

# URBANIZATION & GROWTH

The story of SW Florida

Exploring how SW Florida has reshaped its landscape  
into a *Geography of Nowhere*.



Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone (left to right), Fort Myers, 1931

## Modern History of Fort Myers

Fort Myers was built along the Caloosahatchee River during the Seminole Indian Wars.

The fort was abandoned in 1858 and reoccupied by Federal troops from 1863-1865.

The site of the Southernmost conflict of the Civil War, in 1865.

The fort itself was disassembled and used in construction of some of the first buildings in Fort Myers.

No more than ten families lived when it was originally platted (mapped out) in 1876.

Cattle, farming and logging were early mainstays in the area:

Cattle were herded across Fort Myers to Punta Rassa where they shipped to Cuba;

Tomatoes, avocados, and castor beans were cultivated on Sanibel Island;

Several pineapple plantations were located inland along the river as settlers began to move away from the original fort area.

By 1885 Fort Myers had a population of 349, the second largest town on Florida's Gulf Coast south of Cedar Key.

That year Thomas Edison was cruising Florida's west coast and stopped at Fort Myers. He subsequently built his home and laboratory on the banks of the river (McGregor Ave) and became a strong force in the region's growth and development.

Edison was often joined by his friend, Henry Ford, who eventually purchased the adjoining property.

Ford launched the Ford Motor Company in 1903 and by 1914 the first Ford Car Dealership was opened in Fort Myers.

# History of Fort Myers



Blasting crew in cypress swamp during the Tamiami Trail construction, circa 1920s.

WHY DO MORE  
MIDWESTERNERS  
COME TO THE GULF  
COAST AND MORE  
NORTHEASTERNERS GO  
TO THE EAST COAST?

During the building boom between 1898 and the 1920s, winter visitors from the north flocked to Florida seeking their fortunes in land investments.

The opening of the Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) linked Fort Myers to Tampa and Miami, adding more to the growth of the Big Boom of the 1920s.

Fort Myers suffered along with the rest of the nation during the Great Depression.

Still, some of the more elegant buildings in Fort Myers were built during the 1930s.

**In the early 1940s during WWII, every county in Florida had air bases due to the advantageous flying weather. The Fort Myers area had two airfields. WHY?**

**The city was home to thousands of servicemen, many of whom became permanent residents.**

Commercial and residential growth pushed the suburban development craze in all directions to create Cape Coral, North Fort Myers and Lehigh Acres.

Development also grew in the coastal settlements of Fort Myers Beach, Pine Island, Sanibel and Captiva Islands, Bonita Springs, and south through Collier County.

# US INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM





# Florida's Suburban Poverty Boom and Bust Towns

Sprawl development is the outward expansion of low-density residential and commercial development into the outer edges of cities and towns, far from downtown areas.

Over the last several decades, sprawl has expanded through SWFL's cities and suburbs onto surrounding natural and agricultural lands (greenbelts).

Sprawling development degrades, reduces, and ultimately destroys greenbelt areas—the undeveloped, wild, and agricultural lands that surround our urban areas. By preserving greenbelts, we can prevent inefficient suburban sprawl from paving over valuable natural and agricultural lands, wildlife corridors, streams, wetlands, and recreational areas that surround our cities and towns, which provide critical ecosystems and public resources (the Commons) to the entire region.

When a city expands onto the undeveloped land beyond it, it results in economic, environmental, health, and climate consequences.

The growth of the suburban poverty phenomenon across the US (more poor in the US now live in suburbs than in inner cities) is one of the big, important demographic stories of the last couple decades.

In the revolving boom-bust real estate cycles since the 1950s, the suburban developments in the Florida Sunbelt have appeared explosively fast in many cases (after being bought up and platted decades earlier and sitting dormant for years).

Many of these developments are in areas hardest-hit by foreclosures in the wake of recessions.

They are what it looks like when a Growth Ponzi scheme unravels.

Florida developers have continually bought up absolutely colossal swaths of wilderness, far from existing urban centers, platted and subdivided them into residential lots with almost no thought to future infrastructure or public service needs, and sold the lots to those who cannot afford coastal housing.

# The Making of Modern Florida

## The Mackle Brothers

1945 – 1954

Following World War II, the Mackle brothers became the leading builder of post-war housing in Florida.

Between 1945-'54, the Mackles built over 10,000 homes in subdivisions in Miami-Dade County and Broward County.

Among the largest was in Miami's Key Biscayne, where they also built and operated hotels and villas that were favorite retreats for entertainers, business moguls and political leaders, including Richard Nixon.





**1954 - 1962**

## **General Development Corporation (GDC)**

(first major Community Development company of the era)

Communities developed through GDC on the east coast were Port St. Lucie; Vero Beach Highlands and Vero Shores; Palm Bay; Port John; Sebastian Highlands.

In SWFL, GDC developed Port Charlotte.

Expanded a successful advertising strategy:

selling Florida land through a national advertising campaign (for \$10 down and \$10 a month anyone could own a piece of the Florida dream).

In the eight years of GDC under Mackle leadership, more than 4,000 homes were sold and constructed.

During this period the company was one of the leading home builders in the nation.

# 1962 – 1986 The Deltona Corporation

The Mackle brothers, through The Mackle Company, then founded and became the largest shareholders of The Deltona Corporation. Over 24 years they developed a number of planned communities.

On the east coast: Deltona Lakes; Seminole Woods; St. Augustine Shores

On the west coast: Citrus Springs; Marion Oaks; Pine Ridge (all in the Crystal River area); Sunny Hills (Panhandle); Tampa Palms; Spring Hill (Tampa region); Tierra Verde (joint venture St. Petes area)

**SWFL: Rotunda (Citibank);**

**Marco Island and Marco Shores**

**A typical planned community was around 15,000 acres in size.**

**Many of these are now home to over 200,000 people each.**

**During the Mackle's tenure, Deltona built and sold over 17,000 homes and condominiums.**





## The Modern Development of Marco Island

**IMAGINE THE ECOLOGICAL IMPACT!**

In 1962, through The Deltona Corporation, the Mackles acquired most of Marco Island for \$7 million.

Excluded from the sale was the center of the island, which they later purchased from the Collier family.

A master plan was designed for a complete range of resort and leisure living -- hotels, motels, apartments, and homes.

125 miles of paved roads and 90 miles of navigable bulkheaded (retaining wall) waterways were planned.

Land was set aside for more than 12,000 homesites for lot and home sales;

425 acres were slated for resort hotels;

340 acres were set aside for future apartment construction;

275 acres were designated for commercial development / business districts;

113 acres for schools and churches;

17 acres for medical facilities;

a half-mile of beach for public park development;

a golf course, recreational amenities, yacht clubs, marine facilities, a country club, and an airline service.

The Mackles officially opened modern Marco Island January 31, 1965.

**1962 – 1986 Deltona's Infrastructure Operations  
MORE THAN JUST A REAL ESTATE CORPORATION**



**Hotels** - The Marco Beach Hotel and Villas, Deltona Inn and the Tierra Verde Hotel.

**Utilities** - Water, Sewer and Gas companies

**Lumber company** - Imperial Lumber one of the largest lumber and lumber product suppliers in Florida.

**Airline** - Marco Island Airways was formed with scheduled service from Miami.

**Golf and Country Clubs** - Nine golf and country clubs were built and operated in Deltona communities including the Marco Island Golf and Country Club.

**Shopping Centers** - Each Deltona community was the site of at least one shopping center.

**Two mortgage companies.**

**An international sales network consisting of over 100 company-owned and franchised offices.**

# Selling Marco Island

Following an extensive **international advertising campaign**, particularly in Chicago, New York, Cleveland and Boston, and in western Europe, Latin America, and the Far East, people began to pour onto the island.

**Thirty days** following the official opening, more than **50,000 inquiries** had been made in regard to purchasing a slice of the community development.

**The first waterways were constructed for opening day, as were the first twelve homes.**

Brochures listed the waterfront homes from \$19,800 to \$41,500. Inland homes ranged from \$14,900 to \$23,500. Homesites were listed in the \$2,550 range for inland lots and from \$5,495 to \$16,000 for waterfront sites.

By 1968 the island population had grown to an estimated 1,000 people.

