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HEADLINE: A SNUG BUT FAIRLY COMFORTABLE FIT: THE CONCEPT OF A GROWTH BOUNDARY

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BODY:

OVER the past decade, we in King County have used land like there was no tomorrow.

That's about to change. According to the Growth Management Act, most Washington counties must set urban growth boundaries which encourage urban areas on one side and rural growth on the other. Growth boundaries are intended to protect rural and resource lands and to channel urban growth to where urban services already exist or can be efficiently provided.

Growth boundaries are common. They have been used throughout the world and since the beginning of urban history. A recent national survey conducted by the University of Washington found that one in three counties in the nation has them.

Moreover, three out of four planning directors in communities with urban boundaries report they are effective in achieving their goals.

Some people worry that King County's boundary, which was adopted in 1992, is so tight and inflexible it will drive up housing prices, squeeze out jobs and households, keep apartment dwellers out of detached houses, and force people into buses who would rather drive alone.

If we continue the growth patterns of the past, they could be right. But a loose and flexible boundary would only encourage urban sprawl. That would bring an equally dismal future of smog, water pollution, higher taxes, traffic congestion and a losing battle to save the countryside.

Those who worry about the boundary say that the alternative to sprawl is a "drastic" change in lifestyle which, as UW geography professor Richard Morrill puts it, "involves telling people that their future is to live in apartments instead of houses and to take trains and streetcars instead of cars."

Luckily, most planners are not saying that. We are saying that if we grow more carefully, by recycling more urban land, encouraging large and small urban centers and especially by reducing the average new single-family lot from the 15,000 square foot hulk it has become today, there could be both room enough and a high quality of life inside the present growth boundary.

King County's current urban boundary provides about a third of an acre of land for every household that is expected to be here in 20 years. While this sounds like a lot, it is less than some well-known cases outside Washington. When Portland and Minneapolis set up their growth areas in the 1970s, they included about half an acre for every household.

But times are different now. There is much more interest today in shaping what happens inside the boundary. That was of little concern to the Portland and Minneapolis planners whose main objective was to protect rural and farming areas. A generous growth area was fine as long as it avoided rural and resource lands. Since then, however, they've had sprawl inside their boundaries and have adopted various strategies - such as the Portland minimum density rule - to reduce their use of land.

Residential subdivisions, our biggest land user, used about half an acre of land for every lot they created. While our population grew by 18 percent, the amount of land used for housing went up by 30 percent. Meanwhile, the amount of land used for jobs grew by 35 percent. As a result, we are more spread out than ever before.

Interestingly, some of the spreading has been caused by requirements that developers avoid environmentally sensitive and hazardous areas. That's good, of course, but because we have not built more intensively on the remaining lands, we have increased the spread and extended the total area under our urban footprint.

It's time to go on a land diet to preserve our quality of life. That does not, however, require a drastic change in how we live.

One of the most important places to start our diet is with single family lots in new subdivisions. Allowing for critical area set-asides, streets and other public facilities, conventional single-family detached housing can be built at up to seven dwelling units per acre. We have averaged only 1.9 units per acre in King County over the past decade. We should immediately double the average lot density in new subdivisions. In fact, Des Moines, Kirkland, Sea-Tac and Seattle have done just that.

Other good ideas exist that would reduce land consumption but still allow most households to live in single-family homes and work in campus-style business parks. Add to these a modest increase in urban villages and suburban centers, and we have a combination of opportunities that can save land without drastically changing our lifestyles.

The key, of course, is using less land. A snug growth boundary would help by encouraging less land consumption through higher land prices. But this will only occur if buyers expect the line to be stable. If the boundary is easily moved, speculation will continue on rural land, urban land prices will not increase, there will be no market incentive to use land more efficiently and sprawl will continue.

The market will respond to a snug and stable boundary by substituting capital for land, that is by proposing to use less land per unit of development. In many cases that could be done without changing zoning because many new developments are less dense than current zoning allows. In other cases, zoning should be changed to allow, for example, 5,000-square-foot lots in new neighborhoods where 7,500-square-foot-lots might be required today. The growth boundary line should be moved eventually, but only after we have learned to conserve land and begin reaching a reasonable minimum density target.

Of course, a snug and stable boundary would not succeed on its own. Zoning adjustments, adequate infrastructure funding, efficient permitting, good community design and a committed and involved public must also be in place.

If we succeed, things will be different, but not drastically different.

The price of the typical 15,000-square-foot lot would rise beyond the reach of some who buy them today, but there will be somewhat smaller lots that both those households and our environment can afford. Rents for very low density campus-style business parks will be higher but alternatives will be built that are denser but beautiful, like the UW campus. Driving alone will still be common although we won't need to drive as far to reach our destinations.

Some businesses and households will always prefer sprawl and will choose to move elsewhere. However, most will remain because we will be offering them a non-sprawl alternative that can meet their needs, because King County is where the action is, because our quality of life will be hard to leave, and because the sprawl option also will be scarce in other counties that are planning under the Growth Management Act. Moreover, any room left behind by the seekers of sprawl will be used by newcomers who are glad to live and compete in the new future King County.

So sure, if we keep sprawling like we have, there won't be enough land to meet our needs inside the growth boundary. But if we open up the boundary or adjust it at every turn we will simply trade one sad state for another.

Like it or not, we cannot use land like we have and expect everything to be OK.

But with a moderate touch of the conservation ethic that King County residents already apply to recycling, historic buildings, agricultural lands and other things we value, our land can also be conserved, our boundaries held firm and a quality of life passed on to our children that's better than today.

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GRAPHIC: MAP ED WALKER / SEATTLE TIMES: URBAN GROWTH (MAP NOT AVAILABLE ELECTRONICALLY)

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