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Saturated with stores

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Modern retailing is a cutthroat game of real estate speculation among national chains. Typically the winner is the chain that moves quickest to monopolize prime locations and flood the market with its stores. And the rules of the game are set by national marketing plans and the short-term demands of Wall Street for rapid growth.

Where does this leave local communities? In many cases, it leaves them out of control. They are buffeted by changing retail trends that have little to do with long-term quality of life – trends that may impose long-term costs that outweigh the tax benefits of new development.



In an effort to understand how haphazard retail development is shaping Northeast Ohio, local planning agencies completed a regional retail study in 2000 that documents impacts on land use, transportation, tax base and the environment. The study area included Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina and Portage counties, as well as the northern portion of Summit County.

Here are some of the disturbing findings.

Land use

- New types of retail enterprises have significantly accelerated the pace of change in retail patterns. These new types require larger stores with more diverse merchandise lines, including “category killers,” warehouse clubs and supercenters. These retailing forms require larger tracts of land for both store structures and parking.
- The seven-county region already has more than 37 square feet of convenience and shopping floor space per capita, which is more than the typical 20-30 square feet range in other metropolitan areas. It’s estimated that the amount of space devoted to convenience and shopping goods and services in the region exceeds the demand by more than 6 million square feet.
- While there are more than 10 million square feet of vacant retail space in Northeast Ohio (a vacancy rate of 7.4 percent), a total of 10.1 million square feet has been recently constructed or proposed for the region.
- There is an overwhelming amount of undeveloped land – 77 square miles, or an area the size of the City of Cleveland – zoned for more retail in the region. If all of this were developed, more than three times the amount of existing retail space could be built in an already saturated market. Rural counties, such as Medina, Geauga and Portage, could experience increases of 860 percent to 1,500 percent.
- Locations with large amounts of commercially zoned land at the edges of the region’s urbanized area include State Routes 8, 82 and 14 in northern Summit County; Routes 18, 42 and 94 in northern Medina County; Route 43 in Geauga and Portage County; and Routes 10, 254 and U.S. 20 in eastern Lorain County. Locations with commercial land in more rural areas include Route 83 in Eaton and Grafton Townships in Lorain County and Routes 83 and 162 in Chatham Township in Medina County. Much of Route 20 in eastern Lake County and Route 14 in southeastern Portage County are also zoned for retail use. Competition within the region
- There is a spatial mismatch between the location of proposed development and areas that are underserved. Many of the underserved areas have traffic access, infrastructure and population

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densities to support additional retail but are bypassed in favor of more easily developable locations.

- Currently, Lake County and the Chagrin-Southeast portion of Cuyahoga County have the largest surpluses of retail space relative to their populations, while the City of Cleveland has the largest deficit. Lorain County and the Westshore and Southwest portions of Cuyahoga County have the next largest surpluses, while Geauga County and the Heights area of Cuyahoga County have the next largest deficits. Medina and Portage counties have the best balance of retail space relative to their populations.
- Overbuilding results in new retail space that competes with existing commercial districts in the region, often leading to lower rents, more marginal businesses, increased vacancies in older retail areas, and reduced tax revenues for school districts and communities.
- There is sales leakage from central cities and older suburbs, as consumers travel out to new areas to shop.
- The proliferation of national retailers threatens locally owned businesses that provide uniqueness and special character to retail districts.

Taxes and costs

- Most of the proposed, large-scale retail projects are planned in outlying communities of Cuyahoga County or in surrounding counties. Considerable public subsidies in the form of transportation enhancements, infrastructure improvements and city services will likely be required. Funding for these public improvements is often limited and competes with other priorities.
- Community tax revenue that is generated by new retail development is often offset by the local government costs of providing additional infrastructure and public safety services, the softening of the revenue from existing businesses, and the costs of environmental mitigation.

Environmental impacts

- Retail land use is the source of a number of impacts on the environment. These include airborne pollutants from vehicular trips for shopping purposes, stormwater runoff quality and quantity, as well as noise, light pollution and degradation of community aesthetics. These impacts often extend well beyond the local jurisdiction in which they are located.
- Excess parking capacity, common throughout many areas of Northeast Ohio, unnecessarily increases the amount of stormwater that washes directly into urban streams. This runoff carries with it significant levels of petroleum, nitrogen, heavy metals, and sediment, which contributes to the degradation of streams, rivers, and lakes.
- Land area developed for retail use in the study area increases stormwater surface runoff by 874 million cubic feet annually. If all vacant land in the region currently zoned for retail use was developed, surface runoff could increase by an additional 3 billion cubic feet per year. This would have serious impacts on the remaining high quality streams in the region.
- Retail establishments are significant generators of traffic. Traffic associated with a typical large super-regional shopping center (such as each of the eight largest shopping centers in the study area) generates quantities of air emissions causing the centers to rank among the top sources of carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons within the seven-county study area. In all, vehicular shopping trips in the region annually generate 19,100 tons of hydrocarbons, 10,250 tons of nitrogen oxides, 153,000 tons of carbon monoxide, and 2,691,500 tons of carbon dioxide.

Land use management

- Under Ohio law, proposed retail projects are subject only to local land use management authority, even though they may have regional implications with regard to traffic generation, environmental consequences, regional tax inequities and impact on other retail areas.
- Because many local government zoning codes do not provide for mixed uses and flexible zoning techniques, the development of continuous strips of shopping areas has occurred in many parts of the region.
- Large tracts of privately owned land in developed areas, including golf courses and environmentally sensitive areas, have been targeted for retail development.

The study concludes that communities in Northeast Ohio—and the region as a whole—need to pay more attention to the long-term implications of retail development. And it offers recommendations for adapting to ever-changing retail trends and creating shopping districts that will enhance quality of life in the long run.

The Northeast Ohio Regional Retail Analysis was prepared by the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission for the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (available for download [here](#).)

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