**After 4 years, more than 500 apartment units had been built, and another 172 were under construction.**

**5 condominiums** (Emerald Beach, Sunset House, Southwind, Sea Breeze, and Sea Breeze South) had been completed.

**Over 9,500 homesites had been sold and recreational facilities were under construction.**

**A new toll bridge** spanned the Marco River, and the **Marco Towne Center** opened.

**By the end of 1973 the population had jumped to an estimated 5,000 full and part-time residents. More than 700 single-family homes and 1,500 condominium units had been completed.**

**By the mid-1970s the second bridge connecting the island with the mainland at Goodland was completed.**

**THE ECOLOGICAL IMACT BROUGHT ON BY RAPID URBANIZATION WAS ENORMOUS!**

**Florida is an entire state  
of amusement.  
And one marvelously  
relaxing resort.**

Florida can offer just about everything for your family vacation. From simulated moon shots, to a jungle full of alligators, to a parade of cartoon characters.

But after you've waited in all the lines. And had your fill of hamburgers and french fries, it's time for some relaxation.

At the Marco Beach Hotel & Villas, we'll give you just that.

You'll relax on three miles of white powder beach covered with shells instead of people.

You'll find an island full of nature—where the herons, porpoises and eagles are for real, not for display.

You'll enjoy all the amenities of a brand new \$18 million dollar hotel that's already one of America's great resorts.

And you won't spend much more than you would in roadside motels.

For a complete list of accommodations and a brochure, write Mr. Roger Everingham, V. P.

And relax.

For reservations, see your travel agent, or write Marco Beach Hotel, Dept. A Marco Island, Florida 33937. Phone (813) 394-2511. A Deltona property.

**Marco Beach Hotel & Villas**



*Marco Island  
Airways*

**FLIGHT SCHEDULE**



**EFFECTIVE  
SEPT. 15, 1976**

*Miami-Marco Island  
Florida*



# Marco Island hit a bump in the road

Serious problems developed for the Mackle Brothers in 1976.

Previously approved dredge and fill permits to develop Barfield Bay and Big Key, the final two phases of development, were denied by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Environmentalists and conservationists soon became prominent adversaries to the development.

Years of litigation, compromise, and public meetings ensued.

For 10 years, Deltona fought the permit denial all the way to the Supreme Court while teetering on the brink of bankruptcy.

In an effort to raise funds for their court battles, the company proceeded to sell many undeveloped properties at bargain basement prices and began selling assets, including its prized possession, the Marco Beach Hotel and Villas (it was sold to the Marriott Corporation in 1979 for \$35 million).

In 1982 the Supreme Court refused a Deltona petition to overturn the court decision.

The Mackles were forced to turn most of their undeveloped holdings into nature preserves, agreeing to give 15,000 acres of Marco Island wetlands to the state for inclusion in a wildlife sanctuary. In return, Deltona received 160 acres of prime industrial property near Miami International Airport.

More than 7,000 people had contracts for homesites on property that could not be developed.

Deltona had used much of the down payment cash flow from home buyers to develop other parts of the island.

The company offered cash refunds, alternative island property, and other Deltona properties to investors.



## Continuing Growth

Residential and commercial development continued to occur on Marco Island at an astonishing pace through the 1980s and thereafter.

By 1998 about 80% of the total potential dwelling units had been completed.

By 2013, only 1,754 remaining vacant lots remained to be developed.

Today Marco Island has more than 5,000 single-family residential homes, 10,000 condominium units, 2,000 hotel units, and as well as restaurants, retail stores, and commercial services.

More than 300 new homes continue to be constructed annually.

**Marco Island City Council recognizes it has serious issues to resolve:**

**Infrastructure - potable water, sanitary sewer, stormwater management, solid waste, groundwater aquifer recharge, transportation (traffic congestion), parks and open space**

**Conservation and Coastal Management**

**Lack of intergovernmental coordination**



Homesteader, Pine Island Rd, 1925

The “other side of the river”, or “Hungryland” (modern-day Cape Coral), was a hard place to live, wild and desolate.

#### **WHAT IS A HOMESTEADER?**

The original meaning of a homesteader is characterized by a lifestyle of self-sufficiency – essentially the ability to live off the grid, e.g. through subsistence agriculture and other means.

In today’s Florida, homesteading laws are built into the state constitution, and now apply to condos and other dwellings. They are a complex set of laws that have to do with reducing property taxes, and property protection from debtor rights.

## Cape Coral (Redfish Point / Hungryland)

Early Cape Coral history starts with the Calusa Indians, who had all but disappeared by the time the United States gained control of the area.

Initially, Spanish explorer, Ponce de Leon, colonized many parts of Florida between 1513 (St. Augustine) and 1521 (Estero/Charlotte Harbor).

In 1821, Spain deeded the land of Redfish Point (now Cape Coral) to the United States.

In return, the United States forgave the \$5 million debt that Spain owed the US.

In 1822, Florida became an organized territory and settlers poured in along with runaway slaves who were harbored by Seminole Indians.

Inevitably, there were clashes between Seminoles and whites.

Cape Coral became a site for massacre during one of the Seminole Wars.

The Seminoles lost and were moved to reservations.

Later on, in 1845, Florida became a state.

The state sold much of its land to railroad companies which in turn sold the land to various companies, such as the Matlacha Cattle Company, and individuals.

Franklin Miles of Alka Seltzer fame, bought land "other side of the river" in 1910, which he used for hunting.

At that time, this land at Redfish Point / Cape Coral was also known as “Hungryland”.

It was populated by homesteaders, loggers, cattlemen, rustlers and fishermen.

# Cape Coral

Modern Cape Coral history began in 1957 when two brothers from Baltimore, Leonard and Jack Rosen, flew over the peninsula known as Redfish Point, looking for land to develop.

They subsequently purchased it from Franklin Miles and two other landowners for \$678,000.

They formed what later became the Gulf American Land Corporation and turned the wilderness area of Redfish Point into a massive suburban waterfront development by selling it piecemeal to a public enamored with owning a slice of the American Dream.

Cape Coral was to become the *largest master-planned community* in the United States.

It innovated the successful marketing strategy other developers employed.

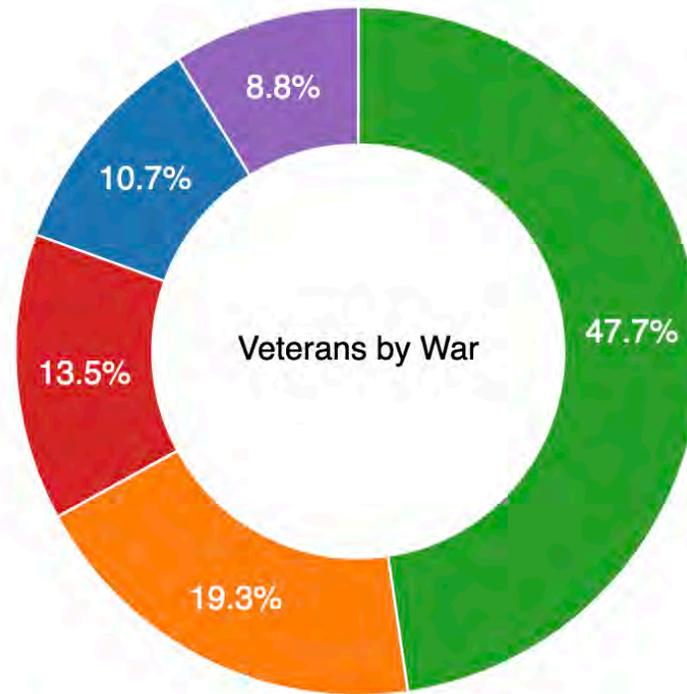
Sales were based on \$20 down, \$20 a month.

Cape Coral was especially attractive to returning Korean veterans. (it still has more than any other city in the US).



Redfish Point, 1944

To this day, approximately 7.4% of all Cape Coral residents are veterans.



■ Second Gulf War ■ First Gulf War ■ Vietnam ■ Korea ■ World War II

14,103

Number of Veterans

13,097

Male Veterans

1,006

Female Veterans

War	Veterans
Second Gulf War	1,234
First Gulf War	2,233
Vietnam	5,503
Korea	1,556
World War II	1,016

Source: US Census 2017



# Selling the Dream

Land was cleared of mangroves, pine trees, and vegetation, rattlesnakes, panthers, and gators. Salt marshes, muddy pools, and thick, hard limestone were cut through.

Canals were dug out with dredges and the earth was used to build up the land to the required elevation of 5'6" above sea level. So many canals and lakes were put in that Gulf American never had to buy fill dirt.

Cape Coral has over 400 miles of canals, more than the Italian city of Venice, a system so extensive that local ecology and tidal systems have been irreversibly affected.

