

How an Urban Growth Boundary Could Save Buffalo-Niagara

A starting point for discussion featuring maps from [The Place Database](#)

By Matt Bowling, AICP

June 2019

The findings and conclusions of this narrative reflect the views of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.



Single-family detached residential properties, frontage lots on former agricultural lands, 19.4 miles from downtown Buffalo, built circa 2005. Credit: Author.

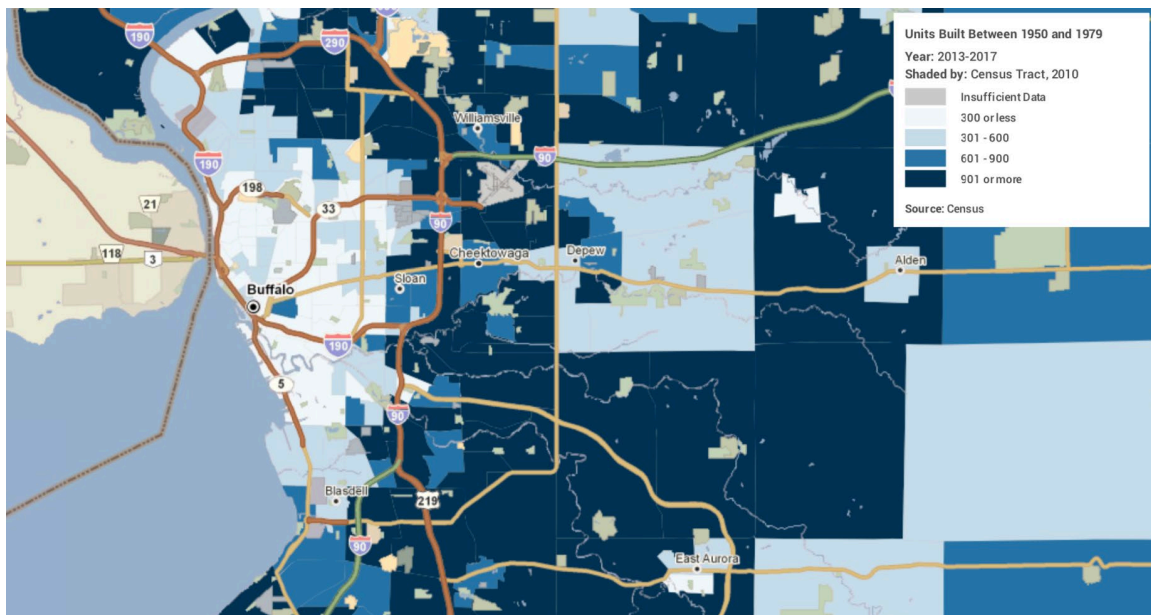


A vacant two-family residential property, 1.8 miles from downtown Buffalo, built circa 1910. Credit: Author.

Background

Since 1970, the Buffalo-Niagara Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) has been contracting in population but sprawling in geographic footprint (i.e. sprawl without growth). The Buffalo-Niagara MSA is comprised of two counties which include 64 independent municipal governments. In Erie County there are three cities, 25 towns, and 16 villages and in Niagara County there are three cities, 12 towns, and five villages. Many of these municipalities are fiercely “home rule” and make land use decisions with their individual community’s best interests in mind, paying little attention to how their land use decisions may or may not impact the region as a whole (New York State is a “home rule” state). On top of that, the majority of these municipalities do not employ full-time planning professionals, leaving them ill-equipped to make land use decisions that affect the long-term health of their own citizens as well as the health of a region of over one million people.

Unlike every other MSA in New York State, the Buffalo-Niagara region does *not* have a regional planning agency. In addition, Erie County, which dissolved its planning board in the 1990s, is the largest county in New York State that does not have a county planning board. The splintering of jurisdiction and diffusion of governance has made addressing structural deficiencies in the region's post-industrial economy all the more difficult. The region has been bleeding population for five decades and the 64 municipalities that comprise the Buffalo-Niagara MSA have cannibalized each other, fighting for the same ever-shrinking pool of residents. The result has been municipal fragmentation, economic and racial conflicts, and dependence on local property taxes that create an environment where regional considerations are given low priority, exclusionary zoning is fostered, and growth continues to get pushed to the periphery.



