

Somerset and Urban Sprawl

Ames intends to be a cool city. One of the hallmarks of a cool city is to avoid urban sprawl. In 1997, Ames engaged in the Somerset development to avoid sprawl. Ten years later, half of Somerset looks like a landfill, weed-filled empty lots sit adjacent to the Café, and visitors ask if the large piles of dirt are from an abandoned open pit mine.

Immediately outside of Somerset, we have housing developments that have filled in rapidly. Many of these houses are owned by people who commute to Ames. One imagines that these houses might have even been in the Somerset area, in close proximity to jobs, schools and shops, but instead they are part of the sprawl around Ames.

Ames has paid a heavy price for Somerset. Tax dollars were used to encourage businesses to set up there, businesses that might have been on Main Street. A large chunk of developable land has remained vacant which has lowered our property tax base. The development has had few children, contributing to the necessity of closing schools. Meanwhile, immediately outside the boundaries, we have the most rapid growing segment of the tax base supporting the growing Gilbert school district.

My conclusion that Somerset has led to urban sprawl may be controversial, but drive, walk or bike through the development, look at Ames, and then look north and west. Derive your own conclusions. Then consider that the City Council is considering doing another Somerset-like development. Do we want more of Ames to look like Somerset?