



# A Nice Place to Live: Creating Communities, Fighting Sprawl

April 2000

**A**lmost anywhere Americans live, their communities are under enormous stress. Cities struggle to survive with fewer middle-class residents, older suburbs suffer from traffic congestion and overdevelopment, and many rural communities are overwhelmed with the explosive growth of new homes and malls. How can we strengthen communities facing such severe problems?

The current building boom and growth pains have drawn unprecedented national attention to how we're building communities and how they're shaping us. As more and more Americans become affected by these forces, there seems to be widespread agreement that growth problems in urban, suburban, and rural areas share a common denominator, and it's called sprawl.

At the same time, there is far less agreement about the best approach to taming the forces of sprawl, which include a controversial mix of consumer preferences, real estate profits, and public policies that affect everything from air pollution to school and road construction to sewer and water services to zoning.

*A Nice Place to Live: Creating Communities, Fighting Sprawl* is designed to help citizens take a fresh look at the problems of building and maintaining nice places to live against the forces of sprawl. The issue guide provides an overview of the issue and, to promote public deliberation and citizen action, outlines several perspectives or choices. Each choice speaks for one set of American priorities and views and, drawing ideas from across the political spectrum, presents a unique and consistent approach. Some elements of the choices are readily mixed, but not others, as each choice would take our communities in a very different direction.

## **CHOICE 1: Fulfill the Suburban American Dream**

In this view, the American Dream is set in the suburbs — typically in a single-family home with a basketball hoop in the driveway and a backyard for barbecues. But that dream is disappearing before Americans' eyes: superstores, strip malls, and subdivisions are proliferating chaotically in and around their communities, and roads are clogging with traffic and air pollution. So we've got to do a much better job planning growth in keeping with community interests. And we must stop public spending that promotes sprawl and use those funds to improve existing suburban communities.

## **CHOICE 2: Strengthen Cities, Stop Sprawl at Its Source**

Sprawl is essentially the roadside litter left by millions of Americans as they migrate farther and farther away from cities in a frustrating search for a "livable" community. In this view, the best way to stop sprawl is to prevent this pointless and maddening migration. We can do it by improving city services, especially the schools, and making cities safer and more comfortable places to live. This approach eliminates the primary reasons families move away from cities, where they enjoy an unbeatable variety of jobs, sports, schools, and theaters — as well as the opportunity to raise children in culturally diverse neighborhoods.

## **CHOICE 3: Free Americans to Choose Lifestyles**

Americans are an adventurous, mobile people who have been pioneering new places to live for centuries. As needs or interests change, people move to the city, suburb, or country. It's a natural, dynamic process — and the less government interferes, the better. That's because public planning and zoning create the grid for unappealing aspects of sprawl, including those look-alike strip malls that take the place of town centers. In this view, individuals need more freedom, not less, to shape their communities. It's time to roll back overly prescriptive regulations and public subsidies that prevent communities from developing naturally.

# Choices, Choice Work, and National Issues Forums

If you're preparing to moderate a National Issues Forum, then you've become familiar with the structure of deliberative dialogue that NIF supports. Discussion guides, starter tapes, and deliberative forums focus on choices.

And you know that each choice represents a distinctly different way of approaching an issue, with accompanying benefits, costs, and consequences.

This choice structure undergirds the basic premise of public deliberation — that citizens in a democracy have a responsibility, and need opportunities, to make choices about how they want to live together, how they want to act

together, how they want their government to function.

Sometimes, forum participants find these uses of the word “choice” confusing. Some assume that they are being asked to choose one of the choices. And, of course, they are not.

Many moderators find it helpful to clarify, at the beginning of the forum, that the work of the forum is to weigh each choice, to “work through” conflicts and trade-offs, and to form a shared sense of what's at stake in the issue. They make it clear that by developing shared directions for public action, forum participants are laying the foundation for making public choices together.

## **If this is your first moderating experience:**

### **You don't have to be an expert on the issue.**

Reading the issue book thoroughly, considering questions that get to the heart of the issue, and thinking through the essence of each choice is the critical part of preparation.