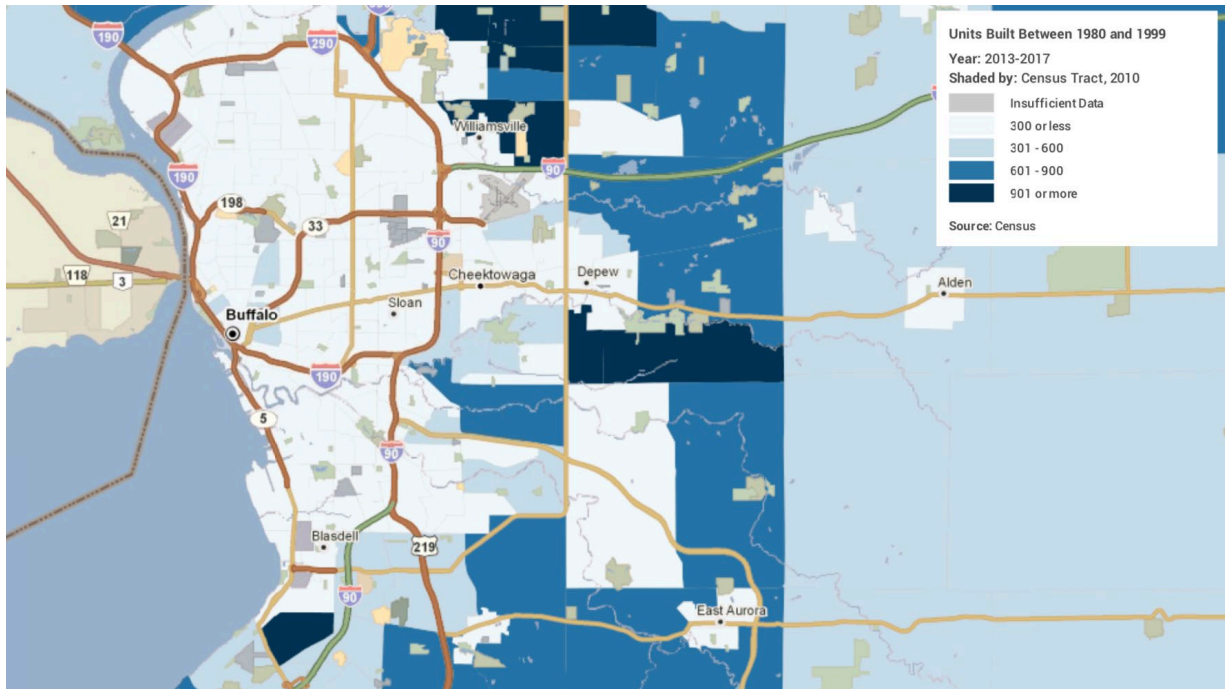
Map: The location of and number of housing units built between 1950 and 1979. Credit: The Place Database, <https://plcy.mp/r4fy5IL>.

