

# Saving central cities

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New York's metropolitan areas aren't growing as much as they're spreading.

They're consuming more and more open land, even without significant population growth. And while there's new construction at the fringes, many of New York's central cities are decaying.

New state legislation aims to curb the trend.

The bill, which sailed through the Legislature with little opposition and now awaits Gov. [David Paterson](#)'s signature, instructs state agencies to direct spending only to infrastructure projects that are consistent with the principles of so-called smart growth.

The bill also requires agencies to evaluate projects using anti-sprawl criteria -- including whether it's within a municipal center, benefits public transportation networks, and uses existing roads and sewers.

Proponents of the bill say it could fundamentally change how New York develops its landscape. Infrastructure projects at the fringes of the metropolitan area will lose out, they say, to road and sewer projects where most people already live.

"It's going to force a change in the thinking of every state agency that's got money," said [Peter Fleisher](#) of Empire State Future, an anti-sprawl coalition and strong supporter of the bill. "That's really big. That's fundamental change."

The legislation was supported by some business-backed groups, as well as by AARP, which argues that smart growth principles benefit the elderly by creating walkable and condensed communities.

But some business groups and residential builders oppose the bill, saying it will thwart economic development. (Infrastructure projects undertaken by cities and towns are affected by the law because they are frequently backed or complemented by state money.)

"I don't know how any developer is going to be able to know if a project is going to meet this standard or not," said [Ken Pokalsky](#), senior director of governmental affairs for the [Business Council](#) of New York State. "It's just so broad and vague."

Pokalsky noted that one person's "smart growth" might be another person's sprawl. He pointed to residential projects in Saratoga Springs that are considered smart because they're close to downtown.

But many Saratoga residents commute to Albany. So, he asked, are those projects really so smart?

Assemblyman [George Amedore](#), a Republican from Rotterdam and vice president of builder Amedore Homes, was one of just a handful of lawmakers who opposed the bill. He said today's open field is tomorrow's thriving and popular suburb.

"If this legislation was in place years ago, would Clifton Park be Clifton Park today?" Amedore asked.

The bill doesn't forbid state infrastructure spending that doesn't meet smart-growth principles. But it requires that agencies spending in such a way justify why they are doing so.

That could be seen as a huge loophole that will allow agencies to spend how they always have, with additional paperwork. But Fleisher said the bill needed to allow spending on worthwhile economic development that's outside of developed areas.

"It's a good application of public policy," he said. "It allows reasonable exceptions."

The legislation also doesn't keep developers from taking on infrastructure costs on their own.

Indeed, the bill targets a thinly veiled development secret: Stores and homes that look as though they're the result of free-market capitalism are actually supported by taxpayer spending. You can't sell homes in a semi-rural subdivision, after all, if there is no road to get there.

"Public investment is a driver of development," said [Rocco Ferraro](#), who heads the [Capital District Regional Planning Commission](#). "Without it, significant development is not going to occur."

Ferraro cited a somewhat dated commission study that found that the amount of developed land in the Capital Region increased by 15 percent from 1986 to 1997, while the population increased by just 3.4 percent.

Proponents of the smart-growth legislation note that the trend has implications for taxpayers, as a relatively stable number of people is being asked to maintain an ever-expanding road and sewer network.

"Sprawl is a problem that has exacerbated New York's financial crisis," says the text of the bill. "The extension of infrastructure to areas that have traditionally been green fields have caused runaway expenditures and economic costs.

"This bill aims to stop the bleeding."

Gov. Paterson is widely expected to sign the legislation.

A spokeswoman for the governor last week said that Paterson is reviewing the bill.