### **Stay focused on what the forum is about — deliberation.**

Your natural curiosity and your interest in understanding diverse views will be your greatest assets; they're probably what got you here in the first place. So use them to ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each choice, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them.

### **Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.**

No matter the level of experience, most moderators find timekeeping to be a challenge. National Issues Forums examine complicated issues, worthy of deep discussion. Sometimes it's hard to move on to another approach with so much more that could be said. But in order to deliberate — to really make progress on the issue — participants need the opportunity to weigh all the major approaches.

### **Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.**

Between allowing time for participants to lay out their personal concerns about the issue at the beginning of the forum and the demanding work of deliberating in depth on each of the choices, it's easy to find yourself with little time left at the end of the forum to reflect on what's been said. But, in many ways, this is the most important work the group will do — if they have time to do it. Explain clearly at the outset that it is important to reserve this time, and then enlist the participants' support in working with you to preserve it.

## Your Role as a Moderator:

- to provide an overview of the process of deliberation — the rationale for the kind of work the participants are getting ready to do.
- to remain neutral throughout the discussion, while encouraging participants to explore all facets of their own and others' opinions.
- to ask questions that probe deeply into what's at stake in the issue and in each choice.
- to keep track of the time, so participants can move through a discussion of each of the major approaches and into an ending period of reflections.
- to encourage participants to direct their responses and questions toward one another.

## The Role of the Recorder:

- to support deliberation by reminding forum participants of their key concerns, the areas of greatest disagreement, and the benefits and trade-offs their discussion highlighted.
- to help inform other members of the community about the outcomes of the deliberation.
- to serve as a written record of the group's work that might feed into future meetings of the group or additional forums.
- to capture the tensions, trade-offs, and common ground for action.
- to express main ideas in clearly written brief phrases.

## Forums or Study Circles — or Both?

Many NIF convenors choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two- to two-and-one-half hours.

Many others, however, arrange multiple sessions (study circles) to allow participants greater opportunities to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings; others might devote a separate session for each choice. And some plan ahead of time for a session after the forum to come back together to consider next steps.

Some communities begin their examination of an issue in a large group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse also can be helpful — starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums is about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

# Guidelines for National Issues Forums and Study Circles

At the beginning of deliberative discussion, most moderators review these guidelines with participants. (A free poster with these guidelines is available to use in your forum. You may request a copy by calling 800-600-4060.)

The moderator will guide the discussion yet remain neutral. The moderator will make sure that —

- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- No one or two individuals dominate.
- The discussion will focus on the choices.
- All the major choices or positions on the issue are considered.
- An atmosphere for discussion and analysis of the alternatives is maintained.
- We listen to each other.

## The importance of the questionnaires

Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum — and in the national NIF network.

The Pre-Forum Questionnaire helps participants direct their thinking to the complexities of the issue, to take an assessment of the views they will bring to the discussion. Its structure focuses on what is at stake in the issue and what trade-offs might be involved.

The Post-Forum Questionnaire also serves multiple purposes. It gives participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had. It gives them an opportunity to add to what they said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside of the forum. As a means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others — to officeholders, to the media, to other citizens.

Nationally, a report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of reports on the outcomes of local forums.

**So it is very important that you, as the forum moderator, take a few minutes to gather and return the questionnaires to the National Issues Forums Institute. Please include the moderator response sheet on page 12 with your contact information so that follow-up for the national report is possible.**

Return the completed Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaires to:

**National Issues Forums Research  
100 Commons Road  
Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777**

## Communicating about your forums

Another important role of the moderator is to communicate with the NIF network about the forums you are conducting in your communities. Please post the dates and locations of your forums at [forums@nifi.org](mailto:forums@nifi.org).

# A Nice Place to Live: Creating Communities, Fighting Sprawl

## Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together with forum participants, you (and they) will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. For example, it may be useful to consider at the outset which of the three choices most closely describes your community right now. Likewise, it may be worthwhile to ask of each choice, “What would our community look like if we chose to move in this direction?”