The Problem

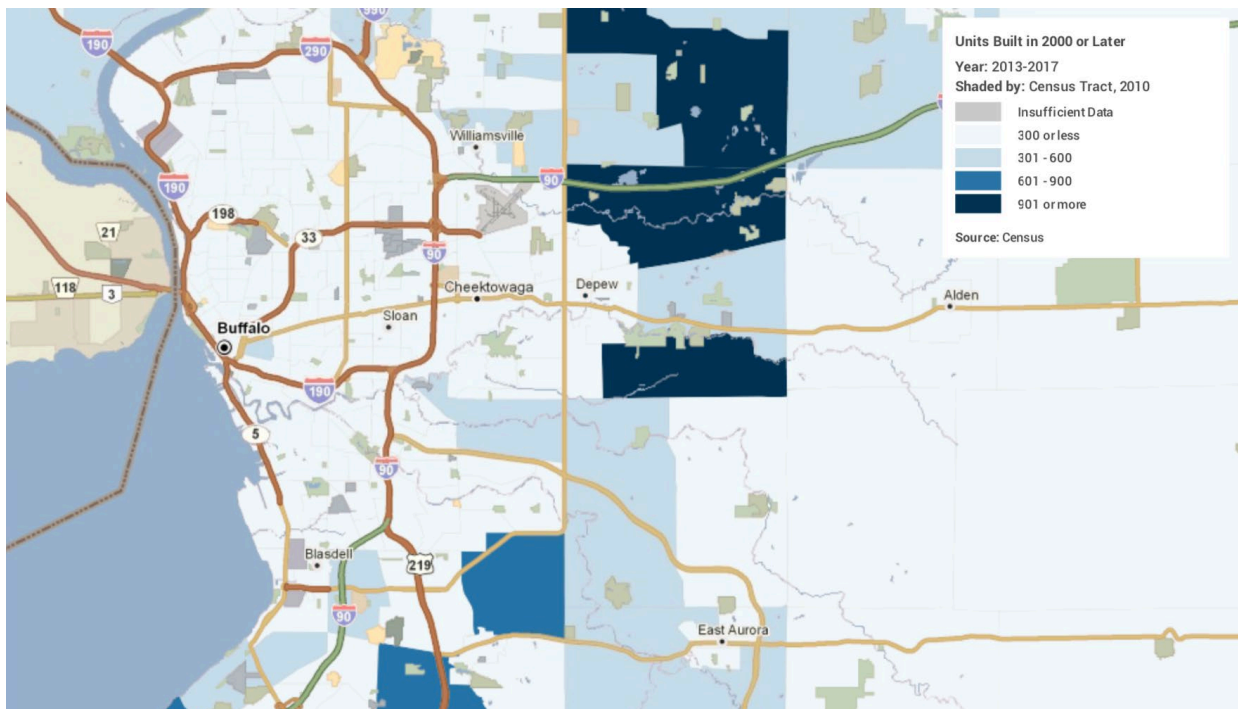
In many regions, sprawl seems inevitable, a fact of life for a growing metropolis and a booming economy—where else are all those people and businesses supposed to go? Planning professionals know better, but in areas experiencing rapid population growth it can be hard to convince decision makers to consider the impact their current choices will have five to ten years (or longer) down the road. In such regions the population is rapidly growing and land has become so expensive within and near the inner core that development has been pushed ever outward until topography/natural features stop it or the distance becomes too great to make commuting practical (and even then, Americans apparently are willing to drive *great* distances on a daily basis in regions such as Washington, DC, New York City, Atlanta, etc.).

The Buffalo-Niagara MSA is experiencing a different phenomena. Buffalo-Niagara, along with several of the other MSAs located within the Rust Belt, is contracting in population. In Buffalo-Niagara, the cost associated with development far exceeds the cost of the land itself (even within close proximity of downtown/the central business district). In places like Buffalo-Niagara, sprawl is unjustifiable and harmful to initiatives geared towards revitalizing distressed areas. Sprawl, in any region, is reckless fiscal policy and detrimental to sustainability. It discourages resiliency and equity, undermines historic preservation, and inhibits walkability and bikeability. In regions with declining populations, such as the Buffalo-Niagara MSA, sprawl contributes to an increased tax burden, as the costs associated with providing, and then maintaining, adequate public facilities (e.g. utilities, roads, schools, emergency services, etc.) are increasingly spread across fewer taxpayers.

In 1970, the MSA's population was 1,349,211. By 2018, its population had fallen to 1,130,152, a decrease of over 16 percent. During that same 48-year period, the MSA's urban footprint increased by nearly 78 percent. This increased urban footprint, driven by suburban expansion, can be visualized through an analysis of data provided in [The Place Database](#) that tabulates the number of housing units built within a given time frame, from 1950 to 1979 (29-year period), from 1980 to 1999 (19-year period), and from 2000 to 2017 (17-year period). These visualizations are not perfect (the number of units does not necessarily directly represent the degree of sprawl), but when coupled with census data, photographic documentation, and commercial/residential real estate reports, they paint a clear picture of the sprawl without growth problem that has plagued the Buffalo-Niagara MSA.