A crack team of hotshot salesmen used a fleet of planes for free rides as a very effective selling method. Sacks of flour were dropped over the lots that customers bought from the air.

After several houses were built, the Yacht Club was constructed next, with beach, pool, pier, and clubhouse. It had a popular teen club and no adults were allowed unless accompanied by a child.

Next, the Rosens had a luxurious country club and golf course built.

There was a lot of hype, promotion and advertising.

Celebrities like Bob Hope were brought in. A movie with Phyllis Diller, *The Fat Spy*, was filmed in Cape Coral and so were episodes of the TV show, *Route 66*.

There was even an "amphibicar" that could drive off the beach and right into the water to take buyers on property tours.





In 1959, a waterview site cost \$990, a waterfront site cost \$1990, and a riverfront site cost \$3390. You could purchase a site for \$20 down and \$20 per month.

A two bedroom/one bath house cost \$10,990, and a three bedroom/three bath house cost \$26,250.

There were beauty pageants, golf tournaments, festivals and boat races.

Salesmen were sent overseas to sell land, mainly to US citizens in Italy, England, Japan, and Germany, and that is why there is a large German community in Cape Coral.

The Rosens thought that they would sell most of the lots for people to make monthly payments on and then eventually retire to later, that way they would have time to build future amenities. But, most prospective buyers wanted to move down right away.

In the first five months, land sales soared to \$5 million.

Model homes had to be built, a motel and restaurant were needed to accommodate buyers - it was hard to keep up with fulfilling the demand for “the good life” of swimming, lounging, fishing, boating and golfing.

Gulf American provided a boat and gasoline every Sunday afternoon for waterskiing. The company went out of its way to keep the early residents happy to help with their promotions.

Homes were given away as prizes on game shows such as *The Price is Right* and *Queen for a Day*.

The Waltzing Waters, Porpoise Pool, Rose Garden, Aloha Lagoon, Garden and Pavilion of Patriots entertained prospects and residents for six years until they got too expensive to maintain.

Then came businesses like the Nautilus Motel, The Cape Coral Shopping Plaza, Elmer's Market, and the Surfside Restaurant with a post office at the back of the store (mail was brought over by boat from Ft Myers).

Before these businesses were built, it was a *20-mile ride to Ft Myers* to get a loaf of bread or medical care.



Cape Coral, 2012. Edward Burtynsky

### CAPE CORAL POPULATION

<b>1960 - 280</b>	<b>1990 - 74,991</b>
<b>1970 - 11,470</b>	<b>2000 - 102,206</b>
<b>1980 - 32,103</b>	<b>2009 - 167,917</b>
	<b>2017 - 189,343</b>

The Rosens sold Gulf American in 1970 to GAC (General Acceptance Corp.), a finance firm from Pennsylvania.

That year, the community incorporated and became the City of Cape Coral.

GAC bought into a development that had rising costs, declining land sales, and other problems and filed for bankruptcy in 1975.

In 1977, Cape Coral developers were fined what was then a record \$19 million to correct “an environmental tragedy” - the obliteration of thousands of acres of mangrove habitat.

Yet, still today, the city continues to be developed.

Cape Coral is now the largest city in America’s fastest-growing metropolitan area.

With the largest canal system in the world, the area’s urban runoff contributes to massive runoff pollution problems.

Cape Coral is literally a peninsula jutting off a peninsula. It's the least natural, worst-planned artificial landscape in the US, with a Seven Islands section featuring seven perfectly rectangular islands and an Eight Lakes neighborhood featuring eight perfectly square lakes.

While much of Florida now yo-yos between routine droughts and routine floods, Cape Coral's fluctuations are particularly wild.



Yet it still is growing like mad.

There are great disparities between the wealthy and poor.

12.71% of residents live below the poverty line.

Cape Coral was one of the hardest hit cities in the country from the latest economic crisis.

Floating City | Cape Coral's 400 miles of manmade canals—the most of any city on earth—serve as not only the city's stormwater management system but also its defining real estate amenity, offering "waterfront property" for fishing and boating. But their creation was ecologically destructive, annihilating the coastal mangroves that had provided natural storm protection, as well as vital spawning and feeding grounds for its fisheries. | Erika Larsen for Politico Magazine

## The Dream Keeps Growing

Cape Coral's population was estimated to reach 200,000 at the end of 2019

**Cape Coral/Fort Myers number one for America's fastest growing cities of 2017.**

**(Forbes)**





# Lehigh Acres – the Original Dream

In the early 1950s, a marketing tycoon named Lee Ratner, who owned nearly all of the undeveloped land east of Ft. Myers, decided to transform his sprawling ranch into one of Florida's first major real estate developments. Working closely with friend and marketing protege Gerald Gould,

Ratner launched one of the most brilliant land schemes/advertising campaigns in Florida history.

Catering mostly to middle-class post-World War II families in the midwest, he employed extensive advertising efforts through the Lehigh Development Corporation, to introduce cold-climate readers to a world of tropical sun and sport.

For the rock-bottom price of \$10 down and \$10 a month (perhaps for life...but did it really matter?), anyone could own a parcel of Floridian soil (i.e. an empty lot), and thus a slice of the *American Dream*.

Despite the early consumer enthusiasm and rapid sales of land, **no one** on the original development team had actually *expected* people to move to Lehigh. After all, the town was **unincorporated (and remains so until today)**.

Utilities, including power, water and drainage, were simply non-existent, and basic two-way streets had been provisioned in an incomplete grid, mostly so prospective buyers could visit their own plots.

Eventually, pre-designed houses were available as options to accompany the parcels of land that served as the bottom-line product for Lehigh Corp.

As people began to make their way down to Lehigh, a **community began to take shape** over the sandy terrain that had once been Ratner's Lucky Lee Ranch.

Entertainers such as Pat Boone were brought down to perform before sold-out crowds at the theater within the town's famous Lehigh Resort and Hotel. Homes were given away on TV's *The Price is Right*.

*Does all this sound familiar?*

For decades, Lehigh represented a Florida dream for middle-income snowbirds and new families.

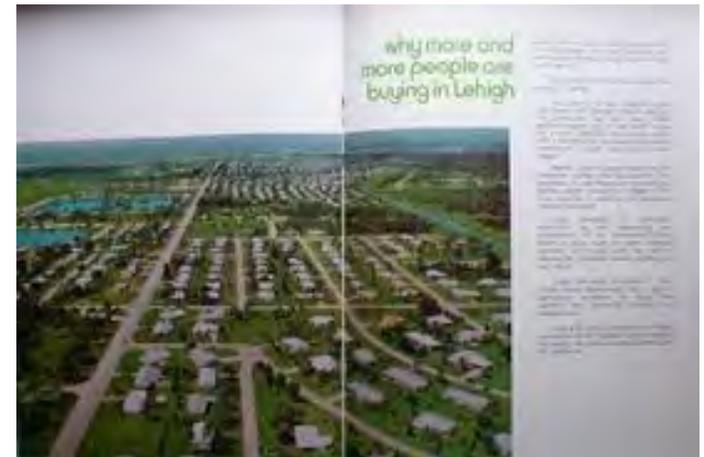
**Unincorporated means Lehigh Acres** depends on Lee County for governance and infrastructure assistance. Taxpayer money goes to the city rather than the town, to be be divvied up by the rest of the County).

Lehigh deteriorated as the years progressed.

Profits disappeared into the cavernous black hole of marketing expenses, and it was discovered (perhaps to no one's real surprise) that \$10/month was not enough of a revenue stream to keep a corporation afloat. Lehigh Corp. was sold and re-sold to avoid bankruptcy, until finally disappearing in the late 1980s.

By the 1990s, Lehigh devolved into a shadow of its former hey-day, existing amenities had vanished and the Lehigh Resort had been torn down.

Many baby boomers who had inherited the parcels of land purchased by their parents during the 1950s and 1960s discovered that the decades-old deeded land in their possession was worth less than the annual taxes on the parcel itself.





## Lehigh Acres

The early 2000s signaled the beginning of a new era of prosperity and growth for the entirety of Florida.

At the forefront of the growth was the real estate market, which was teeming with new construction and investment.

Prices of homes began to surge at a breakneck pace, to the point where a buyer could reasonably expect to earn 20 or 30 percent by merely "flipping" a new house or condominium just weeks or months after having purchased it.

Lehigh, which had once claimed the title "the bargain of Lee County," found itself at the epicenter of the boom.

