

Ready for Sprawl II?

You ain't seen nothing yet

by [Frank Cagle](#)



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Jobs at the Department of Energy facilities in Oak Ridge began the urban sprawl in West Knox County. Then the assembly line of developable farmland, real estate agents, title companies and mortgage companies accelerated the trend. Retail followed the population shift. The result: nowadays, if you are a newcomer to the area, you have to try hard *not* to settle in West or Northwest Knox County.

The issue before us all these days is the possibility that we ain't seen nothin' yet.

It is ironic that growth in West Knox County has occurred while the DOE facilities were on the decline. With the end of the Cold War, Y-12 became a place to disassemble nuclear weapons, and the biggest contracts were for clean-up of radioactive waste. The Oak Ridge reservation seemed to be a place where growth would slow to a stop, and retrenchment would be the future. Research would continue at the laboratory, but the go-go years were past.

Yet there are two things going on now in Oak Ridge which have tremendous implications for the area, and for West Knox County as well.

The Spallation Neutron Source and the ORNL supercomputer have the potential to cause explosive growth. (Read Joe Sullivan's cover story last week for an overview.) If you are working at the subatomic level to develop new materials, you need a snapshot of the inside of the material, which is the whole point of SNS. Once it's completed, everyone who works in material science will be interested in doing experiments in Oak Ridge; companies all over the world will need a presence in Oak Ridge to consider experiments using the Spallation technology.

Meanwhile, the fastest computer in the world will also be at ORNL, and companies will seek it out to do computations that would take months or even years on conventional equipment.

There is no way to predict all of the ways these facilities may be used, just as no one could predict all the applications of the silicon chip in the first years after its invention. For our purposes, we need only realize that the potential in Oak Ridge for new jobs and new companies is huge. What does that mean for Knox County?

It means that rather than leveling off, residential growth in West and Northwest Knox County may accelerate. It means the present overcrowding in the schools may get worse, and the tail will continue to wag the rest of the county's dog in the area of school resources, taxes and roads.

The beltway through Hardin Valley is a whole other can of worms, presenting its own development challenges. Interchanges will convert little farm-to-market roads into arteries for subdivision development. In fact, there is widespread suspicion that the by-pass is merely a vehicle to spur further West Knox County

development.

What can we do?

Oak Ridge is already preparing for growth. The city has passed a sales tax increase by referendum, and is rebuilding the high school for its already outstanding school system. Officials are going after residential development projects, and are generally trying to stop the trend of people getting a job in Oak Ridge, yet going to live and spend sales tax in West Knox County. To the extent they are successful, they will alleviate some of the future sprawl in West Knox.

Additional subdivision development in West and Northwest Knox County will, of course, increase the tax base. Farmland turned into homes worth hundreds of thousands of dollars means more tax revenue. Up until now this money has gone into the county pot. Some communities, faced with tremendous growth, have imposed impact fees. A fee on each lot goes into a fund to cover the demand for more roads or schools.

Knox County Commission has been sitting on its hands for 20 years, watching the growth in West Knox with no effort to direct, disperse, or plan for it. Anyone who was paying attention could see what was happening. But did the school board buy cheap land and hold it for school sites? Did the county develop guidelines on how many houses could be built on a narrow farm-to-market road? Did anyone give developers guidance on where services would be needed in 10 years, and encourage them to plan accordingly? No, no, and no.

In lieu of road and utility planning that would have encouraged the direction of development, growth has occurred willy-nilly, and roads and utilities have followed haphazardly. The county has exerted no controlling influence.

The direction and size of a simple sewer line has more impact on the direction of development than almost any other factor. If we are moving into the second phase of West Knox sprawl, we have the option of continuing to sit by, wringing our hands, or to start paying attention.

Frank Cagle is a political analyst and the host of Sound Off on WIVK FM107.7, WNOX AM990, FM99.1 and FM99.3 each Sunday 8-9:30 a.m. The program is pre-empted this week by UT football coverage.