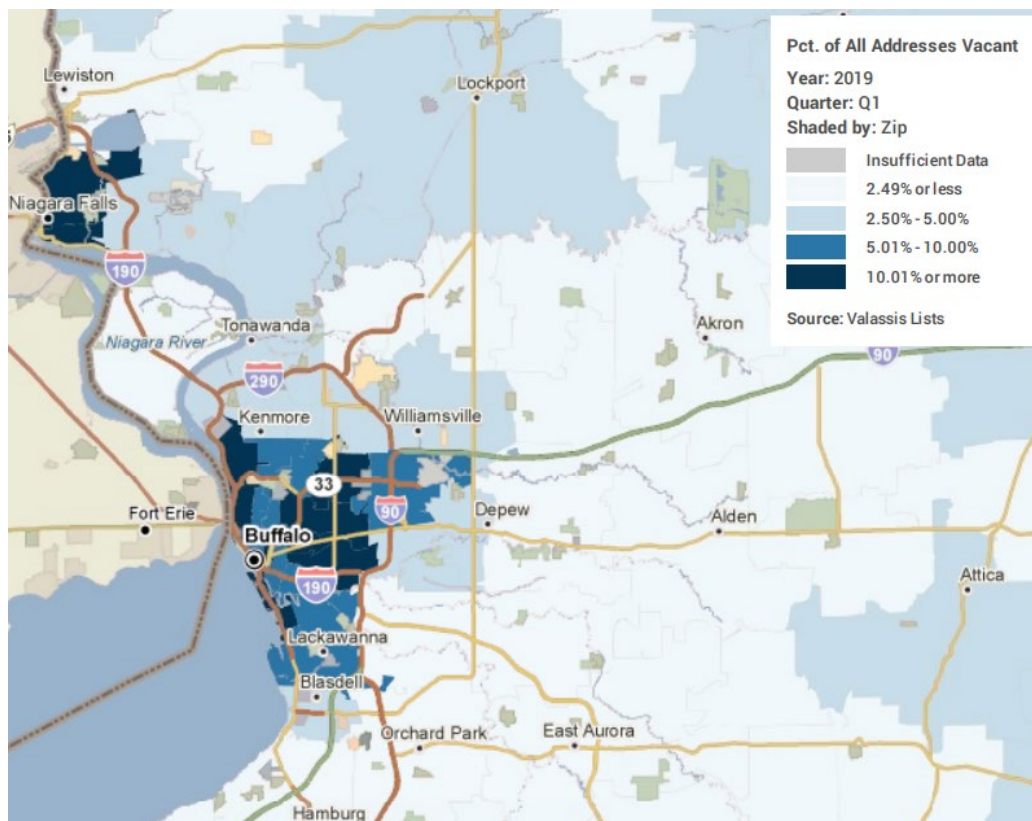


Map: The location of and number of housing units built between 1980 and 1999. Credit: The Place Database, <https://plcy.mp/6Xg53mm>.



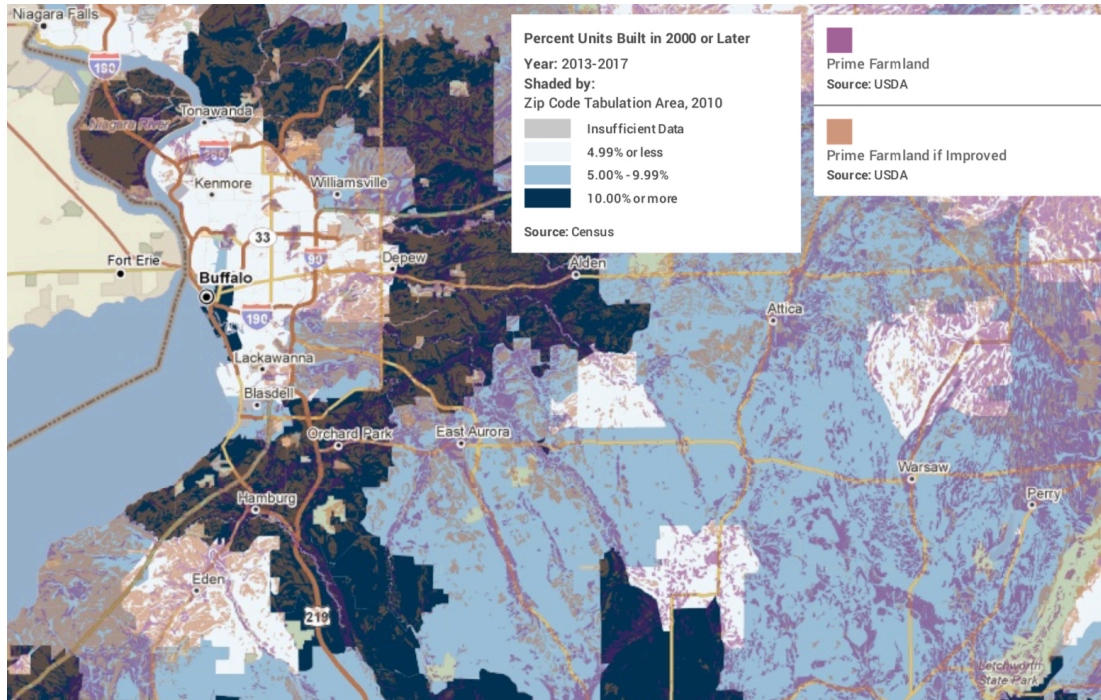
Map: The location of and number of housing units built in 2000 or later. Credit: The Place Database <https://plcy.mp/XGQQ0vN>.