Between 2003 and 2005, the median sales price of a new house had climbed over 130%.

Even unimproved land on the outskirts of Lehigh, which ten years earlier was practically worthless, was now fetching bids of \$40,000.

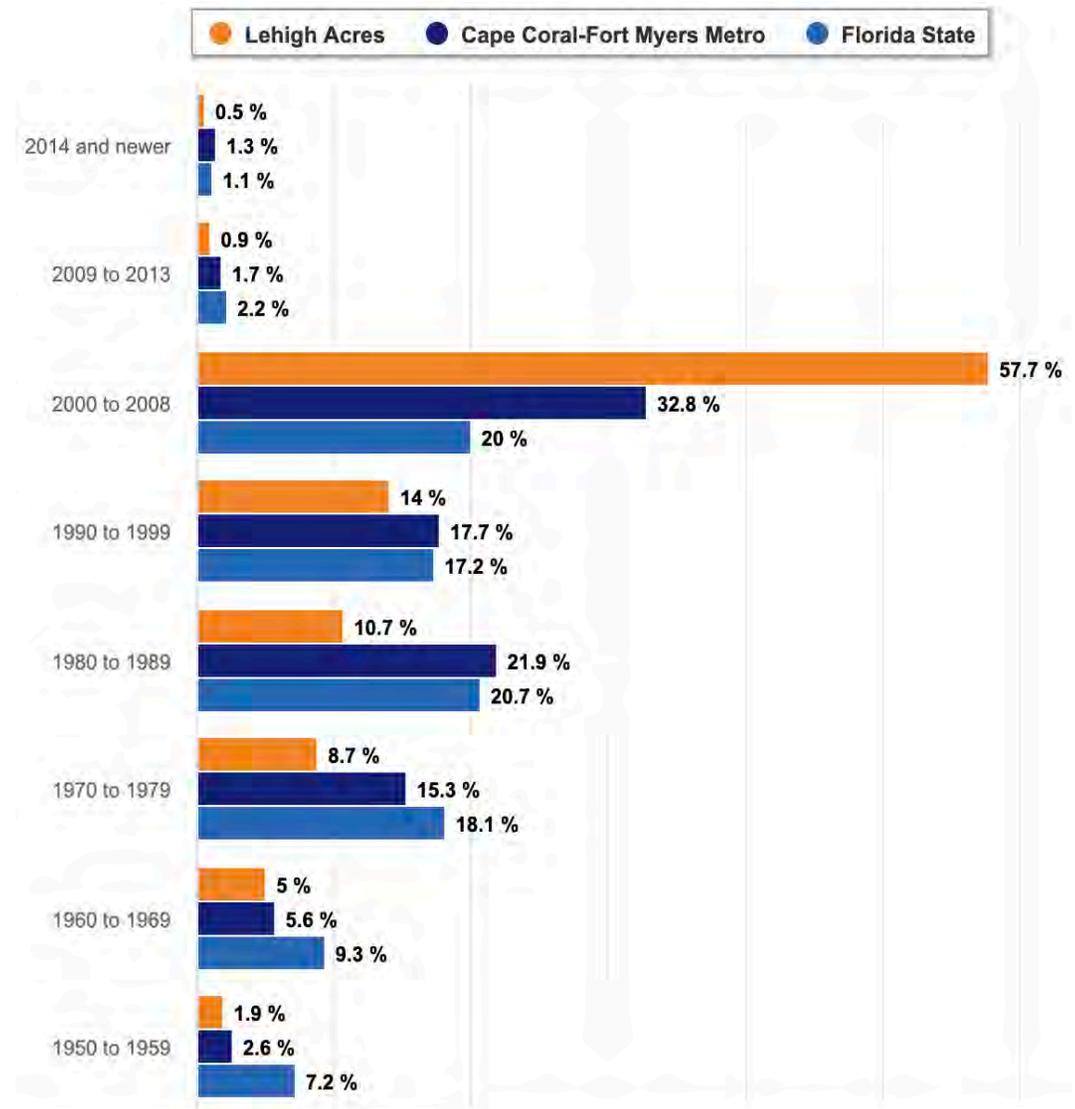
It was a veritable 21st century gold rush, and anyone who could secure a loan (at a time when anyone *could* secure a loan) could have a slice of the pie.

# Boom & Bust cycles

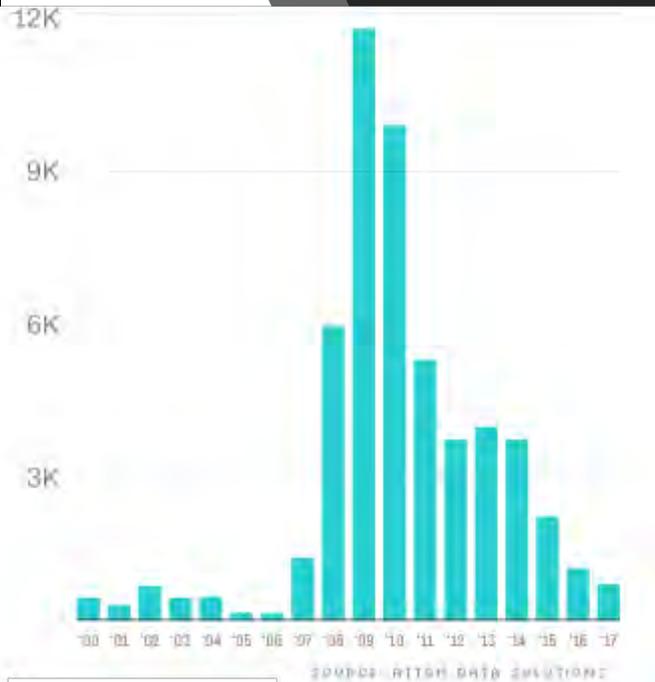
In the ups and downs of the housing booms of the 1980s and 1990s, the populations of the region's **pre-platted vast bedroom communities** (residential suburbs from which residents commute to a nearby city for work), **exploded with insane growth.**

**Lehigh Acres population quintupled (5x) from 1990 to 2010, while Cape Coral's doubled.**

The expansion coincided with a glut of easy credit for home buyers—much of it in the **subprime mortgage** market—starting in the 1990s and continuing until 2007/8.



# Lehigh Acres



Yet again, though, by 2006 and 2007, the writing, so to speak, was on the wall.

New construction was sliding to a grinding halt, as investors began to back away from some of the riskier ventures they had promised to support.

Buyers were suddenly finding themselves stuck with properties for which they had paid top-dollar, only to discover that no one was interested in paying that price - or any price.

Fear and panic ensued. By 2008, the financial meltdown went global, and onlookers from Lehigh and elsewhere in Lee County watched in horror as giant financial corporations crumbled into insolvency, one after another.

## Why Lee County became the foreclosure capital of the US.



**FOLLOWING THE 2008 FINANCIAL MELTDOWN, OBAMA CALLED THE FORT MYERS AREA 'THE FORCLOSURE CAPITAL OF THE US'.**

Up until 2008, home buyers could still live the master-planned original dream. The only difference 60 years on, was now the cost was \$50 down and \$50 a month.

**The Great Housing Recession of was a fate that befell one out of ten homeowners in Lee County.**

It had one of the **highest foreclosure rates in the country** between 2008 and 2013. (Attom Data)

**In one zip code, 42% of properties went into foreclosure.**

And all those people who lost their homes?

**Most were forced onto the rental market, often leasing their houses back from the investors who'd bought them at auction.**

Many left entirely, with no jobs to keep them around, returning to whatever state they'd come from up north.

## BACK FROM THE DEAD

Foreclosures are almost back to  
pre-recession levels in Lee County\*

\*Completed foreclosures  
in Lee County, Florida

Lehigh is once again on the boom-  
side of the boom and bust cycle.  
Home appreciation in Lehigh Acres is  
increasing.

Part of a pattern of what David Harvey calls  
*Accumulation by Dispossession*.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?



Now, ten years after the depths of the financial crisis, median single-family home prices in Lee County have more than tripled from the bottom reached in 2011, and construction, again, is everywhere.

Remarkably, the area continues to grow steadily as a tourism and retirement destination.

Lee County's population of 440,910 in 2000 has since almost doubled (to 754,610 in 2018).

The area presents a more affordable route to palm trees and white sand beaches than the state's more crowded east coast.

