

LAND USE FUTURES C

Introduction

The American West is the fastest-growing region of the country, but it is also a place endowed with great open spaces that offer important ecological and social values. This juxtaposition, and the region's rapidly changing land use patterns, attract a lot of interest and evoke a lot of emotion. Residential and commercial development is spreading across the landscape. The region is home not only to some of the most sprawling cities in the country, but to a more dispersed "exurban" pattern of low density development in rural areas, especially near charismatic landscapes like national parks. Westerners watch these changes and grieve over lost open space while simultaneously appreciating the benefits of economic and population growth, and the land development, expanded services, and property value appreciation that naturally follows.

Western growth has boomed and slowed through history, but the landscape effects of growth are cumulative. Economic prosperity may advance and retreat, but its physical edifices hold their ground. Each developed acre is subtracted from the fount of open lands that have long marked this region as a special place and have allowed the West to maintain much of its natural endowment of biodiversity. Because development is carved predominantly out of lands used for agriculture, it also inevitably reflects a reduction of the agrarian and pastoral economy and culture that once formed the core of Western rural society. Letters to the editors of newspapers in Boise, Phoenix, and Denver, and even in rural valleys like the Bitterroot and Payette, speak to a sense that development is spreading too fast, consuming the view, habitat, and sense of community that Westerners have valued for so long. Of course, many of us who complain about growth and land development are ourselves part of the problem. We gravitate to the edge of the suburbs, at-

tracted by views of the mountains and cheap land, or we take the next step and build our homes out in the exurbs—out in the so-called wildland-urban interface where people and nature coexist uncomfortably.

A few key facts of western land use are important. First, half the land between the front ranges of the Rockies and the Pacific coast is federally owned, and not subject to residential or commercial development (it may have gas wells, roads, lodges, and clear-cuts, but it won't have shopping malls or cookie-cutter subdivisions). And much of the West's private land is not likely to be developed in the foreseeable future—it is too dry or too remote. But there's reason to believe that a lot more development is coming. The West has grown faster than the country as a whole for much of the last century, and is likely to outpace national growth for the foreseeable future. The "New West" is increasingly attractive to migrants and to investors. Western land owners will certainly continue to respond to market forces, and to their own preferences, by transforming lower value land uses, like agriculture, into more financially-rewarding options like subdivisions and shopping malls. Finally, Westerners will continue to buy homes in suburbs distant from city centers and to build second homes in the forests and on ridge tops. They will demand highways, water systems, and other utilities. They will also continue to complain about the sprawl, traffic, interrupted views, and lost sense of community that growth brings.

Over the last decade, Westerners have witnessed remarkable change, have watched whole mountainsides develop, and found their commutes lengthening. But we all still find it hard to imagine what the land will look like in twenty, thirty, or forty years, when the region's population is likely to have grown by 50 percent or more again. So we at the Center of the American West set out to project land use patterns so that Westerners might take a look at their region's future. These are just projec

tions, not exact predictions. Many unpredictable events and forces will make the future turn out differently than our maps suggest. Still, we are confident that in general we have captured the broad patterns of likely future development in the West.

O u r P r o j e c t i o n s

Our model for projecting land development has its virtues, but like much of the growth in the West it is not very smart. It assumes that all private land that is technically buildable in the West is on the real estate market. It does not know that some owners have placed conservation easements on their land, nor that many ranchers and farmers are not interested in selling, even if the price is right. And it does not know where state or local governments have enacted effective growth limits. Still, very little private land is permanently protected from development, and very few effective growth limits exist in the West. Outside of Oregon, no state has statewide growth limits strong enough, in our view, to significantly affect large-scale development patterns. Local communities with land use regulations backed by effective incentives or disincentives are sufficiently rare that they are repeatedly cited as case studies (e.g., open space programs in Boulder, Colorado, or Davis, California) of either effective growth management or, according to their critics, of ill-conceived interventions in the land market. Most land development in the West thus stems from a mixture of market forces and individual preferences, often aided by government investments in highways and other infrastructure. The model simply spreads development out across the landscape based on population growth (which drives demand for land and development). It calculates only residential development, which we offer as a surrogate for all that comes with it, including infrastructure and commercial land us

Depending on your point of view, our 2040 scenario can be seen as offering either positive or negative futures. The public lands figure prominently as a reserve of open space that Westerners will come increasingly to value as the buildable lands develop. But several areas face projected growth that is sure to cause contention. Phoenix continues to sprawl across the desert; cities along Colorado's Front Range merge into one another and send exurban sprawl into the nearby mountains; and development in California's Great Central Valley, so rich in productive farm land, expands to dominate the landscape.

A few places step into the land-use limelight: Spokane spreads out, and towns in Idaho's Upper Snake River Valley grow and begin to merge, as do several small towns on the west side of Washington's Cascade Range. On the eastern border of our maps, though, a huge swath of the Great Plains in eastern Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico that is mostly private land stays green (rural) even in 2040. Population growth and spreading development concentrates in the mountain, desert, and coastal parts of the West, while avoiding the Great Plains.

In the following pages we take a closer look at selected parts of the West.