

MOSBACHER INSTITUTE WHITE PAPER SERIES



INFRASTRUCTURE CONSEQUENCES OF EXURB GROWTH IN TEXAS

Executive Summary

By Rebekah F. Barfield
2022 Texas Lyceum Fellow
Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University

The exurbs are low-density communities that spring up outside the fringe of major cities. Identifiable features include fast-paced development, rapid population growth, a large number of homeowners, and a large commuting workforce traveling out of county. Families moving to the exurbs seek better schools, lower crime rates, lower housing costs and larger pieces of land. Ironically, as families flood into the exurbs, they put at risk the very infrastructure which attracted them to the area in the first place. Exurb growth is having a measurable impact on state and local infrastructure, particularly in areas such as education, transportation, and flood management. Texas has the largest exurbanite population in the United States relative to its size, which makes the exurbs particularly relevant to Texas moving forward into the next few decades.

Education

Within the realm of education, exurb growth has caused spikes in K-12 enrollment in these districts beyond the average growth rate. This includes thousands of new students per year in a given district, which strains facilities. From the design stage through the final result, new school buildings take around a year to complete. Additional funding from the state for fast-growth districts is insufficient and often inflexible regarding how it can be used. Rapid increases in K-12 enrollment put a strain on local education infrastructure as they try to meet new levels of demand, and districts are in need of additional, flexible funding in order to support incoming students.

Transportation

Another impact of exurb growth on state infrastructure is through transportation on rural roads. Exurbs send a large portion of their workforce—up to 50-60%—into the nearest city centers, which leads to a significant increase in commuters on rural roads and highways. Reports in recent years have shown an increase in fatal car accidents on Texas roads across the state. Since rural roads are statistically more unsafe due to low visibility, no lane barriers, and high speed limits, this increase in number of commuters indicates an urgent need to target rural roads, particularly in exurb areas, with current and future public safety expenditures in order to limit vehicle accidents and protect travelers.

Flood Management

Finally, exurb growth has an impact on flood management. Fast-paced development of former floodplains across Texas exacerbates flooding in these areas. Local governments, who often oversee the assessment of potential economic and environmental impacts of development before issuing permits to developers, lack the funds and personnel necessary to do so thoroughly and responsibly. Local flood management projects across the state are in need of supplemental funding in order to be completed, and while the Texas Legislature has allocated money through the recently established Flood Infrastructure Fund, this program should be closely monitored throughout its implementation in order to ensure that all projects are able to be completed and none fall through the cracks due to eligibility criteria.

Challenge

Exurbs are a bridge between communities in Texas. They provide labor to nearby metropolitan areas, and new infrastructure to rural ones. They are an outlet for economic mobility, offering families the opportunity to buy homes and attend better schools. As Texas has such a large exurbanite population, we have the opportunity to pave the way for how we navigate and improve the way exurb communities function in our state. While Texas learns how to support exurb infrastructure and promote economic mobility, other states will be watching.

Key Messages:

- School districts in exurb areas are at risk of outgrowing their facilities due to explosive K-12 enrollment, and require additional flexible funding and resource channels.
- Significant growth in the number of commuters traveling from exurb counties into nearby Texas city centers makes rural roads an increasingly urgent target for TXDOT public-safety expenditures and improvements.
- Wetland loss, particularly in the Houston area, has increased risk of flooding in the exurbs, and requires additional state funding to supplement local stormwater management projects and monitor development permits.

The full report is available at <https://bush.tamu.edu/mosbacher/white-papers/>.