If you want a fuller picture of what the development pattern looks like in these Florida boomburbs, and the problems that come with it, check out

<https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2016/2/24/suburban-decline>

For an understanding of Lehigh Acres's history in particular, *Harper's* magazine ran an interesting article a few years back, titled "[Paradise Swamped: The boom and bust of the middle-class dream.](#)"

[Damien Cave's 2009 New York Times article](#) about foreclosures in Lehigh Acres is also a good read.

## LEHIGH ACRES - IT'S A GROWING PLACE, BUT NOT A SUCCESSFUL PLACE

Year	Population	White	Black	Hispanic
<b>1990</b>	13,611	93.0%	4.2%	4.9%
<b>2000</b>	33,430	84.3%	8.8%	13.4%
<b>2010</b>	86,784	67.5%	19.3%	34.3%
<b>2014 (Estimated)</b>	106,747	66.2%	21.1%	36.0%

Source: US Census (1990, 2000, 2010) and American Community Survey (2014)

Year	% of Units Owner-Occupied	% of Units Renter-Occupied	Median Household Income	Poverty Rate
<b>2000</b>	83.7%	16.3%	\$38,517	7.7%
<b>2010</b>	64.3%	35.7%	\$47,277	16.7%
<b>2014 (Estimated)</b>	58%	42%	\$39,686	21.7%

Source: US Census (2000 and 2010) and American Community Survey (2014)

### ***ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION – a system of profiteering***

***In this context, controlling interests devalue, seize (at little to no cost), and revalorize real estate assets for corporate gain.***

Note the **dramatic drop in household income from 2010 to 2014**, and the **increase in poverty**.

Note also the **dramatic shift from homeowners to renters** in years immediately **following the 2007/8 recession**.

**Investors and banks still own** many of the homes that were foreclosed upon in the wake of the subprime mortgage crash.

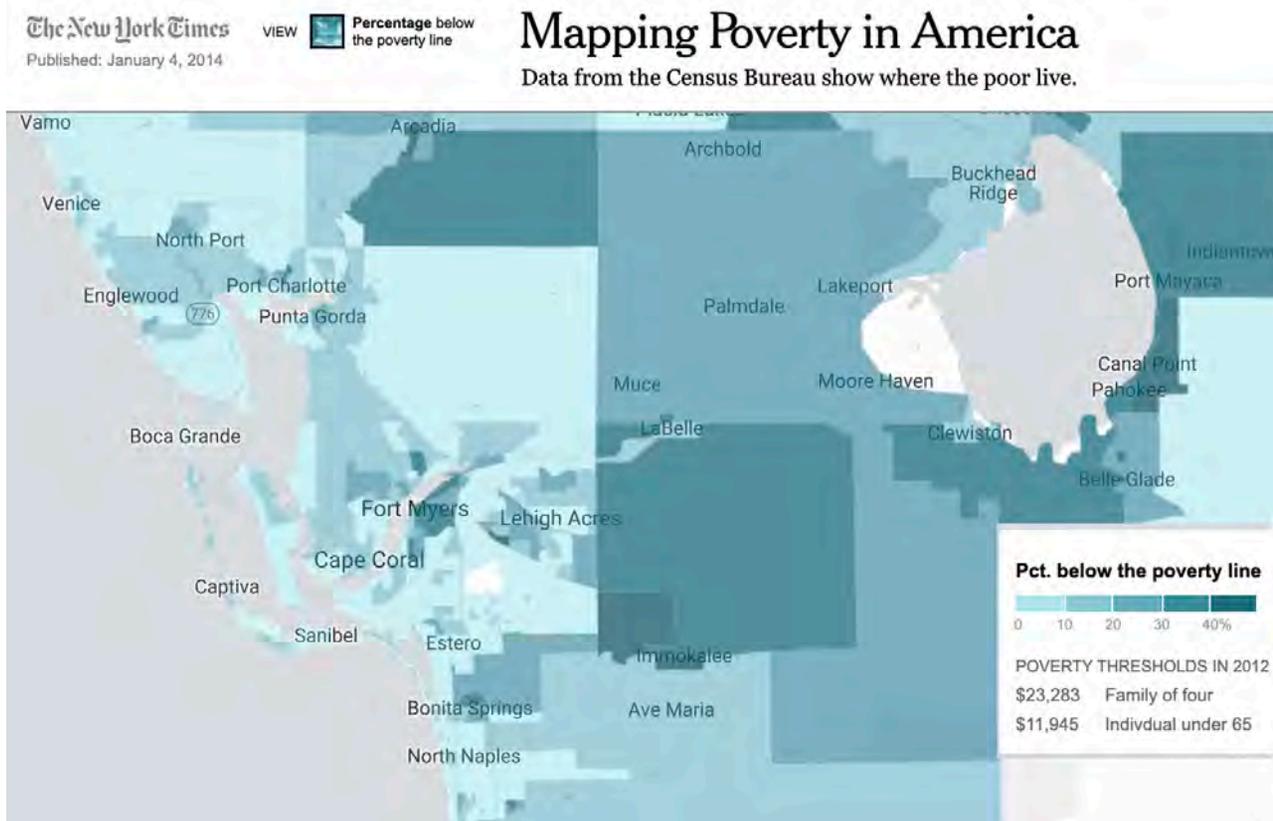
Another striking statistic is the poverty rate. In 2014, an estimated 30.7% of children under age 18 were living in poverty.

# NOT ALL POVERTY IS CREATED EQUALLY

## MONEY = POWER

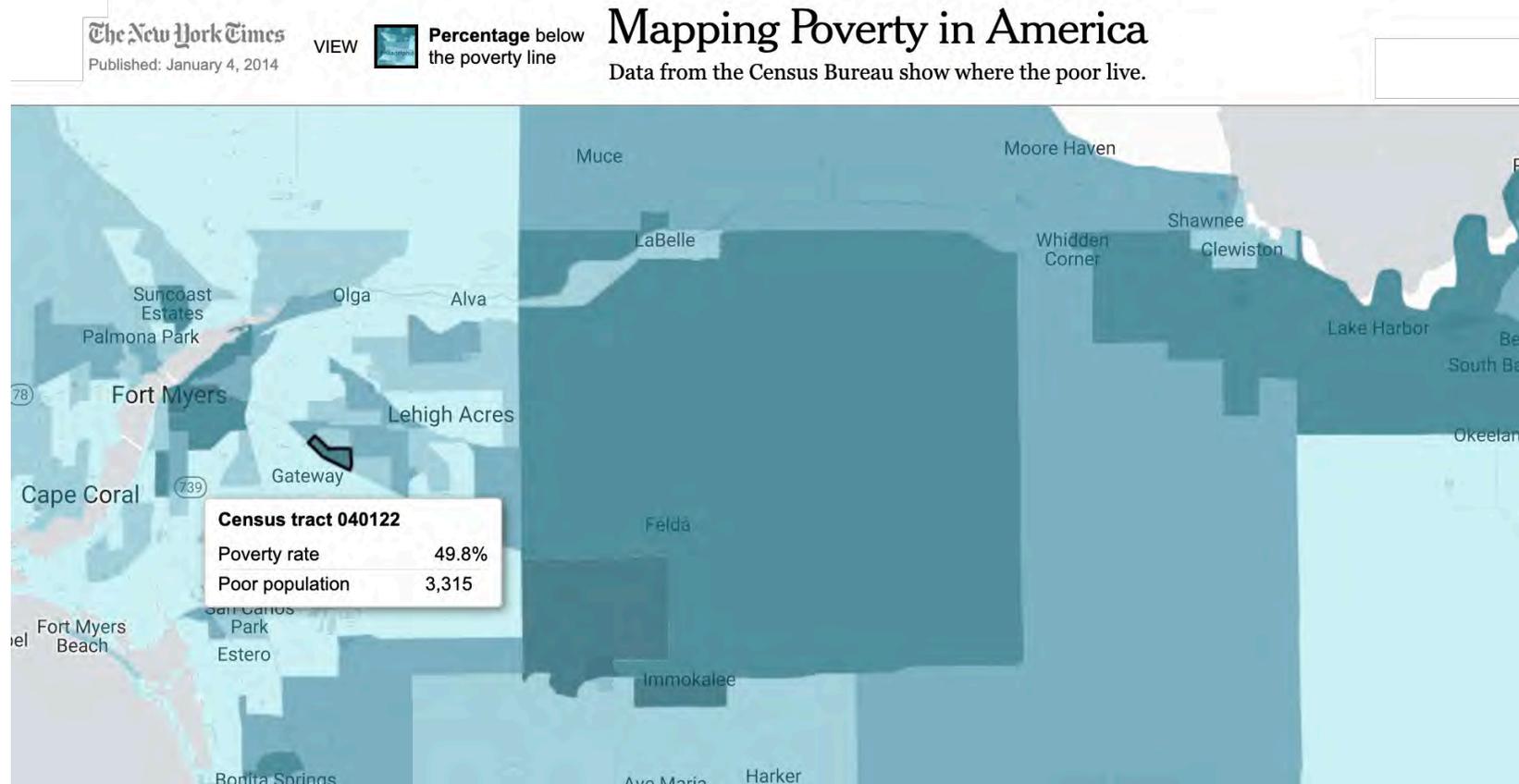
### REGIONAL POVERTY BY CENSUS TRACT

The New York Times' interactive map of poverty rates by census tract. (<http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2014/01/05/poverty-map/index.html>)