In some forums, questions may arise that could derail the deliberation, if the moderator allows them to. In forums about sprawl, issues of poverty and racism are among them. It is important, of course, not to dismiss these issues, since many people will find them relevant to the discussion. But you should encourage the group to address them as they relate to the choices in the issue book. You can also suggest to the group that they take up these issues in greater detail at a later time, in order to focus during this forum on the broader questions of how our communities might move forward in “creating communities, fighting sprawl.”

Many other questions will arise during the forum, based on participants’ responses to you and to one another. Most moderators find it helpful to consider ahead of time some of the basic questions that need to be addressed about each choice. Here are some possibilities:

### **Choice 1: Fulfill the Suburban American Dream**

- Can government policies be reshaped in order to discourage the apparently endless cycle that spins resources and residents farther and farther out from city centers to nearby suburbs to ever-distant rural developments?
- When allocating tax dollars, should governments give priority to existing schools and roads, rather than to new construction in rural areas? Would this approach unfairly favor those who choose the suburban “American Dream”?
- Are the social ties and other amenities that often go with established suburban neighborhoods worth preserving, perhaps at the cost of the convenience offered by strip malls and superstores?

### **Choice 2: Strengthen Cities, Stop Sprawl at Its Source**

- How might revitalized cities affect relations among America’s increasingly diverse population?
- How can cities’ residential communities be made nicer for everyone, including low-income residents?
- Does it make sense to pour resources into such services as public transportation, when it’s obvious that most Americans would prefer to live outside the city and drive their own cars?

### **Choice 3: Free Americans to Choose Lifestyles**

- In a democracy, how active a role should governments play in encouraging or discouraging citizens from living in one place or another?
- In a country where 95 percent of land remains undeveloped, are concerns about “sprawl” overblown?
- What kind of broad impact might such actions as repealing zoning ordinances, eliminating subsidies for public transit, relaxing building codes, and expanding road and highway improvements have on our communities? On low-income residents?

# Comparing



Almost no matter where Americans live, their communities are under enormous stress. Cities are struggling to survive with fewer middle-class residents, older suburbs suffer from traffic congestion and creeping blight, and rural communities are often overwhelmed with explosive growth of new homes and malls. How can we strengthen communities facing such severe problems? As with other NIF issue books, this one provides an overview of the issue and, to promote public deliberation and citizen action, outlines several perspectives, or choices. Each choice speaks for one set of American priorities and views and, drawing ideas from across the political spectrum, advocates a unique and consistent approach to the issue. Some elements of the choices are readily mixed, but not others, as each choice takes the nation in a very different direction. To spur deliberation and action, the three choices presented in this book are outlined in these pages.

## Choice 1

### **Fulfill the Suburban American Dream**

Most Americans enjoy living in the suburbs but are frustrated by inadequate control over their community's future. We need to guide growth efficiently and in keeping with the interests of existing communities.

#### **What Can Be Done?**

- Expand planning to guide growth, and give residents a bigger say in such things as the construction of superstores or malls at their community's doorstep.
- Spend tax revenues where people currently live, mostly in the suburbs, and not in rural outposts where developers want to sell houses.
- Use public funds to preserve green space in and around suburban communities.

#### **In Support**

- Residents should have more control over proposed construction projects that might greatly affect their community's future.
- Taxpayers should not have to subsidize construction in rural areas when their own schools and roads need improvement.
- Guiding growth efficiently and concentrating public spending in established suburbs would make our hometowns nicer places to live.

#### **In Opposition**

- Suburbs are growing largely because declining city services, especially schools, are forcing families to move away. To curb the forces of sprawl, we need to improve cities.
- This choice puts the needs of suburbanites ahead of those of all other Americans.
- This choice speaks of community control, but what about the rights of property owners?

#### **A Likely Tradeoff?**

- In concentrating public spending in suburban communities, this choice would substantially increase growth pressures on them as they became more attractive.

# the Choices

## Choice 2

### **Strengthen Cities, Stop Sprawl at Its Source**

With their rich democratic mix of peoples and opportunities, cities hold a strong appeal for Americans. But when public services and schools decline, families leave, contributing to suburban sprawl.