From 2010 to 2018, the population of the MSA fell from 1,135,509 to 1,130,152, a decrease of 5,357 residents. This more modest drop in population would not be *too* troubling (a “leveling off” of sorts), however, the population loss, coupled with another increase in the MSA’s urban footprint, is troubling. Current land use policies and economic development mechanisms within the MSA are fractured and have proven to be ineffective arbiters of addressing the region’s sprawl without growth.



The spatial inefficiency caused by sprawl has resulted in irreversible damage to agricultural lands, forested areas, wetlands, and watersheds located within the region. The damage to valuable agricultural lands within the region can be seen in the accompanying map.

Further, sprawl is inhibiting the use of alternative forms of transportation (e.g. public transportation, biking, or walking). In fact, today, there are fewer users of alternative forms of transportation in Buffalo-Niagara than there were in 1970. As homes, goods, services, and employers have become more scattered throughout the 2,367-square-mile region, its residents have become more dependent on automobiles for transport. For many low-income families, cars are an unaffordable luxury, effectively limiting their access to opportunities.



Map: The percentage of housing units built after 2000, many of which were constructed on USDA classified Prime Farmland/Prime Farmland if improved. Credit: The Place Database, <https://plcy.mp/RB70j4Y>.

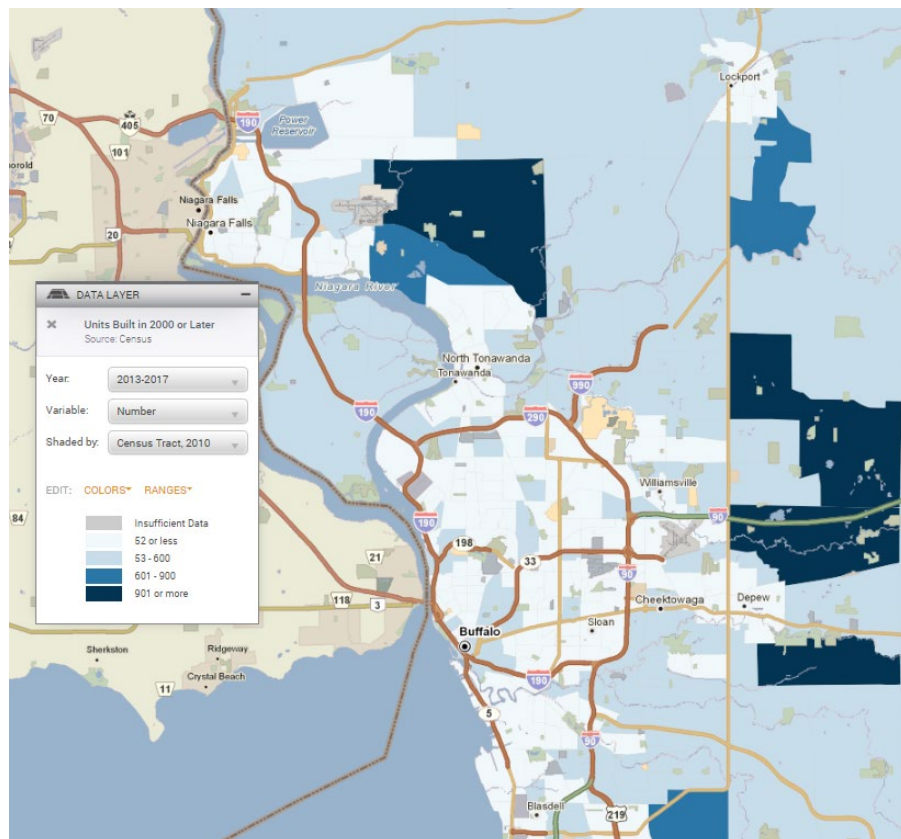
Potential Solution