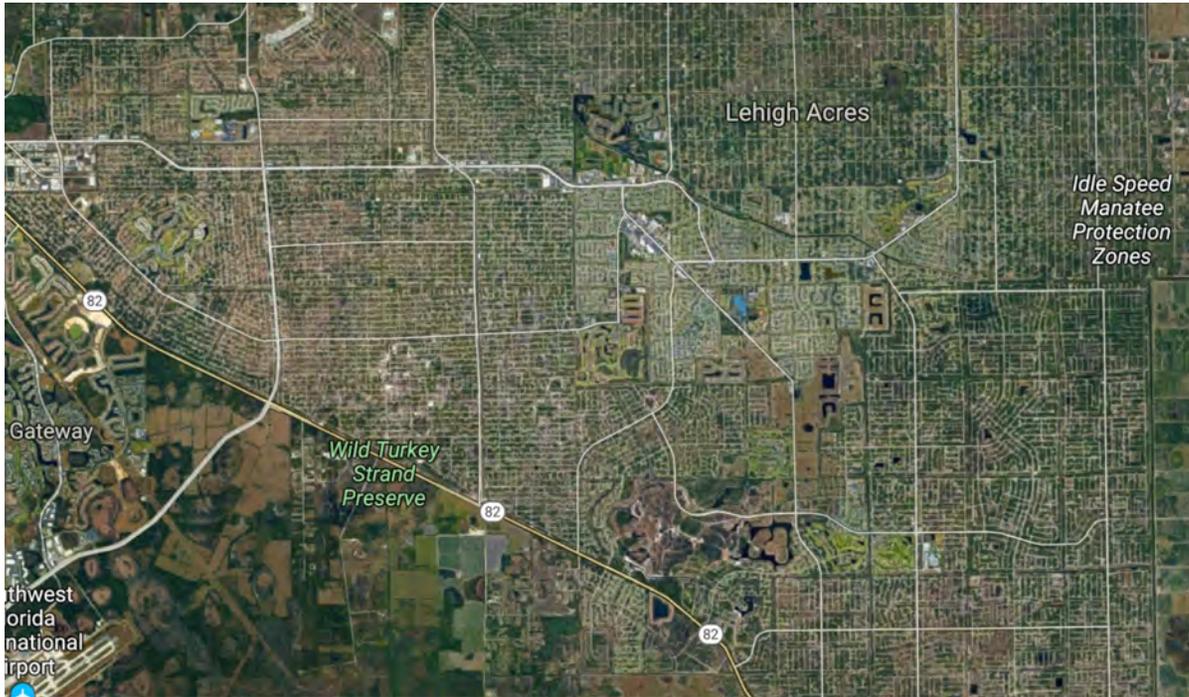


SWFL poverty by percentage

# Lehigh Acres' poverty is not uniformly distributed over its vast expanse.



Inside **Tract 040122**, an area in **Lehigh** in between State Route 82 and Leonard Boulevard, the **poverty rate is 49.8%**. This is an area of concentrated poverty by any definition, comparable to some of the poorest inner-city neighborhoods in major U.S. cities. (roughly equivalent to the South Side of Chicago). Tract 040122 is the poorest census tract in Lehigh, largely characterized by duplexes and triplexes. Beyond this area, almost all of the houses are single family.



# A VAST EXPANSE OF SPRAWL

## LEHIGH = REMOTENESS

LAND HAS BEEN SUBDIVIDED INTO A MONOTONOUS GRID FOR MILES AND MILES AND MILES.  
IT'S HARD TO CONVEY THE SHEER SCALE OF PLACE.

**AN EXAMPLE OF THE FAR-OUT  
“DRIVE ‘TIL YOU QUALIFY”  
SUBURBS**

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

**LOCATED INCREASINGLY FARTHER  
AWAY FROM JOBS AND SERVICES,  
IN INCREASINGLY REMOTE, CAR-  
DEPENDENT ENCLAVES THAT OFFER  
APPARENTLY CHEAPER HOMES.**

**THE TRUE COSTS OF  
TRANSPORTATION, FURNISHING,  
HEATING AND COOLING,  
INFRASTRUCTURE, AND ACCESS TO  
AMENITIES ARE OFTEN NOT FULLY  
FACTORED IN BY THE BUYER.**

**You might have to drive more than  
a two-hour round trip to reach  
work or a store.**



With few exceptions, the architecture is incredibly drab.

Banal architecture is one of the distinguishing characteristics of places that are part of suburban sprawl (PART OF THE GEOGRAPHY OF NOWHERE), as they are built with materials that are cheap and not designed and built to retain value.

The only appeal of such homes are their new-ness, and they're built with little concern for what happens to them 20 or 30 years down the road.

In Lehigh Acres, there is an utter reliance on cars as one's lifeline—an expensive and precarious way to exist.

**(CAR CULTURE IS A CENTRAL A CHARACTERISTIC OF THE GEOGRAPHY OF NOWHERE)**

Many households have two to three cars.

Particularly in more remote sprawl, there are a *lot* of cars per household (and not a sidewalk to be found).

**For a low-income area, multiple cars per household represent a tremendous cost burden,** yet there is little choice when you live in a place located miles from anywhere, where public transit services are so infrequent and spread-out as to be practically useless.

So, if you have to get to a job, you have to drive.

There are also a general lack of water and sewer services (in Lehigh, most homes are on well water and septic systems – another maintenance cost).

EMS response times are longer, and policing is less frequent.  
Therefore crime is usually higher.



Transportation in the US accounts for just over one quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions (US EPA 2017). By reducing per capita driving, which in turn cuts GHG emissions, which in turn reduces climate change impacts, promotes compact, more functional, more desirable, and less ecologically harmful, urban development.

Crime in Lehigh Acres, though decreasing, remains extraordinarily high.

- The overall crime rate in Lehigh Acres is 71% higher than the national average.
- For every 100,000 people, there are 12.89 daily crimes that occur in Lehigh Acres.
- Lehigh Acres is safer than 9% of the cities in the United States.
- In Lehigh Acres you have a 1 in 22 chance of becoming a victim of any crime.
- The number of total year over year crimes in Lehigh Acres has decreased by 13%.

Lehigh Acres compares less favorably to the Fort Myers' inner-city neighborhood of Pine Manor (1 in 27 chance of being a victim of crime). Even though Pine Manor is a less affluent suburb, it has invested in building community.

SOURCE: National Centers for Environmental Information (NOAA) Statistics 2016.



Directly across State Highway 82 from Lehigh Acres, there is a gated subdivision, "Hampton Park".  
It has a higher price point than Lehigh Acres.

**Is it more sustainable?**

Note, names of streets and subdivisions are usually chosen to associate either with non-existent nature (e.g. Willow St) or wealth (e.g. Hampton), or quaint concepts of old-world urbanity (e.g. Essex Square), as is the case with the street leading into the Hampton Park development.  
THIS IS ANOTHER INDICATOR OF A GEOGRAPHY OF NOWHERE



Hampton Park residents are completely car-dependent.

Almost certainly, like countless subdivisions around it, it will **ultimately fail to generate enough tax base to pay for its infrastructure.**

Only while its new and shiny will byers be attracted to it.

There is no spatial logic to it, nor any prudent and efficient use of land.

There is no need for this place to exist in the utterly generic location it does (*a geography of nowhere*), except that it *can* and someone can make money building it and selling it.

