local issues. Growth occurs in everybody's backyard, most new subdivisions attaching to existing ones and wiping out someone's open space view. So Westerners fret over development even as they enjoy both the benefits of growth and the region's enduring legacy of great open spaces. The vision and power to alter the future, somehow to balance the benefits of both growth and land conservation, must come from the local level.

Our projections also suggest that there is value in coordinating growth and land use patterns among communities and across regional landscapes. The pattern and rate of growth matter as much as its total footprint. Growth tends to follow riparian areas, to fill in spaces between communities, and inevitably to fragment natural and agricultural landscapes. Protection of community separators, viewsheds, agricultural land, and wildlife corridors could yield a new blueprint for the West in which the settlement landscape at last matches the region's incomparable beauty.

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