

Urban sprawl

SEMCOG wants to slow this horse down

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Without a peep of controversy, the South-Central Michigan Council of Governments has adopted a strategy report to slow down "urban sprawl" — the development of suburban open space with little population increase.

SEMCOG's General Assembly last week approved a 40-page strategy to save older cities and infrastructure, including reclaiming contaminated sites.

"Revitalizing Urban Communities" contained no hint of the charge of "racism," which deeply offended Oakland, western Wayne and Macomb delegates two years ago during debate over the Regional Development Initiative (RDI).

"The new document started in the RDI," said John Amberger, SEMCOG's executive director. "There were five major findings in RDI. One was that we need to do a better job at the suburban level of managing growth so it doesn't turn into sprawl."

"If we can have quality growth in the suburbs, and not just suck out jobs, that's part of the equation," Amberger said. "It (the new report) is positive for older areas."

People shifted

Cruz of the problem: SEMCOG expects the

amount of developed land to increase 40 percent in the seven-county region in 20 years while population rises only 6 percent — a shifting of people without real growth.

Twin evils: abandonment of older, built-up areas and heavy taxpayer burdens to serve newly developed land.

"Cooperation between urban centers and their surrounding suburbs could be enhanced," the SEMCOG policy says. "By joining together, all communities in the region will enjoy greater economic success."

One recommendation calls for "quick take" laws allowing older communities to assemble the large land parcels required by modern industry. Another would allow property tax breaks to be given only by "designated areas" to end the bidding war between communities.

SEMCOG points a finger of blame at a law it once praised — PA 233 of 1990, the so-called "Polluters Pay" act. The planning agency now says the law "tightly restricts" redevelopment of land in urban areas.

SEMCOG continues its call for a stronger public transit system, noting 33 percent of Detroit families and 12 percent in the region have no auto.

Amberger said the "Revitalizing" report

benefited from much suburban input. Task force members included Joan Buser, Oakland Township supervisor; Don Gross, Southfield community development director; Tim Pope, Novi councilman and aide to Sen. David Bonigman of West Bloomfield; Nancy Bates, an aide to Rep. Jan Dolan of Farmington Hills; and officials from such Wayne County communities as Dearborn, Southgate and Grosse Pointe Farms.

'Superb work'

SEMCOG also unveiled its new handbook "Land Use Tools and Techniques."

"It's an absolutely superb work," said Amberger. "We'd like to get a copy into the hands of every zoning official in the region, and even the state."

Oakland Township's Buser, outlining the work, said it would help suburban officials retain open space and the character of their communities even as development arrives.

For example, instead of a wetlands ordinance requiring "buffer" areas between a wetland and a building, a community can do better by requiring large setbacks from a wetland in its zoning ordinance.

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SS number request irks folks

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Homeowners who object to giving the local assessor their Social Security numbers may have to prove by other means that they're eligible for the lower school property tax rate this year.

Citing fears of "Big Brother," some homeowners are refusing to give their Social Security numbers when they send city or township hall the affidavit entitling them to a six- or 12-mill tax rate on their dwellings.

Without some proof, they may have to pay 24 mills.

"The Michigan Department of Treasury has the legal authority to use Social Security numbers for tax purposes," according to the state treasurer's Feb. 10 advisory memo.

"Federal law prohibits the state or local governments from releasing a Social Security number to unauthorized persons. Local governments may not use Social Security numbers for any purpose other than to administer the homestead exemption."

Maximum penalty for improperly disclosing a Social Security number: five years in prison and a fine of \$5,000.

Will you receive the homestead exemption if you fail or refuse to enter your Social Security number?

Treasury's answer: "The Department of Treasury may ask for further verification of your homestead exemption claim." It does not say what "further verification" might be.

All property will be taxed at 24 mills for school operations except your principal homestead. If Proposal A, a constitutional amendment, is approved March 16 by voters, the rate will be six mills; if it's rejected, 12 mills.

Deputy treasurer Madhu Anderson said the state requests the number to "preclude any person from having or claiming more than one principal residence at any time."

"Because some taxpayers may inadvertently make errors on their affidavits or improperly claim more than one homestead exemption, we ask for a Social Security number to verify that the property is properly claimed," she said, citing three sections of the Social Security Act.

Here's how it works: If a local unit raises a question about whether you are seeking more than one exemption, Treasury uses your Social Security number to run a computer check to see if you've filed more than once.

The exemption applies only to your principal homestead. A second home is ineligible for the lower rate.

"If the Department of Treasury denies your homestead exemption, you may file an appeal with the Michigan Tax Tribunal," the Treasury bulletin says.

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