

Writers on the Range

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Wherever you go, sprawl isn't far behind

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Some of my wilderness-loving friends are abandoning California. Sick of the traffic, the smog, the subdivisions creeping up and destroying beloved landscapes, they're bailing out in search of smaller communities in the true West.

But urban sprawl is everywhere east of here. Like most other man-made problems, sprawl is not something you can run away from. Sooner or later, it catches up with you.

The wanderings of my suburb-a-phobic mother have always illustrated this point for me. She and her horses, dogs and boyfriends have ranch-hopped all around California's central coast since I was a kid. I lived with my father in the sterile suburbs of Silicon Valley, but weekends and summers I

escaped to my mom's oases of yellow grass and live oaks.

In 1990, when I was 13, she was living near Santa Cruz, in a small, ramshackle ranchette on the north side of town. Even then, big new monster houses had popped up on two sides of the corrals. But we could ride out for miles through the oak woodlands of an adjoining ranch, to sandstone bluffs that overlooked the ocean.

Then, as the economic boom of the 1990s got under way, my mom fled south, away from the high rents and rapid urbanization emanating from Silicon Valley. Her first stop was a place in the strawberry fields near Watsonville, where she paid half her schoolteacher's salary to live in a tiny one-bedroom guesthouse on somebody else's ranch.

Over the next eight years, she kept on moving, trying to find some place that was still like the rural California coast of her childhood. But everywhere she went, sprawl had gotten there first. The roar of commuter and weekend traffic on the nearby highways drowned out the whinnying of the horses, and a brown line of smog was always on the horizon.

In 2000, fed up and frustrated, she swore off the Monterey Bay, packed up her stuff and headed south to rural San Luis Obispo County - 200 miles from the Bay area, 200 miles from Los Angeles, just about as far away from office parks and strip malls as you can get in California. She found a roomy house with plenty of acreage and a noticeable lack of big-mansion neighbors, for less than she'd been paying up north. She unloaded the horses and declared that her wandering days were over.

But sprawl, like fate, has a funny way of catching up with you. Just months after her arrival, I was doing some research and paid a visit to the San Luis Obispo County planning office. I discovered that the county had recently approved a 2,000-unit subdivision, complete with golf course, retail space and a small airport, on the nearby Santa Margarita Ranch. It was less than a mile from her new paradise.

The simple truth is that the West, and those of us who care about the West, cannot run away from sprawl. In fact, it is our desire to get away from it that makes it happen. In our quest for greener pastures, we are abandoning the communities at the time that they need us most, and guaranteeing that sprawl developers will continue their march across the open spaces of the region. If we want to preserve what's left of our communities and landscapes, we'd better turn and fight.

In California, birthplace of the drive-through McMansion lifestyle, years of efforts by grassroots opponents to sprawl are finally paying off. In a landslide 2000 victory, San Jose became the largest city in the nation to enact a voter-adopted permanent urban growth boundary.

Initiatives to stop sprawl at the county level appear on the ballot with increasing frequency in California elections. It's always a tough battle, judging by the multimillion-dollar misinformation campaigns waged by developers and landed interests. But on the flip side of the growth coin, California cities are finally waking up to the fact that there is a better way to accommodate growth: reinvesting in older neighborhoods. Facing pressure from a new coalition of environmentalists, labor and social-justice advocates, San Francisco Bay area cities are seeking out vacant lots and empty warehouses to reincarnate as housing developments.

To those of you bemoaning the influx of Californians taking over your communities, I send my apologies. But if you don't take to our company, at least take a cue from our tactics, and stand up to sprawl in your community before it's too late.

In the meantime, this Californian's gonna stay and fight.

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