

Top Ten Things Adversely Affected By Poor Land-Use Decisions

1. Farmland

While all farmland is not of equal value, if you look at the quality of farmland globally, Iowans are sitting on a precious nonrenewable resource. Farming is Iowa's second largest employer after retail. One out of every four jobs is related to ag, for a total of 500,000 jobs. In 1996, ag accounted for 25% of the state's total economic activity (\$55.8 billion).¹ Yet Iowa loses 26,000 acres of farmland a year.² Urban development on farmland compromises the ability of farmers to do their jobs. Machinery, noise, dust, livestock, smells, traffic, building materials littering fields, and increased population do not make for good neighborhood relations.

2. Natural Areas

Iowa has the most altered landscape in the nation. As late as the 1860s, Iowa was 90–95% covered with prairie grasses, whose deep root system could soak up more than 5,000 gallons of water per hour, helping to mitigate flood damage. Today, Iowa has lost 99% of its native prairie and wetlands.³ Woodland is also affected by development. As habitat vanishes, wild animals become pests to drivers and suburban homeowners. Natural areas, widely used for hunting, fishing and other types of recreation, are no longer available. One of Iowa's remaining natural landscapes, the Loess Hills, is found in only one other place: China. Besides adding beauty, character and recreational opportunities to our state, natural areas enhance our quality of life.

3. Urban Centers

People and businesses leave downtown and older neighborhoods to relocate in the suburbs. This leaves Iowa's larger, older cities with high taxes, more poverty, empty store fronts and homes, and a stagnant population. For example, the Des Moines population fell by 1% in the 1990s, while West Des Moines grew by 34%, and Ankeny by 36%.⁴ A study by the city manager's office in the 1990s showed that Des Moines had 5,500 vacant, buildable lots. In the urbanized portion of the Des Moines metro area, population density was 5.7 people per acre in 1950. In 1990, it was 3.6.⁵

4. Small Towns

All the growth in Iowa shouldn't just happen in suburbs and on farmland around urban centers. We have to enhance small towns, too. Rural Iowa has seen an outward migration

of its people. This trend accelerated with the farm crisis and has continued as small farmers have left the land. Commercial sprawl on the edges of small towns and mega malls in Iowa's largest cities drain the vitality of a small town's Main Street. Comparable to our inner-city neighborhoods, as people leave rural Iowa, drugs and crime appear.

5. Local Businesses

Enough can't be said for the importance of locally-owned businesses to a community. Economists tell us that the multiplier effect of a dollar spent in a local economy is duplicated seven times. Ken Stone, economist at Iowa State University, found that five years after the opening of a superstore like Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Target, or Home Depot, locally-owned small businesses within a 20 mile radius experience a 19% decline in sales.⁶ If you are just hanging on, that's going to finish you off. The local store owner sends his kids to your kids' school. He helps the ball team and the Girl Scouts. He goes to your church and joins your civic groups. Superstores predominantly hire part-time help at low wages. Many are built with subsidies paid for by Iowa taxpayers. They usually locate on the outskirts of town, drawing customers away from Main Street businesses. Retail is Iowa's largest employer and accounts for the single largest sector of our state's economy. Yet as chains dominate the retail market, many of the dollars spent on retail simply leave the state.

6. A Balanced Transportation System

Urban sprawl has increased our dependence on the automobile and use of non-renewable fuels. Miles and miles of paving cut into the land, taking thousands and thousands of acres of farmland out of production. In Des Moines, I-235 averages 1.007 riders per vehicle.⁷ The social impact of the car on America is almost unfathomable. Time consuming commutes are now a way of life. Sidewalks are no longer a feature in many new parts of town. New housing tracts are designed, not so people can visit and build a strong community, but for isolation and auto-convenience. Strip malls and discount stores only accessible by driving destroy downtowns and older neighborhoods. They steal the sense of community that helps bind us together as a people and a nation. Why don't state and federal departments of transportation provide our communities with busses, light rail, bike lanes, and more money to repair existing roads, instead of specializing primarily in new highway construction?

7. Historic Preservation

When we were a far less wealthy nation, we built things with the expectation that they

would endure. To throw away (painfully acquired) money and (painfully expended) energy on something certain to fall apart in 30 years would have seemed immoral if not insane to Great-Grandpa. Compare the richly embellished post offices of old to the square concrete counterpart built today. Compare the quarter-cut oak woodwork in older homes with what we see in new construction today. The city of Des Moines bulldozes 30 older homes each year at an average cost of \$7,500.⁸

8. Quality of Life

When we look at the things we value, what do we use to measure our quality of life? Is it the quantity of things we possess, or happiness we get from the kind of life we live, that determines our quality of life? If we are truly concerned about making Iowa a destination state, a place our young people will speak of proudly and will want to call home, quality of life is essential. Iowa has many things to offer. A beautiful, diverse landscape, nestled in the heart of North America, Iowa is the hub of hospitality. A leader in education, Iowa has three world-class universities, 62 public and private colleges, and 28 community college campuses. We need to recognize our diverse cultures, quaint communities and agricultural heritage for the potential it has to attract tourists. We should not be concerned only with where development goes, but how it is designed and how it relates to everything around it. Let's not destroy our most precious assets.

9. Community Identity

Does your community have its own identity and sense of place? Or does it look like Everywhere, U.S.A.? Taupe colored homes, Wal-Mart, a strip mall, McDonald's.... These are not features that make citizens proud of their town. Buildings like the Frank Lloyd Wright hotel in Mason City, the courthouse in Sioux City, or Czech Village in Cedar Rapids provide a community with that uniqueness that sets it apart and makes it special.

10. Taxes

In a 1998 study of three central Iowa cities, it was found that these cities pay \$1.12 to service residential development for every dollar residential development generates in taxes. In other words, residential development doesn't pay its own way. Commercial, industrial and farmland all pay their way. One conclusion from this is that farmland should not be regarded as merely an interim use for the land until a so-called "higher and better" use can be found. From a purely tax-base point of view, while farmland generates less tax revenue, it pays its own way, requiring only \$.80 in services for every tax dollar paid. We also must consider the many public incentives that subsidize development on

flat, rich farmland. Taxes are better spent maintaining a well-utilized existing infrastructure than to develop new systems that merely duplicate what we already have.²

Notes

1. Iowa Department of Economic Development. [back](#)
2. Iowa State University Extension. 1998 Pilot Land Use Inventory, pp. 24–30. [back](#)
3. Bahrati, Luna. MS thesis, Department of Forestry, Iowa State University, 1997. [back](#)
4. U.S. Census Bureau, cited in the Des Moines Register, July 1, 1999. [back](#)
5. Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Estimates of Land Use in Comparison to Population for the Des Moines Metropolitan Area, 1997. [back](#)
6. Beaumont, Constance. How Superstore Sprawl Can Harm Communities, 1994, p. 7, citing research done by Kenneth E. Stone, ISU Economist. [back](#)
7. Wilbur Smith and Associates. I-235 Alternative Analysis, 1994. [back](#)
8. Community Development Department, City of Des Moines, 1999. [back](#)
9. Fallon, Ed. “The Cost of Community Services in Three Central Iowa Cities,” May 1998; updated July 2002.