What we are doing collectively, as a region, to address sprawl without growth is not working. The existing enabling legislation, legal frameworks, and policy structures have largely failed to address the issue for five decades. Buffalo-Niagara must fundamentally evolve the way planning is done within the MSA in order to curb sprawl without growth. All feasible options, including amending New York State's enabling legislation, creating a regional planning council, and dissolving or consolidating governments should be given a hard look and explored in greater detail. It should be noted that there are no "silver bullets" to counteract a problem decades in the making. It will take a combination of tools to address the region's sprawl without growth problem. One option, which could potentially be implemented in a relatively short period of time, an urban growth boundary, is briefly explored below.

An urban growth boundary would prohibit most forms of development outside of the boundary, which would stop sprawl at the boundary. Ostensibly, a regional discussion, including decision makers committed to the health of the region as a whole, would need to take place to establish

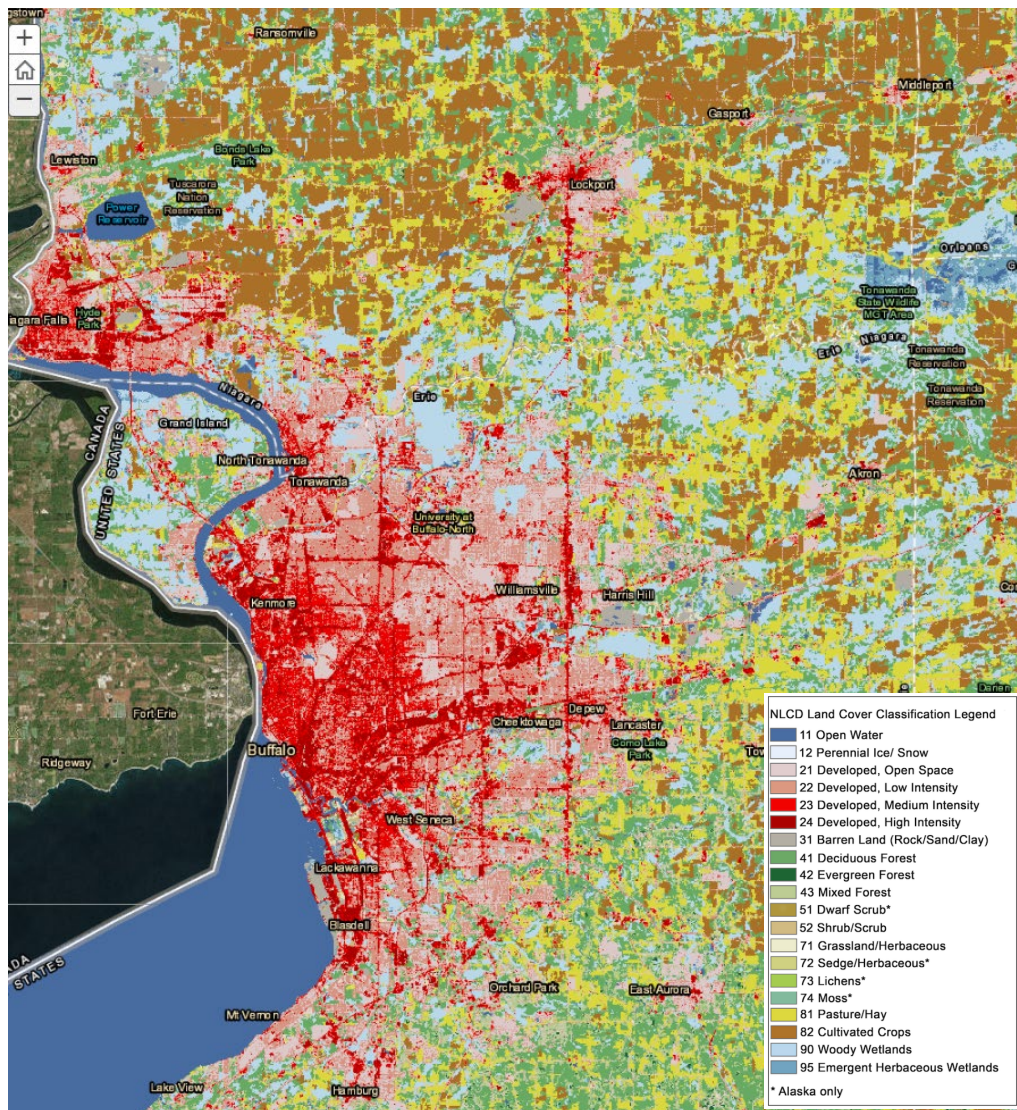
where such a boundary would be appropriate (i.e. where to draw the line). If a consensus cannot be reached at the regional level, New York State should consider taking action. Since 2012, New York State has invested over \$1 billion in the Buffalo-Niagara region, with the goal of laying the foundation for an economic resurgence. An urban growth boundary would help to focus and protect New York State's considerable economic investment in the MSA.

