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## Don Jarvis: Urban sprawl is a Ponzi scheme

Don Jarvis Feb 2, 2018



Don Jarvis poses for a portrait at the Daily Herald on Thursday, July 3, 2014. GRANT HINDSLEY, Daily Herald

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Ever wonder why city leaders always seem to be looking for ways to raise fees or cut services? A common reason is maintenance costs for single-family residential housing — the suburban neighborhoods you and I love.

At first, a new development looks like healthy financial growth. The developer and new homebuyers pay “impact fees” for putting in roads, sidewalks, water mains and sewer lines. The new homeowners pay more property taxes, city leaders claim success and everyone is happy. For a while.

But after about 25 years, roads and other infrastructure start to need repair and the city has to pay for it with your tax money. There should be plenty of money from all those years of property taxes, right?

Nope. Study after study shows the upkeep of established suburban neighborhoods costs far more than those neighborhoods produce in taxes over the long run.

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City planners know this, but what have most of them done in the past? They looked at farms and other open land around their city and just approved more detached housing. City residents approved.

That destroyed local agriculture and produced miles of urban sprawl, but it did solve the financial problem temporarily.

It was an unintentional Ponzi scheme that went unnoticed by the public because it worked fine for years.

But eventually, cities run short of open land to develop, and infrastructure costs exceed tax revenue. Then, they have to raise taxes, cut services or both.

Commercial development is supposed to cover the difference, but it seldom does.

Provo recently ran short of money to repair its roads and decided to add a \$3.50 "Transportation Fee" to residents' water bills. It made sense, because half of Provo's real estate is not subject to property taxes. But that small fee will not cover Provo's infrastructure upkeep for long.

Many Utah County cities have similar financial troubles, and are looking for more income to cover the costs of their urban sprawl.

Even Salt Lake City, with lots of commercial development, just announced that two-thirds of its roads are in bad shape, and money will have to be borrowed to fix them.

## So, what is to be done?

It's not practical or popular to bulldoze old suburbs and replace them with more cost-effective higher-density townhouses, apartment buildings or commercial development.

And don't get me wrong: I love my suburban one-third acre lot. Many of us like suburbia and would do anything to protect our established family neighborhoods.

But if your city is looking at nearby agricultural land and planning more new detached residential housing, it's time for you to demand smarter growth that pays for itself in the long run. No sense throwing good money after bad to get more urban sprawl and less farmland.

Good solutions include more infill — more high-density housing in the center of town and around shopping malls and transportation hubs. It pays for itself. In new areas, variable-density housing and mixed-use commercial and residential development can make financially sustainable and walkable communities.

## Agriculture can help balance city budgets

Another solution is to leave some nearby farm land alone, rather than develop it.

Agricultural land actually contributes more revenue to local government than it requires in expenditures. On average, farmland requires only about 37 cents in public services for each dollar paid by land owners, while typical residential land requires \$1.11 in services for every dollar owners pay in taxes.

Utah County has more of the best soil and climate for agriculture than any other county in Utah and leads the state in agricultural receipts that total over \$245 million. Most cities in Utah County share these soil and climate advantages, but have forever lost most of their best farmland (and its income and tax revenue) to urban sprawl. We too often forget that farming is a viable business, and agricultural land is not just cheap empty space that needs to be developed or have roads run through it.

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People often ask how we can house all the people who want to live in our cities. They pressure planners to approve more detached housing, forgetting this development cannot possibly house all the people who want to move to our cities.

The answer is smarter development, which adds infill, variable-density housing and mixed-use commercial/residential areas that will pay for themselves, while protecting a good fraction of this irreplaceable agricultural land.

Our children will thank us if we develop smarter and keep some local land for local food. If we just turn all that priceless land into urban sprawl, increasing their taxes, they will ask "What were you thinking?"

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Don Jarvis is chair of the Provo Sustainability and Natural Resources Committee. His views do not necessarily reflect official Provo city policy.



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