

The Columbus Dispatch

The Columbus Dispatch, February 4, 2008

Stunted growth: Columbus still has an appetite for annexation, but it's swallowing up land much slower lately

By Debbie Gebolys

Columbus used to grow like a weed. But lately, its suburbs are more likely to be broadening their borders.

In Franklin County last year, Columbus added 111 acres while Hilliard added 125 and Obetz tacked on 174 for a Columbus Regional Airport Authority industrial park.

Columbus has been praised for its growth policy, started by Mayor M.E. Sensenbrenner, who was first elected in 1954. It uses its control of water and sewer services to limit suburban growth that could landlock the city.

Does pulling back on annexation mean dark days ahead?

A recent study by State University of New York researchers compared the economic and social conditions of Columbus and 85 other cities. Annexation helped Columbus score high for wealth, education and the condition of its urban housing, said Lisa Montiel of SUNY's Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government.

"Areas that would actually be a suburb became part of the city of Columbus," she said. "They're annexing these more-affluent suburban areas, so that makes the central city look better."

Columbus covers nearly 215 square miles, spilling into Union, Licking and Delaware counties and extending westward to the Madison County line.

The octopus shape of the city provides annexation corridors that could take Columbus still farther out.

The city stops annexing at its own peril, said David Wright, co-author of the SUNY study.

"The more landlocked Columbus becomes ... the more strained the tax base of the city is likely to become."

Columbus annexations fell dramatically after 2003, when 1,262 acres were added.

In late 2003, Mayor Michael B. Coleman said the city could no longer afford to extend services without some help. Since then, developers who want to annex to the city must help pay for new roads, utilities, parks, police and fire protection.

It's a coincidence that annexation dropped after the policy change, said Greg Davies, Columbus deputy development director. "We have not stopped any annexations."

Jim Hilz, executive director of the Building Industry Association of Central Ohio, agreed.

"I don't think there's a direct correlation between 'pay as you grow' and the slowdown because, as the policy was enacted, the housing market nationally started to slow," he said.

Davies said the city is ready to resume growing whenever developers are.

But real-estate lawyer Tom Hart said Columbus has a backlog of land that was annexed but not developed before the local economy and housing market sank.

New jobs are the trigger for new houses, and central Ohio has trailed the national average in job creation for five years, the Columbus Chamber says.

With large annexations in expansion corridors northwest and northeast of the city, "They just bit off two huge chunks and the market tanked for a while," Hart said. "I think that's a digestion issue and the market forces hitting them, too."

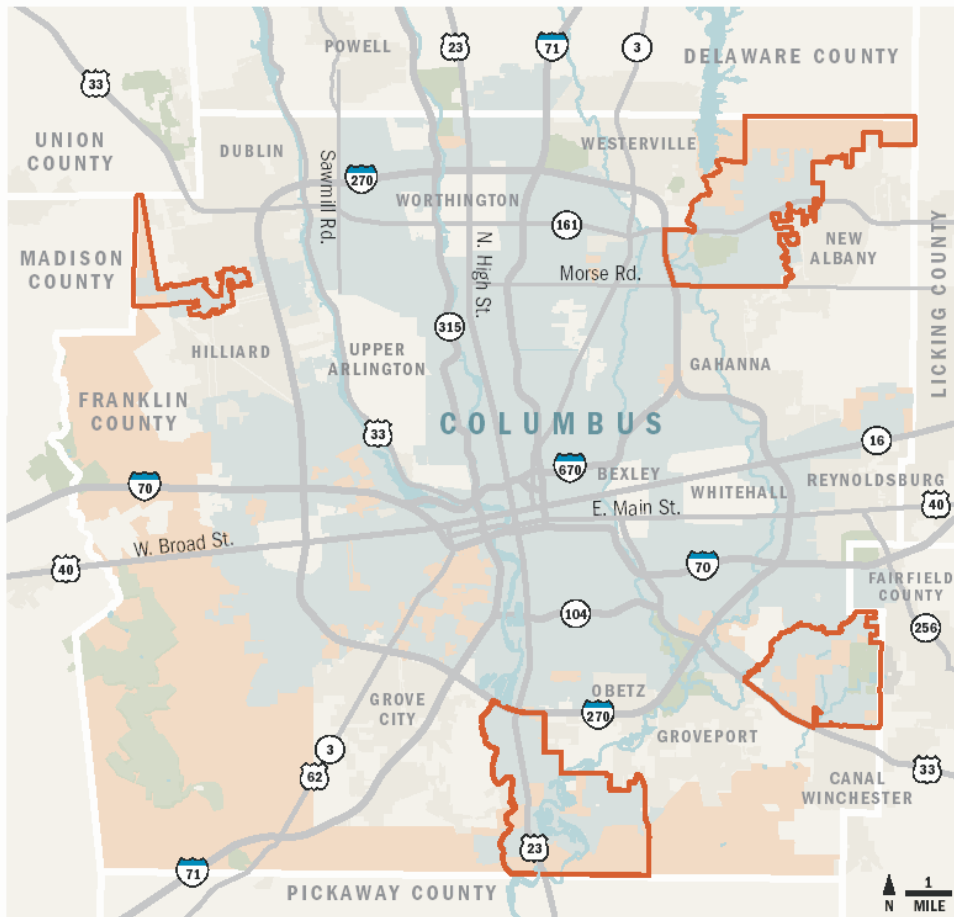
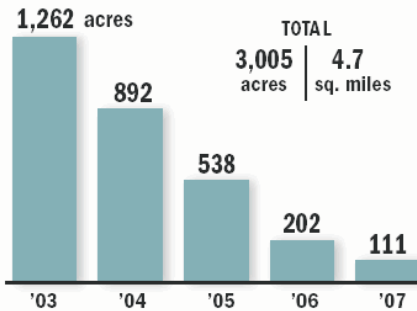
Where to grow

In 2005, Columbus identified potential growth areas outside I-270 that would allow suburban-style development within expanding city borders for years to come. The map shows areas within Franklin County that the city saw as opportunities for annexation. Areas outlined in red are where developers have agreed to cover at least part of the cost of extending city services.

City of Columbus
 Potential growth areas

 "Pay as you grow" areas

Five years of annexations



Note: A development agreement is in place in the Big Darby Creek region, although it is not considered an active growth area.
 Source: City of Columbus
 TOM BAKER | DISPATCH

Smaller burghs have less of a backlog.

In Ostrander, population about 600, recent annexations more than doubled the size of the Delaware County village, to 450 acres. To former Mayor Scott Davis, it was always just a matter of time before people discovered what he described as a “peaceful little place.”

Upscale new homes were built before the housing downturn. But two-thirds of the lots haven’t been developed, and other recently annexed land also remains farmland.

Granville, in Licking County, added 517 acres last year. Johnstown, population roughly 3,400, added 551 acres between 2004 and 2006.

Delaware added nearly 1,200 acres to accommodate Grady Memorial Hospital's planned new building. So far, more than 500 houses have been built on the south end of the city. At least twice as many are planned.

Urban geographer Richard Fusch, of Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, said some people live far from the urban core because "America has an anti-urban bias" that feeds off frequent news reports about crime.

"People are scared to live in the old central cities," Fusch said.

New houses at reasonable prices in good school districts and safe neighborhoods are "a hard argument to fight with," Ohio State University geographer Darla Munroe said.

"Some place like Hilliard is a little more of a known quantity. There's a thought that a certain type of person is moving to Hilliard — people of similar age, income, racial makeup. It's less chancy than an urban neighborhood.

"And in times of great risk, people retreat to neighborhoods that reflect them."