Urban growth boundaries don't have to be permanent in nature (they can be analyzed and revised, even expanded periodically depending on the needs of the region). If the Buffalo-Niagara region's population were to start growing again, the boundary could be enlarged to accommodate additional growth (although, it would have to be a *significant* amount of population growth given the five decades of sprawl without growth and accompanying increases in urbanized area). The Buffalo-Niagara MSA is the perfect location for such a policy measure. Land values are low and the population is contracting. An urban growth boundary would stop sprawl without growth and solidify the urban core by directing commercial and residential investment inward, rather than outward. In addition, an urban growth boundary would decrease the fiscal burden of supporting roads, snowplows, utilities, schools, emergency services, parks, etc. to cover an ever-increasing geographic footprint for the existing populous. More low-income families would have access to the goods, services, and jobs currently found at the outward fringes of the region. Finally, an urban growth boundary would protect valuable agricultural lands, sensitive ecosystems, and vital watersheds from destruction, aiding with sustainability goals and making for a more resilient region.



Map: The concentration of housing units built after 2000 across the entire MSA. The darker colors represent higher concentrations of new housing units. Credit: The Place Database, <https://plcy.mp/SJ9s4dN>.

An urban growth boundary is not a perfect solution, nor is it the only solution. However, it is a solution that could be implemented quickly (in relative terms) and could produce immediate positive socio-economic, environmental, public health, and fiscal results. Should the Buffalo-Niagara region *not* start growing again (in terms of population), it is time that we, as planners and policy makers, start focusing our attention on making life great (e.g. by lowering the tax burden, increasing walkability, protecting the environment, ensuring access to locally produced food, etc.) for those residents who love the region and desire to live, work, and retire within it. The April 2019 census estimates paint a picture of a region that is still, despite billions of dollars in public investments, slowly bleeding to death in terms of population shifts (due to outmigration). An urban growth boundary could very well be one of the planning tools used to help stop the bleeding, one of the mechanisms used to save the beautiful Buffalo-Niagara region.



Map: National Land Cover Data 2016. Credit: <https://www.mrlc.gov/data/nlcd-2016-land-cover-conus>.

Sources

Brachman, Lavea, and Alan Mallach. 2013. *Regenerating America's Legacy Cities*. Policy Focus Report. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

Thomas, G. Scott. 2019. "Why Isn't Buffalo Growing?" Buffalo Business First. April 19. <https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2019/04/19/why-isnt-buffalo-growing.html>.

University at Buffalo Regional Institute, State University of New York at Buffalo, School of Architecture and Planning. 2015. "One Region Forward: A New Way to Plan for Buffalo Niagara."

U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018." <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-counties-total.html>.