



Taxes, outmigration threaten Cuyahoga County, new study by CSU's Tom Bier finds

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Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

By

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Exciting new urban developments such as **Uptown in University Circle** are great news for Cleveland, but they haven't altered the basic dynamic of suburban sprawl, which is sapping the city's energy and threatening the future of Cuyahoga County.

So says **Tom Bier**, a senior fellow at Cleveland State University's Levin College of Urban Development, and the former longtime director of the college's Center for Housing Research and Policy.

Bier (pronounced like Buyer) has been meeting over the past month with groups of local government and foundation officials in Cuyahoga County to make a presentation (embedded below) based on his new research on sprawl and the damage it's causing by decimating the county's tax base.

His goal: to raise an alarm about development trends that, if unchecked, could hollow out Northeast Ohio's cities and spread thinly settled suburbs across the region.

"In my 35 years of looking at this, the fundamental dynamics are basically unchanged," he said. "I've been looking for something has a decent chance of forcing action."

Bier's presentation is compelling, and it ought to be on the agenda for the **Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium**, a new nonprofit funded by a \$4.3 million federal grant to help the region map a rational path to the future.

Bier's main point is that Cuyahoga County, with only 2,000 acres of agricultural land left within its



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Uptown will have commercial space on the first two floors, including a Barnes and Noble, Verizon and a Constantino's market, so far.

boundaries, is on track soon to become the first county in Ohio to be completely built-out.

With no easy way to add "greenfield" developments to local tax bases, the 59 jurisdictions in the county face the much harder and more costly task of recycling older developed areas, cleaning up brownfields or renovating existing structures.

Under home rule, the section of the state constitution that gives localities sole power over land use and zoning, older communities in the region's urban cores face the challenges of redevelopment in a "do-it-yourself" mode, Bier says.

"Home rule is taken to mean, 'It's your problem, you fix it,' " Bier says in his presentation.

Counties surrounding Cuyahoga, meanwhile, are filled with plenty of open land in townships, which by state law may not levy income taxes.

This means, Bier said, that residents can easily move from incorporated cities and villages in Cuyahoga to townships in nearby Medina, Geauga and Lake counties, where they pay significantly less in taxes per household in exchange for slightly longer commutes by automobile.

According to Bier's research, 96 percent of Geauga County land is in townships; 90 percent in Medina County; 86 percent in Portage County and 70 percent in Lorain.

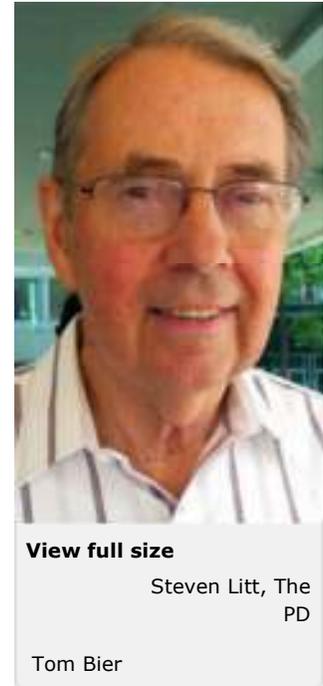
Bier's research shows that Cleveland, Akron and Lorain lost more than 100,000 residents between 2000 and 2010, while townships in the six counties surrounding Cuyahoga picked up nearly 40,000 new residents.

The pace of development, both in cities and suburban areas, slowed during the latter half of the 2000s as the national housing market collapsed and the country entered the 2008 recession. But Bier said he expected pre-recession trends to resume in Northeast Ohio.

He predicts that over the next 25 years, Cuyahoga County can expect to see another 75,000 houses abandoned as more and more residents leave.

Cuyahoga will also lose roughly one-fifth of its property value, along with \$5 billion in income. Cleveland's population will certainly dip below 300,000.

Raising taxes to pay for municipal services, much less redevelopment, worsens the predicament of older communities in the urban core, Bier said, calling the situation a catch-22. Bier said his study did not take into account the predicted 9 percent reduction in county property taxes caused by the recent state-mandated property tax reappraisal, **described in Monday's Plain Dealer**.



Meanwhile, six adjacent counties around Cuyahoga, including Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage and Summit, will gain 175,000 new homes and consume another 550 square miles of land.

Ultimately, the pattern will debase the quality of life in the newer communities, destroying the very reasons the newer residents sought to leave older areas, Bier said. And if Cleveland continues to lose population and economic energy, the entire region will suffer.

"Does the economy of the region grow because downtown Medina is attractive?" Bier asked. "I'm sorry, it doesn't matter." What happens to downtown Cleveland, however, does matter to the rest of Northeast Ohio, he said.

Bier said Cuyahoga County needs to increase the pace of urban redevelopment and add 3,000 new housing units a year. That's three times the pace of the best year in recent decades, he said. The county also needs to create incentives for regeneration of core areas.

The state, meanwhile, needs to change the system of local income and real estate taxes, which fuels urban decline and suburban sprawl simultaneously, he said.

Bier concludes his presentation with a statement culled from a recent regional planning effort in Scotland. It states that "regeneration is the holistic process of reversing the economic, physical and social decline of places where market forces alone won't suffice."

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