#### **What Can Be Done?**

- Substantially improve city services, especially schools, and make cities safer and more comfortable places to live.
- Draw the line on sprawl by setting urban growth boundaries around metropolitan areas and banning construction in rural areas outside the boundaries.
- Expand public transit systems and sharply reduce highway construction.

#### **In Support**

- Cities offer Americans tremendous opportunities and advantages, but families feel pressured to move away when schools and services decline.
- The only way to stop suburban sprawl is to improve cities and restrict new construction in rural areas.
- Expanding public transit would help reduce air pollution and traffic congestion; building highways just intensifies these problems.

#### **In Opposition**

- These solutions are worse than the problems. Families should be able to live wherever they want and use their automobiles. This choice would crowd people into cities and buses.
- With its antisuburban bias, this choice erroneously presents sprawl and suburbia as the same problem.
- Public transit can't solve any problems if Americans won't use it. Instead, better roads and better technology are needed.

#### **A Likely Tradeoff?**

- In preventing new suburban communities from forming, this choice would force more families into urban neighborhoods, thus displacing low-income families.

## Choice 3

### **Free Americans to Choose Lifestyles**

Americans, by tradition, are pioneers. As needs or interests change, people move to the city, suburb, or country. But intrusive public plans and rules limit freedom and promote unappealing aspects of sprawl.

#### **What Can Be Done?**

- Oppose public planning and repeal or scale back regulations for siting and building homes and stores.
- Reduce congestion by building highways. Reduce funding for unwanted transit systems. For fairness, raise tolls and fares so that users pay the lion's share of costs.
- Eliminate public subsidies for constructing homes and businesses, as this distorts the natural way communities develop.

#### **In Support**

- Americans should have the freedom to create communities where and how they wish.
- More than 95 percent of American land is undeveloped; there is no need to worry about running out of open space.
- Many of America's most popular communities were built prior to land-use regulations.

#### **In Opposition**

- Amazingly, this choice opposes the idea of making plans for the logical growth of communities. Thinking ahead avoids costly mistakes.
- This choice would put Americans at the mercy of an unbridled real estate market. Free markets operate best within constraints that reflect societal values.
- This choice, which supports unlimited rural growth, offers no protection to farms and forests in the path of development.

#### **A Likely Tradeoff?**

- In rolling back rules governing real estate, this choice would require people to take much more responsibility for protecting their property rights in court.

# Suggested Format for an NIF Forum or Study Circle

## Welcome

Let participants know who is sponsoring the forum/study circle. Stress the cosponsorship if several organizations are involved.

## Questionnaire (Pre-Forum)

Remind people that the Pre-Forum Questionnaire is a way to get everyone focused on the issue and a way for each participant to take inventory of initial feelings on the issue. Tell them there'll be another questionnaire for them after these deliberations end.

(Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaires are found at the end of the issue book. You may want to provide copies to participants separately if they do not want to tear these pages out of their issue books. If you distribute separate copies, it is wise to make the Pre- and Post-Forum Questionnaires on different colored paper so that they easily may be kept separate.)

## Ground

MAKE CLEAR THAT THE FORUM IS NOT A DEBATE. Stress that there is work to do, and that the work is to move toward making a choice on a public policy issue. The work will be done through deliberation. Review the paragraph "How Do We Do It?" (see page 11). The responsibility for doing the work of deliberation belongs to the group. Deliberation is necessary because there are competing approaches to solving the problem.

## Starter

Explain that the video reviews the problems underlying the issue, then briefly examines three or four public policy alternatives. In so doing, it sets the stage for deliberation. (Starter videos for each issue book are available from Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company at 1-800-228-0810.)

## Personal

Connect the issues to people's lives and concerns — in the first few minutes — by getting participants to talk about their personal experiences with the issue, and to tell their stories. This makes the issue genuine, human rather than abstract. Some questions you might ask include: "Has anyone had a personal experience that illustrates the problems associated with this issue?" "Within your family, or circle of friends, is this an important issue?" "What aspects of the issue are most important to you?" "How does the issue affect people?"