**It's important to understand the destructive fallout of experiments with automobile-oriented development and zoning.**

**The outcomes often result in disposable places.**

# PENDING COLLAPSE



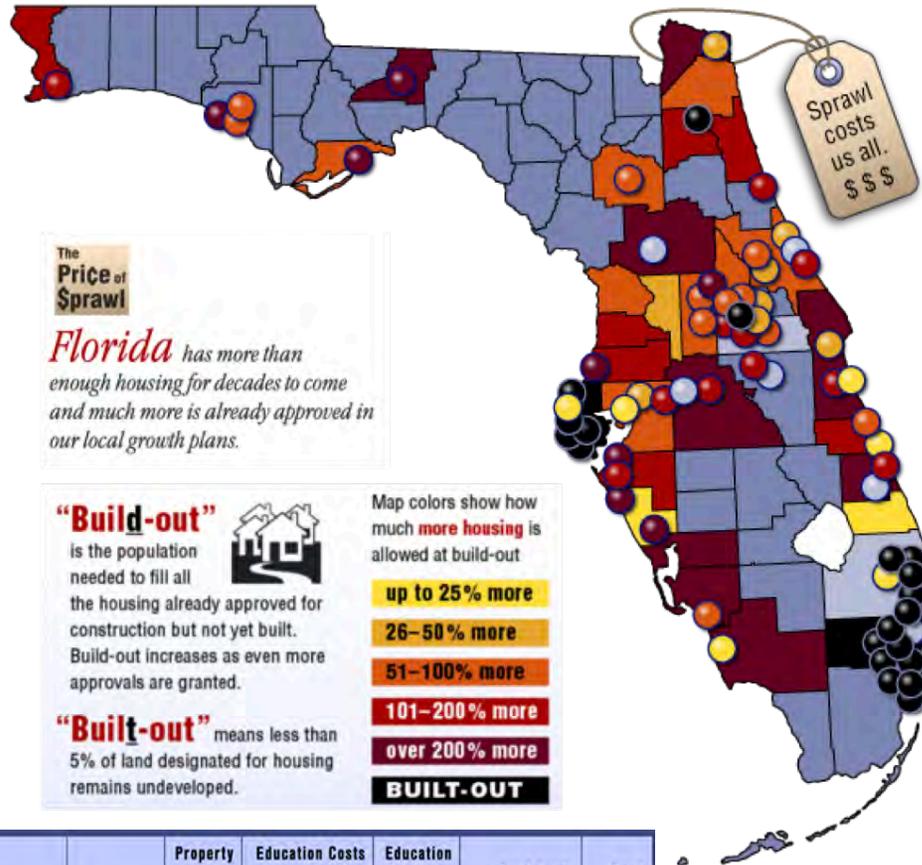
The tax revenue brought in from low suburban densities isn't nearly enough to pay the bills; property taxes generally bring in anywhere from 4 cents to 65 cents for every dollar of liability.

Most suburban municipalities are therefore unable to pay the maintenance costs of their infrastructure, let alone replace things when they inevitably wear out after twenty to twenty-five years.

The only way to survive is to keep growing or take on more debt, or both.

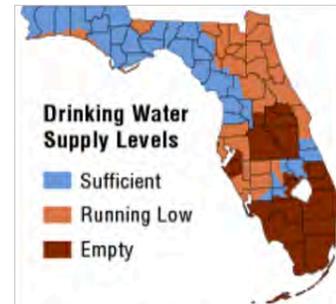
<https://time.com/3031079/suburbs-will-die-sprawl/>

# HOW MUCH MORE SPRAWL DO WE NEED, AND AT WHAT COST?



## What Does “Build-Out” Mean for Your Community?

“Browardization” is a term frequently used to describe what happens to a place that is overwhelmed with the consequences of over-development – traffic congestion, water shortages, school crowding, zero green space, degraded quality of life and crime.



## Not Enough Drinking Water!

Florida is running out of drinking water from the Floridan Aquifer, our main source of drinking water which has been relatively clean, cheap and plentiful – until now.

	Location	Buildout Pop % Increase	Current Population	Buildout Population	Water Supply Status	Property Value Decline 2007 to mid-2014	Education Costs for New Construction Build-Out Per Year	Education Costs per Student 2012 to 2013	Road Costs for New Construction Build-Out	Road Costs per Home
City	Bonita Springs	97%	43,914	86,389	Empty	-35%	\$26,518,458	\$9,205	\$180,683,820	\$9,316
County	Charlotte	386%	143,337	696,936	Running Low	-38%	\$492,156,186	\$9,506	\$2,409,967,890	\$9,316
County	Collier	233%	285,170	950,223	Empty	-39%	\$846,819,250	\$11,224	\$2,603,207,457	\$9,316
County	Lee	228%	345,491	1,133,497	Empty	-35%	\$831,018,736	\$9,205	\$3,123,858,914	\$9,316

[priceofsprawl.com/](http://priceofsprawl.com/)



The 850,000 acre Everglades ecosystem acts as a natural filter, removing excess nutrients and keeping out seawater. But half of 'the river of grass' already has been lost and more is dying off. As the aboveground ecosystem slips away, so does our underground fresh water.

The water that flows from your tap is likely to originate from the Everglades.

One in three Floridians -- more than eight million of us -- gets drinking water from the Biscayne Aquifer a few feet below the southeastern Everglades.

Those of us who don't get our water from the Biscayne Aquifer system, (those on the gulf coast), get it from the greater Florida Aquifer.

Currently, Ft Myers is operating a water treatment plant that meets a demand of 6.5 million gallons of water per day. This plant gets source water from the Floridian Aquifer.

As early as 1968, a USGS report entitled *Water - Supply Problems in Southwest Florida*, specifically noted water quality concerns in Charlotte, Collier, Hendry, and Lee Counties.

These counties were among the 15 counties that had the most rapid population increase for the period 1960-64.

The report suggested that quality concerns were attributable to the population of Southwest Florida increasing by 300 percent in the 15 years prior to the report being written. The expansion had to do with Redfish Point being turned into Cape Coral in 1958, and expanding from uninhabited to 2,850 in 1963.



## Economic Costs

Multiple studies show that low-density sprawl burdens local governments with higher economic costs in the long run compared to “infill development”—development on vacant or underused land within areas that are already largely developed.

Sprawling outward requires that new roads, water mains, sewer pipes, and other infrastructure be extended into undeveloped land outside of cities and towns (which constitute “the greenbelt”), while infill development usually requires simpler, less costly upgrades to existing city infrastructure.

Economic costs can include: Providing water, sewer, roads, and other services to far out neighborhoods, which is very costly for local governments. A 2015 study by the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate found that **policies limiting density in large cities cost the US more than \$1 trillion,\* and can increase per-capita land consumption by up to 80% and car use by up to 60%.**

Higher transportation and energy costs, and reduced access to jobs, services, and amenities create additional costs that can outweigh the typically-reduced housing prices that residents may pay to live in outlying areas.\*\*

**Residents in sprawl neighborhoods can expect to drive three times further than urban drivers, who rely more heavily on walking, biking, and public transit, and the estimated annual cost to provide roads to the most sprawling communities averaged \$804.74 per household, compared to \$19.87 in the highest-density communities.\*\*\***

In addition, new developments on the outskirts require new **police and fire services**. Because sprawl development is more distant and less dense, more officers may need to be working at a time to cover the additional area.\*\*\*

Regarding fire services, **the further a home is from a fire station, the higher its property insurance rates are**. Further, **neighborhoods with low densities and disconnected streets require four times the number of fire stations at four times the cost** compared with more compact and connected neighborhoods.\*\*\*\*

Similarly, the costs of other municipal services also rise as sprawl increases. Denser communities pay less to provide infrastructure and services including water, roads, solid waste, libraries, parks and recreation, governance, and more.

A US city’s annual average household cost for public services is \$1,416 in high-density areas, and up to a whopping \$3,462 in sprawling areas (as of 2012).\*\*\*

\* New Climate Economy, Sprawl Subsidy Report, 2015. <https://lecities.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/NCE-Sprawl-Subsidy-Report-021.pdf>

\*\* Brookings Institute, 2002. The Link Between Growth Management and Housing Affordability: The Academic Evidence <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-link-between-growth-management-and-housing-affordability-the-academic-evidence/>

\*\*\* Greenbelt Alliance, What is Sprawl Development, 2016. <https://www.greenbelt.org/blog/what-is-sprawl-development/>

\*\*\*\* Todd Litman, Victoria Transport Policy Institute, Understanding Smart Growth Savings, 2019. [https://www.vtpi.org/sg\\_save.pdf](https://www.vtpi.org/sg_save.pdf)

# THE TRUE COST OF SPRAWL

While this infographic applies to a study conducted in a municipality of Canada, it parallels what is happening in the States, and points out that in the end, there is a real cost to that cheaper suburban house.

