



Michigan State University Extension
Land Use Series

The Problems with Large Lot Zoning

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Large lot zoning initially seems a natural approach to growth-related problems. Requiring every house to have three to five acres of land may initially maintain the appearance of a rural character in a community. Large lots mean fewer houses, which means fewer residents. Homes on large lots are likely to be expensive, so they contribute more in taxes than smaller units. By allowing houses to get by with a well and on-site septic treatment, large lots often avoid significant infrastructure costs.

Large lot subdivisions are often easier to develop. Governments that are under pressure to accommodate booming populations and development will find that zoning for large lots does not require months of deliberations with professional planners and attorneys. For developers, large lot subdivisions are an easy sell and guaranteed to make a profit: a large percentage of new residents are seeking a big house on a five acre, “rural” lot. Unfortunately, the seeming advantages to large lots are short-lived when communities face a booming population and mass-scale development. While expensive homes have higher property taxes than inexpensive ones, they still do not merit the costs they bring. Service costs for schools, police and emergency services, roads, and government administration for a typical subdivision range from \$1.04 to \$2.00 for every dollar of tax revenue. Existing residents in the community bear the brunt of these costs. Large lots cost the community more, both in terms of greater expenditures per household served and in terms of revenue gained in taxes from each.

Rapid population growth eventually brings along infrastructure costs in the form of new roads, utility lines, and services for residents. In the long run, large lot zoning causes these costs to increase. Building new streets is costly both for the developer, who generally pays for construction of the street, and the municipality, which pays to maintain the street. Thus, a rural landowner seeking to develop his acreage generally will want to sell parcels that front on an existing public road. Such new lots transform rural roads into streets with ribbons of driveway entrances, some of them hard to see. Many rural areas do not require traffic feasibility studies, and thus have no way of assessing the true impact such development has upon roads. Housing development on the urban fringe often follows this pattern; however, this form of development leads to increases in traffic congestion and accidents. The community may not yet feel the significance of traffic problems these additional homes cause. Particularly in hilly rural areas, limited sight distance for speeding through traffic equals greater potential for accidents with vehicles entering from their driveways. Community officials may be reluctant at first to consider alternative development patterns, not yet realizing the costs of development.

*“Thirty seven million acres is
all the Michigan we will ever have”*
William G. Milliken

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A community rarely grows from scattered dwellings and large tracts of vacant land into an outer ring suburb without providing public sewers and water in at least some areas. Even the best soil types for on-site septic systems reach limitations when there are hundreds of new homes. As with streets, utility costs are directly related to the length of installations. Thus, the fewer new units there are, the greater the cost for each individual unit to access utilities. What may be a reasonable project in a town center or suburb with one-quarter acre lots becomes a serious burden in more rural areas. The addition of a large lot development to a public water/sewer system can carry extraordinary per unit expense, both for construction and line maintenance.

Local government costs associated with on-site wastewater disposal systems include the inspection process for development of the lots, siting of the systems, installation, maintenance, pump-outs, detecting and correcting failing systems, and the availability of trained personnel to carry out these inspections. Other community services do not escape cost increases. Higher populations create new demands and expectations on the community. At some point, an occasional patrol of an area by county police units becomes insufficient because they cannot respond quickly enough. New police officers, ambulance workers and fire workers may become needed. Each new worker represents increased costs for the community: even with new workers the response times are often longer due to the distance between homes.

One of the inherent conflicts that developing communities face is that new residents are attracted by the semi-rural atmosphere, but are often unwilling to forsake the emergency response capacities that were available in the urban core. They expect professionally equipped police, fire and ambulance crews. The lower taxes rural in-migrants from urban centers pay do not necessarily translate into lower expectations for services. For long-time residents who have different perspectives on rural life, this can lead to a debate about raising taxes to improve emergency services. As the proportion of newcomers to long-time residents increases, taxes for everyone rise accordingly. These taxes will be dedicated to more expensive equipment for firefighters, satellite dispatch stations to lessen response times in widely dispersed communities, and eventually, the costs for around-the-clock police protection.

Attempting to control growth through large lot zoning not only has dire consequences for taxpayers and the environment, but eventually this form of development permanently alters the rural character of a community. Fields and farms become subdivisions, eventually leading to adjacent commercial development. Farmland and undeveloped open space are the defining elements of a rural community. However, the land that offers the best opportunity for agricultural production is also the easiest and least costly for a developer to build upon. The challenge facing developers and the local community is to accommodate for growth while retaining the features that originally made the community appealing to newcomers. Somewhere in the transition from rural to rapidly developing, a community loses valuable landscape elements and natural resources. Unregulated development and large lot requirements quickly convert fields into residential parcels that are too big to mow and too small to plow. People destroy the

very qualities they sought when they moved. Wildlife corridors are disrupted, and the landscape, despite the “green” color, becomes fragmented. One option available to local governments is to try and preserve as much open space and agricultural land as possible, to keep taxes low and retain the natural features of the area. Large lots may appear to serve this purpose, since a small proportion of the lots are paved or built upon, but they do not generate enough in taxes.

Each community is unique, thus no one ratio of residential and nonresidential land exists that will stabilize taxes and spending. Instead, local officials must look at each of the major cost factors in turn, to determine how different conditions affect the needed balance. If growth is inevitable, caring citizens and community leaders must find and implement effective ways to protect a desirable quality of life.

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