---

# The Forum/Study Circle Deliberation

**Consistent with what deliberation is, moderators ask basic types of questions in a forum:**

---

## **What Is Valuable to Us?**

This question gets at why making public choices is so difficult: the approaches turn on things that people care about very deeply, such as being secure or being treated fairly. This question can take many forms:

- How has this issue affected you personally? (Usually asked at the beginning.)
  - What things are most valuable to people who support this option?
  - What is appealing about this approach?
  - What makes this choice a good idea — or a bad one?
- 

## **What Are the Costs or Consequences Associated with the Various Choices?**

This question can take as long as it prompts people to think about the likely effects of various approaches on what is valuable to them. Examples include:

- What would result from doing what this approach proposes?
  - What could be the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
  - Can you give an example of what you think would happen?
  - Does anyone have a different estimate of costs or consequences?
- 

## **What Are the Tensions or Conflicts in This Issue That We Have to “Work Through”?**

As a forum progresses, moderators will ask questions that draw out conflicts or tensions that people have to “work through.” They might ask:

- What do you see as the tension between the approaches?
- Where are the conflicts that grow out of what we’ve said about this issue?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?
- What are the “gray areas”?
- What remains unsolved for this group?

# Ending A Forum/Study Circle

Before ending a forum take a few minutes to reflect both individually and as a group on what has been accomplished. Questions like the following have been useful:

## I. Individual Reflections

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other people's views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

## II. Group Reflections

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

What trade-offs are we, or are we not, willing to make to move in a shared direction?

## III. Next-Step Reflections

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?

Do we want to meet again?

# Questionnaire (Post-Forum)

The Post-Forum Questionnaire is a way to face the conflict within ourselves. Often we discover aspects of each choice we hold most valuable. Yet, the things we care deeply about are often in conflict. Please return the questionnaires and the moderator response sheet on page 12 after the forum.

# Suggested Time Line

<b>Stages of a Forum/Study Circle</b>	
<b>15% for Opening</b>	<b>Welcome</b> — The convenor or moderator introduces NIF program.
	<b>Questionnaire</b> — Participants complete Pre-Forum Questionnaire.
	<b>Ground Rules</b> — Participants review desired outcomes of forum.
	<b>Starter Video</b> — The starter video sets the tone for the discussion.
	<b>Personal Stake</b> — Connect the issue to people's lives and concerns.
<b>65% for Deliberation</b>	<b>The Deliberation</b> — Participants examine all the choices.
<b>20% for Ending the Forum/Study Circle</b>	<b>Ending the Forum</b> — Reflect on what has been accomplished.
	<b>Questionnaire</b> — Participants complete Post-Forum Questionnaire.

---

# NIF Forums and Study Circles

---

## Why Are We Here? What Are We Going to Do?

We are here to move toward a public decision or CHOICE on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

---

## How Do We Do It?

Through a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- Understand the PROS and CONS of each approach, its TRADE-OFFS, COSTS, AND CONSEQUENCES.
  - Know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
  - Get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations — the things people consider to be most valuable in everyday life.
  - Weigh carefully the views of others; appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
  - WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.
- 

## How Can We Know If We Are Making Progress?

By constantly testing your group:

- Can your group make the best case for the approach least favored?
  - Can it identify the negative effects of the approach most favored?
- 

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**To order issue books and starter tapes, call Kendall/Hunt at 800-228-0810.**

**For moderator guides and forum posters, call: 800-600-4060.**

**For other information and comments, visit the NIF Web site at [nifi.org](http://nifi.org) or call NIF Research at 800-433-7834.**

**To post the dates and locations of your forums, E-mail: [forums@nifi.org](mailto:forums@nifi.org)**

---

# A Nice Place to Live: Creating Communities, Fighting Sprawl

## Moderator Response

---

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum.

Moderator's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Date and location of forum \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe the audience of your forum including city and state, diversity, age of participants, number of participants.

---

---

---

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult to the participants?

---

---

---

What common concerns were most apparent?

---

---

---

Were there trade-offs most participants would accept? Describe.

---

---

---

Were there trade-offs most participants would not accept? Describe.

---

---

---

Did the group identify shared directions for action?

---

---

---

Return with questionnaires to:

**National Issues Forums Research**

100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777