

Smartish growth

Good news: Stockton area fares well in national survey of sprawl. Bad news: It's partially because other places are doing so poorly.



Farmland sits next to homes in Stockton's Spanos Park West neighborhood.

CRAIG SANDERS/The Record

By **Alex Breitler**

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A group championing smart growth says the Stockton metro area has done a better job than most of curbing urban sprawl.

But "better" is a relative term.

"It doesn't necessarily say you're doing well. It means other people are doing a lot worse," said Ilana Preuss, vice president of Washington, D.C.-based Smart Growth America.

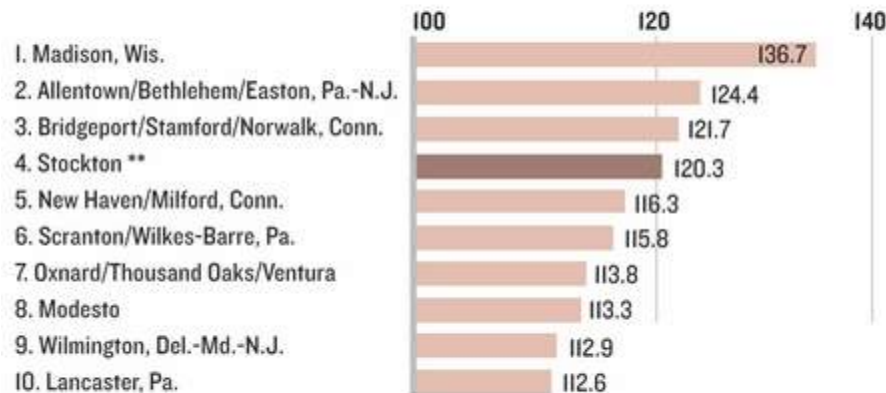
In a report that might surprise local slow-growth crusaders, that organization ranked the Stockton area as the fourth-most compact region in the nation, compared to other mid-sized metro areas.

Compared to all metro areas, Stockton ranked 41st out of 221.

This could seem counter-intuitive, given the headlines of the past few years. The city of Stockton was sued in 2008 over its growth-inducing General Plan, and a settlement involving then-California Attorney General Jerry Brown - combined with new planning laws and the collapse of the housing market - fueled a re-evaluation of how the city should grow in the future.

Compact and connected?

The Top 10 list of most "compact" mid-sized metropolitan areas, according to anti-sprawl advocacy organization Smart Growth America. A score of 100 is considered average.



**Stockton ranks as the fourth-most compact on a list of mid-sized metros, and 41st most-compact on a list of all 221 metropolitan areas with at least 200,000 people.

KORY HANSEN/
The Record

While giving this region a relatively high score already, Thursday's report does come with caveats.

The census data used to generate the rankings covers all of San Joaquin County, not just urban Stockton.

That means the study includes rural areas. And because of California's robust rules to protect farmland, you won't find as many rural ranchettes here as you might in other states, said Eric Parfrey, a planner and leader of the slow-growth group Campaign for Common Ground.

Those large ranchettes, he said, are causing sprawl elsewhere, which in turn makes Stockton's score appear more favorable.

"The statistics can get skewed very easily," Parfrey said Thursday. "No one is claiming Stockton is a paradigm of smart growth."

John Beckman, head of the Building Industry Association of the Greater Valley, said the report makes "perfect sense."

New subdivisions are now built closer together than in decades past, particularly in California, he said. That strategy by developers to reduce the cost of roads, pipes and other infrastructure also results in denser neighborhoods.

Beckman said he would have been shocked if Stockton had not fared well in the rankings.

"In the Central Valley, we are absolutely not sprawling," he said. "When folks talk about sprawl, they're not talking about us."

He said he hopes elected officials will read the report and "pat themselves on the back."

Smart Growth America's findings are not based on density alone.

Stockton's score was buoyed largely by what Preuss described as a good mix of housing and jobs in the community. Simply put, there are jobs near where people live.

Asked why, then, so many Stockton-area residents must commute to the Bay Area for work, Preuss said the jobs here aren't necessarily good ones.

"If you have a lot of major arteries with reams of strip malls and there happen to be neighborhoods behind them, that's going to come up in the census (data) as mixed use," she said. "It doesn't mean they're high-quality jobs."

Seasonal agricultural jobs might also make the jobs and housing mix look better than it is, Parfrey said.

Stockton also scored well on its system of roads. Our streets have short city blocks and are laid out in grids with four-way stop intersections, probably a function of our flat topography as much as anything else.

In theory, gridlike streets and short blocks allow more route choices for drivers and bicyclists and might make people more likely to walk.

But the caveats continue: "It doesn't mean there are sidewalks on that street, or that there are pleasant sidewalks to walk down," Preuss said.

The only one of the four major criteria in which Stockton scored poorly was in regard to the strength of "activity centers" such as downtown.

Overall, despite a high ranking, Preuss said Stockton's story is "a nuanced one."

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