What is a Growth Boundary?

A growth boundary is a growth management policy that directs growth to specific areas in order to prevent unplanned growth. This planning technique helps define and separate the urban core of a community from surrounding agricultural and natural lands. The land areas within a growth boundary should be capable of accommodating growth for about 20-30 years and be reviewed every five to ten years to assess if changes need to be made. The objective of a growth boundary is to protect and preserve open spaces, farmland, and natural environments from random urban and suburban development on the outskirts of the urban center.

There are no specifically defined criteria for administering a growth boundary, making them unique to each city, region, or county. Each locality or region can tailor the policy to the community’s needs and utilize different aspects of growth management to identify what will be productive and effective for the community. The boundary is an established line with some flexibility, depending on how it is implemented. The amount of flexibility depends largely on the locality’s strictness of application and the associated zoning ordinance. Studies have shown if a boundary is too flexible, it is often ineffective at achieving its purposes.

Benefits of Growth Boundaries

**Land Preservation:** By directing growth to areas with existing development and infrastructure, the land outside the boundary can be utilized for agricultural purposes or preserved as natural areas and open space. The land inside the boundary is more attractive to developers since it is often zoned for higher density development. Preserving agricultural lands and natural areas leads to more sustainable development, efficient patterns of growth, and protection of environmental resources.

**Efficient Use of Infrastructure and Public Services:** Growth boundaries are economically beneficial to municipalities and developers because time and money are saved connecting to existing infrastructure. Properties within a growth boundary will typically have easy accessibility and connectivity to public infrastructure and services such as sewer, water, roadways, and transportation. This accessibility to services creates an incentive for developers to build within the boundary and is an efficient use of the current resources and services.

**Infill and Redevelopment:** By directing growth inside of a growth boundary, infill development of vacant lots and redevelopment of underutilized properties is encouraged. Focusing development in these areas, avoids leap frog development. Infill development and redevelopment ensures available land inside the boundary is used rather than intensively developing land outside the current boundary. The number of vacant lots is reduced and there is an increase in the livability of the community.

The first growth boundary was established in 1958 in Lexington, Kentucky to protect the rural bluegrass fields, known as Bluegrass Country, surrounding the city.
Perceived Stigma

There are common misconceptions associated with growth boundaries due to the restriction put on available, buildable land. With a limited land supply and an increasing demand to accommodate population and job growth, people believe land costs within a growth boundary will increase. In turn this will cause housing prices to increase, although there is little evidence to support this. High housing prices are more often due to a higher quality of life in a community and reflect the access to amenities, higher construction costs, higher median incomes, and lower levels of unemployment. Nevertheless, if a growth report or development capacity analysis is completed regularly to determine the need to expand the boundary, municipalities can ensure there is enough land available to meet the needs of an increasing population for the next 20-30 years.

Growth Management Techniques

Zoning

The zoning ordinance is the primary tool utilized to implement a growth boundary. Without supportive zoning regulations in place, the boundary has no value and is merely a line on a map. The zoning ordinance must be complimentary of the boundary with both permitted uses and densities. Most importantly, the land outside the boundary should be zoned for development consistent with the existing rural character. If the growth boundary is to be expanded or altered, the zoning ordinance should be amended as well to reflect the new boundary.

Land Reserves

Urban and rural land reserves, sometimes referred to a future growth or rural resource areas, are common tools utilized to provide an orderly expansion of a growth boundary. An urban reserve is land that is designated for potential development and future inclusion within the boundary to accommodate growth. On the other hand, a rural reserve is agricultural or natural land protected from development and prohibited of being included in the boundary. Urban land reserves are a proactive technique to identify areas to be included in the boundary in the future, given there is a need to expand.

Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)

TDR programs protect farmers and preserve agricultural land. TDR programs allow the owner of a rural, agricultural, or forested parcel of land to sell or “transfer” their development rights to a developer. The developer can then use the density credits purchased from the rural parcel to increase the permitted density on a parcel of land in a more urbanized area within the growth boundary. This strategy preserves farmland and natural areas and encourages sustainable development by concentrating density where the proper infrastructure already exists. TDR is an alternative to selling rural land to developers and allows farmers to continue farming. Economic incentives, such as tax breaks, are often necessary for this strategy to be appealing to land owners.
Section 1103 of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) supports the use of growth boundaries, which are referred to as designated growth areas.

Portland, Oregon

Portland is well known for their urban growth boundary and implementation process. Oregon was the first state to adopt statewide land use planning laws in 1973. Under these laws, metropolitan areas are required to implement a growth boundary at the city, municipal, or multi-municipal level. As a result of these regulations, there are currently 241 growth boundaries across Oregon today. In 1979, Portland established a growth boundary around the metropolitan area and currently covers about 258,000 acres. The growth boundary accommodates population and employment growth for the following 20 years and an analysis is completed every six years to evaluate the need for expansion.

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

Lancaster County offers tools, resources, and expertise necessary for municipalities to voluntarily implement a growth boundary or village growth area and participate in the Lancaster County growth management plan, as part of the County’s Comprehensive Plan. Currently, 13 urban growth boundaries and 31 village growth areas have been established with 41 out of the 60 municipalities participating. A village growth area is a growth boundary on a smaller scale and only within a single municipality. There was an urgent need to control growth due to sprawling subdivisions overtaking prime farmland, which is significant to Lancaster County’s economy, identity, and culture.

The Centre Region, Pennsylvania

The Centre Region, which is comprised of the Townships of College, Ferguson, Halfmoon, Harris, and Patton and the Borough of State College, officially adopted a regional growth boundary (RGB) in the 2000 Comprehensive Plan. Then in 2006, the Centre Region Act 537 Sewage Facilities Plan was updated and the sewer service area (SSA) was made consistent with the RGB. Combining the RGB and SSA boundaries together created a common area of growth for orderly development. Five of the six municipalities are included partially or entirely within the RGB and SSA. Every five years the Centre Region Planning Agency performs a data analysis of development capacity known as the Regional Development Capacity Report to determine if the RGB and SSA includes adequate developable land to accommodate growth for the 20-30 year planning horizon.
Sources and More Information:

Holding the Line: Urban Containment in the United States by Rolf Pendall, Jonathan Martin, and William Fulton

Stopping Sprawl in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania: Making the Case for Mandatory Urban Growth Boundaries by Rachel D. Jaffe

Oregonmetro.gov/urban-growth-boundary

cconservationtools.org