

Urban Growth Boundaries

A new planning solution in California to stop urban sprawl, protect open space and strengthen our neighborhoods and cities

What's an urban growth boundary (UGB)?

An urban growth boundary is an officially adopted and mapped line that separates an urban area from its surrounding greenbelt of open lands, including farms, watersheds and parks. UGBs are set for significant periods of time — typically 20 years or more — to discourage speculation at the urban or suburban fringe.

Why bother with an urban growth boundary? Isn't it just another city limit line?

A UGB is more than just a line separating cities from countryside. As one urban analyst has noted, a long-term boundary is "a pro-active growth management tool that seeks to contain, control, direct or phase growth in order to promote more compact, contiguous urban development." The other key purpose of a UGB is to protect farmlands and other resource lands — like watersheds or wildlife habitat — from scattershot or low density development.

Urban growth boundaries are being considered by dozens of California communities to maintain their identity, protect open space and farmland, save tax dollars, and strengthen downtowns.



What are the advantages of establishing a UGB?

There are dozens of advantages, including: affirming your community's identity by ensuring that it doesn't merge with nearby communities • promoting urban and suburban revitalization • saving taxpayers' dollars by using public facilities more efficiently • encouraging the development of more affordable housing • stimulating community development patterns that support more accessible public transit • enabling quick open space retreats from urban centers • bringing together diverse interests — such as environmentalists, developers, and farmers — who want more certainty about which land can and cannot be developed • and encouraging long-term strategic thinking about your community's future.

How do you establish an urban growth boundary?

In California, there are two key techniques for establishing long-term

boundaries: UGB by voter approval and UGB by city council action.

What's involved in setting up a UGB by voter approval?

It's a three step process. First, you need to follow a collaborative process mapping out a UGB and including it in your community's general plan. Second, the voters must secure the UGB through initiative or referendum. Third, your community needs to work with adjacent jurisdictions to ensure that they don't violate the spirit or intent of your UGB by building in the greenbelt lands outside the boundary. Apart from these steps, it's important to reinforce the goals of your UGB policies which protect greenbelt lands beyond the boundary and facilitate development inside the UGB.

How do you establish a UGB by council action?

Establishing a UGB by council action is similar to the voter approval

(continued on reverse)

technique in requiring a thorough, collaborative process of mapping out your UGB. But rather than have it ratified by the voters, however, the boundary is secured by tough planning requirements which limit the regularity and extent to which the UGB can be modified. The UGB can be additionally secured through joint arrangements with adjacent jurisdictions.

Which is the better way to go: UGB by voter approval or council action?

If you're looking to lock in your UGB for the long term, UGB by voter approval is the better way to go. Such a UGB cannot be changed except by another vote of community residents. A UGB by council action, however, could be changed by a future council (most likely after it goes through several procedural hoops).

Does this mean you shouldn't consider a UGB by council action? Not necessarily. A UGB by council can enable cautious city officials to take the first step toward defining a real edge of their community. It sets a series of rules and standards for changing the UGB that may deter future elected officials from expanding the boundary. And it lays the groundwork for a long-term UGB by voter mandate.

Where have UGBs been tried in California?

Seventeen Bay Area communities have recently adopted UGBs. Voter approved UGBs have been adopted in Cotati (71% of the vote), Healdsburg (71%), Milpitas (55%), Napa (77%), Novato (70%), Petaluma (79%), Pleasanton (75%), Santa Rosa (59%), Sebastopol (66%), and Windsor (72%). Communities which have adopted UGBs by council action include Benicia, San Jose, Cupertino, Los Gatos, Morgan Hill, Monte Sereno, and Palo Alto. Other California communities which claim UGBs by council action are Santa Barbara and Modesto.

UGBs can mean a green retreat for families and children — not far from home!



Are there UGBs outside of California?

Lots of them. Internationally, many people look to England as the home of "Green Belts" and urban growth boundaries. London is surrounded by a boundary and a 900 square mile Green Belt. Copenhagen is surrounded by a boundary and "green wedges" of open space. Vancouver, British Columbia, has drawn long-term boundaries, encouraged infill development and protected a "green zone" of farmlands and other open space.

In the U.S., there are two states which require each community to draw long-term UGBs: Oregon and Washington. Several other local jurisdictions have fixed long-term boundaries (like Boulder, Colorado) while others utilize UGBs on a voluntary basis. One of the most prominent is Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, which combines its UGB with strong agricultural zoning requirements and one of the nation's most aggressive purchase of development rights (PDR) programs.

Has the experience with UGBs been successful?

The best place to look for evidence of how UGBs have done is Portland, Oregon — a major American metro-

politan region with a UGB in place since the late 1970s. On the whole, the UGB has been a huge success. It has helped protect huge swaths of forest and farm land at the region's edge. It has helped increase the amount of housing planned inside the UGB — from 129,000 homes to 300,000 homes. And it has helped revitalize Portland's downtown.

The boundary and its accompanying land use program are so successful that it has the support of a wide array of interests, including the Sierra Club, the Oregon Homebuilders Association, high tech businesses and the state farm bureau. Early in the program's life, there were three statewide ballot measures to eliminate the land use program. Each failed by progressively larger margins.

Where Can I Get More Info?

Contact Greenbelt Alliance for a copy of *Bound for Success*— a terrific 75 page guide on how to establish a UGB around your community.