## Suburban City's Annual Cost, per Household



## Urban City's Annual Cost, per Household



**SP** Sustainable Prosperity

For more data and more reports, visit [thecostofsprawl.com](http://thecostofsprawl.com)  
Data based on Halifax Regional Municipality

<https://www.treehugger.com/urban-design/new-studies-measure-true-costs-more-you-think.html>



Sprawl development leads to more cars driving more miles, thus creating **more traffic delays, pollution, road kill, and safety risks**. Decades of traffic data shows that building or expanding roads to serve new or existing sprawl only increases congestion through “induced demand.”\*

Adding road capacity encourages people to take longer or more frequent car trips. Congestion is a persistently growing problem.

- **In 2017, congestion caused urban Americans to travel an extra 8.8 billion hours and purchase an extra 3.3 billion gallons of fuel for a congestion cost of \$166 billion.**
- **Trucks account for \$21 billion (12 percent) of the cost, a bigger share than their 7 percent of traffic.**
- **The average auto commuter spends 54 hours in congestion and wastes 21 gallons of fuel due to congestion at a cost of \$1,010 in wasted time and fuel.**
- To reliably arrive on time, peak hour travelers have to allow 34 minutes to make a trip that takes 20 minutes in light traffic.

Sprawl development also uses more water. As lot sizes increase, water consumption increases, largely due to the increased irrigation demand.

- Denser developments are typically more water-efficient than a single-family house with a green lawn.
- **Annual per-capita water use almost doubles (from 25,000 gallons in “urban” development to 44,000 gallons in “standard” sprawl development).\*\*\*\***

\* Gilles Duranton, Matthew A. Turner, 2011. The Fundamental Law of Road Congestion: Evidence from US Cities, American Economic Review, Vol. 101 (pp. 2616-52)  
<https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.101.6.2616>

\*\* Bianca Barragan, 2014. Cubed LA, 405 Commutes Now a Minute Worse Than Before Carpool Lane.

\*\*\* INRIX, 2019. Global Traffic Scorecard. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5733302-INRIX-2018-Traffic-Scorecard-Report-00000002.html>

\*\*\*\* Chris Busch, Erika Lew, and Joe DiStefano for Energy Innovation: Policy and Technology, LLC & Calthorpe Analytics, 2015. MOVING CALIFORNIA FORWARD HOW SMART GROWTH CAN HELP CALIFORNIA REACH ITS 2030 CLIMATE TARGET WHILE CREATING ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CO-BENEFITS SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS, <https://energyinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Moving-Forward-Summary-for-Policymakers.pdf>

<https://static.tti.tamu.edu/tti.tamu.edu/documents/mobility-report-2019.pdf>



### Climate Change

The IPCC states that urban sprawl could consume as much as 5% of current cultivated land by 2050—in other words, five times the current footprint of cities themselves.\*

**Low-density sprawl development results in a significant increase in vehicle miles travelled compared to infill development.** This increase in VMT produces a commensurate increase in vehicle greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. **An estimated 29% of all US GHG emissions in 2017 came from the transportation sector, which now leads power generation as the largest GHG-emitting sector of the economy (US EPA\*\*).**

This means that, even as state economies move towards greater reliance on renewable energy sources for electricity and industrial production, climate change emission targets will not be met without substantial reductions in GHG emissions from the transportation sector.

**Ecosystems, especially forests and wetlands, are very efficient at storing the greenhouse gas, carbon. As continued sprawl develops, massive amounts of carbon are released into the atmosphere.**

\* IPCC, 2019. Climate Change and Land, Summary for Policymakers.  
<https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/Fullreport-1.pdf>

\*\* <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions>



## Health Costs

### **Sprawl negatively affects our health.**

Cities built around car use provide fewer opportunities to exercise than walkable and bikeable cities. Cars and trucks release air pollutants, including ozone, CO<sub>2</sub>, and airborne particulates, which cause respiratory problems such as asthma and lung cancer.\*

Increased vehicle miles traveled (VMT) is **linked to rising obesity rates, diabetes, chronic illness, inactivity, and mental health impacts.**\*\* People living in less walkable communities have a **50% higher rate of diabetes** as compared to the most walkable communities. The exercise that residents of walkable neighborhoods get daily is an important public health benefit of higher density development.

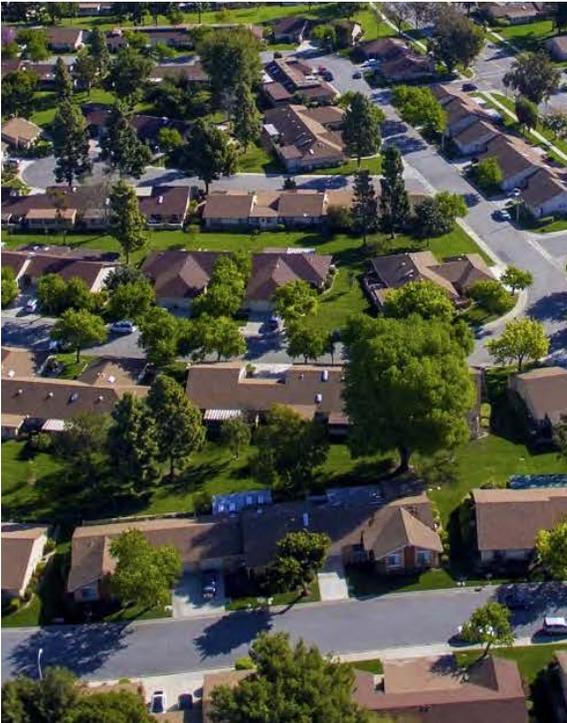
Sprawl is associated with **higher direct and indirect rates of fatal vehicle crashes.**\*\*\*

\* Resnik DB. Urban sprawl, smart growth, and deliberative democracy. *Am J Public Health*. 2010;100(10):1852–1856. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2009.182501

\*\* US Dept. of Transportation. <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/person-miles-traveled-mode>

\*\*\* Reid Ewing, et al. Urban sprawl as a risk factor in motor vehicle crashes, *Urban Studies*, Volume: 53 issue: 2, page(s): 247-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014562331>

# A BIG HOUSE IN THE SUBURBS WON'T MAKE YOU HAPPIER



In 1973, when the Census Bureau started tracking home sizes, the median size of a newly built house was just over 1,500 ft<sup>2</sup>, but that figure reached nearly 2,500 ft<sup>2</sup> 2015.

Despite the major upscaling of single-family home sizes, house satisfaction has remained the same in US suburbs.

In fact, larger homes might make people less satisfied.

Those in the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest tier of home size seem most dissatisfied, specifically when a larger home is built near them.

Homeowners exposed to the construction of big houses in their neighborhood put lower prices on their home.

They are also more likely to upscale to a bigger house and take up more debt.

Moreover, a recent life expectancy study suggests U.S. will lag behind

New analysis shows many in countries like S. Korea, are likely to live beyond 90 by 2030, but not those here in the US, who will be likely to live to around 73 years of age – due to a lack of access to health care, homicide rates, and obesity.

How might the suburbs exasperate these conditions?

Obesity-time spent in cars / higher crime and arrest rates in suburbs, with newest exurban suburbs experiencing higher rates of crime / longer emergency response times to suburbs.

<https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/p66.pdf>

<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/02/american-arrest-rates-suburban-urban-crime-policing/581587/>

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3378131](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3378131)

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/life-expectancy-study-suggests-u-s-will-lag-behind/>

How can we  
*'slow the train'*  
and create  
more livable  
communities?

SHOULD WE, CAN WE,  
DO WE WANT TO RETROFIT  
SUBURBIA?

A livable community is one that has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options, which together facilitate personal independence and the engagement of residents in civic and social life.



How can we  
'slow the train'  
and create  
more livable  
communities?

SHOULD WE, CAN WE,  
DO WE WANT TO RETROFIT  
SUBURBIA?

Liveable, walkable communities with good, low-cost public transportation (and provisions for non-motorized transport – e.g. bike lanes), well-funded public services, community centers and cared for public spaces with lots of functional green space (parks, sidewalks, food gardens), are all necessary for creating sustainable, desirable and vibrant communities.

## UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF SUSTAINABILITY

**WHAT ARE SOME OF THE  
COMPONENTS WE COULD PLAN  
FOR, TO RETROFIT A SUBURB?**