

CAS 492 Section 801 Spring 2001 1 credit
Reporting on Sprawl and the Environment



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Class meets: 6 to 7:50 p.m. Wed. (Feb 28; March 14,21,28; April 4), 242 Comm Arts.

Office hours: 8 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays (after class) or by appointment.

Textbook: Covering Urban Sprawl: Rethinking the American Dream (relax, it's free):
AP Stylebook recommended.

This class examines the often difficult-to-explain issues rooted in the way land is used. It will discuss many of the environmental consequences linked to suburban sprawl, urban decay, and rural fragmentation. And it will explore methods of explaining these consequences to the public.

This is a journalism class. There will be several written assignments. Spelling, grammar and punctuation count. Assignments should be typewritten, double-spaced and conform to AP style. Students may be asked to rewrite assignments. Assignments are due at the beginning of the class following the class in which they were assigned.

Attendance is mandatory. Attendance and class participation are 25 percent of your grade. A missed class could also mean missing an assignment based on an in-class exercise.

Lecture/Assignment Schedule

(Subject to breaking news and speaker availability.)

Feb.28

Discussion: Why care? Land use as a unifying concept in diverse news stories.

Guest speaker: Mindy Koch, chief of land and mineral services division, Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

Assignment: News story analysis. Minimum length: One page. 15 percent of grade. Due March 14. Be prepared to discuss.

Read: Chapters 1 and 2; Visit: <http://www.gahran.comcu2>

March 14

Discussion: News analysis. Land use and the web. Sprawl as literature.

Guest speaker: Keith Schneider, director of the Michigan Land Use Institute and former environment reporter for the New York Times

Assignment: Visit a place where land is poorly used or where uses are in conflict. Write an essay focusing on creating a sense of place. Length: One page. (15 percent of grade). Due March 21. Be prepared to discuss.

Read: Chapters 3 and 4

March 21

Discussion: Pleasant Township Zoning Board Meeting.

Guest Speakers: Various

Assignment: Write a daily news story (at least 500 words) based upon the fictitious Pleasant Township scenario AND write a separate description or outline of how you would handle ongoing coverage including ideas for second-day stories, art and a web presence. (20 percent of grade). Due March 28. Be prepared to discuss.

Read: Chapters 5 and 6.

March 28

Discussion: Previous zoning board exercise.

Guest Speaker: David Goldberg, editorial writer for the Atlanta Journal and Constitution and author of “Covering Urban Sprawl: Rethinking the American Dream.”

Assignment: Neighborhood audit. (15 percent of grade). Due April 4.

Read: Chapters 7 and 8.

April 4

Discussion: “Inner City Blues” and “Fat of the Land.”

Guest Speaker: David Hammond, documentary filmmaker and director of National Programs for Michigan Public Radio.

Assignment: Outline a pitch for a documentary. (10 percent of grade) Due April 11 in instructors mailbox.

CAS 492

Assignment: News analysis.

Due: March 14

Read and analyze a news story based upon a land use issue. The story should have been published between March 1 and March 14 of 2001. It should appear in a general circulation newspaper or be available online.

Possible sources for stories: The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, either Detroit paper, Lansing State Journal, your hometown paper. A quick way to scan eight Michigan dailies: www.mlive.com (click on news.) **Attach copy of story to critique.**

The analysis should include (but not be limited to) answers to these questions:

Why is this a land use story?

Is the story written well? Explain.

Is it organized? Explain/.

Are there any reporting holes – unasked or unanswered questions?

Is there a nut graf near the beginning that summarizes what the story will be about?

What is it? Does the story meet the expectations set by the nut graf?

Do the quotes act to advance the story or are they merely filler? List particularly good or poor quotes.

What did you like about it? What did you dislike?

What would you have done differently?

Does the story prompt ideas for follow-up stories?

Minimum length: One page, although longer and more detailed critiques will score better, unless obviously padded.

This assignment should be written as a critical essay and not merely as answers to the questions above.

Be prepared to discuss your critique.

CAS 492

Assignment: Descriptive essay

Due: March 21

If you buy into the old formula of answering who, what, where, when, why and how in every news report, then the “where” is the most significant question in a land use story. Even if you don’t buy into that formula, don’t throw out the “where” question, especially in sprawl-related reports.

Giving your readers a “sense of place” is what much of land use reporting is about. It tells them what’s at stake – what things are like now, how they were in the past and how a pending action may change them forever.

This week’s assignment is to physically visit a place where land is poorly used, has undergone great change, is threatened by multiple conflicting uses or is simply possessed by great beauty.

Suggestions: a decaying urban neighborhood, a sign-infested stretch of highway, fingers of sprawling development stabbing into the heart of the countryside, a quiet beach, an ugly beach, acres of asphalt surrounding a mall, a lush park, a campus that has undergone great physical change.

Describe what you see. This is not a news story. It is an exercise in observation and communication. Push the envelope. Use flowery prose, stimulating similes, words that create images, detailed description. Avoid words like ugly and beautiful and latch onto description that makes readers themselves arrive at those conclusions.

Don’t ignore facts. Do some reporting. Find out something about the scene you describe. What has caused it to look the way it looks? Talk to people who see this scene often. How do they describe it? How do they *feel* about the way it looks? Have they seen it change?

Minimum length: At least one *full*, typewritten, double-spaced page. Longer essays, if not padded, will score better. Assignment weight: 15 percent of final grade.

Be prepared to read your essay and discuss it in class.

CAS 492

Assignment: Pleasant Township Scenario

Due: March 28

Part I:

Write a news story based upon the Pleasant Township in-class exercise. Consider it a story that you are writing on deadline for the next day's paper. It should be constructed from the information, quotes and facts that you observed, heard or otherwise gathered. Your story will be evaluated for accuracy, organization, and creativity. Concentrate on conveying what you learned simply and in a manner that will catch your readers' interest. Correct spelling, names, titles, punctuation and grammar are required.

Minimum length: 500 words. Feel free to go longer, but efforts that are repetitive or otherwise padded will not score as well. Decide what is necessary for readers to know about this issue now.

Part II:

Describe how you would continue to follow the Pleasant Township story. What story ideas would you pursue? Who else would you interview? What kind of art or graphics would you assign? What would you look into if your editor assigned you to write a weekend think piece (analysis) based on this issue?

Bonus: How would you present your efforts on the web in a way that augments what shows up in the newspaper? (See www.gahran.com/cu2 for ideas).

The exercise:

This is an attempt to enact a rural township zoning board grappling with the implications of a proposed development. The purpose is to expose journalism students to the complicated and competing forces surrounding a typical land use debate. The students are required to write a next-day news story, and outline a campaign for ongoing coverage.

The role descriptions are guides. Players are encouraged to improvise as long as they stay true to their roles. Note that some of the roles are designed to test whether students will pick up on clues to key elements that can improve the accuracy, context and interest of a news story.

Students play the role of Central City reporters and will question the participants following the zoning board meeting.

When the exercise is completed, there will be a general discussion of the action as a potential news story. Participants are encouraged to help dissect the exercise, suggest avenues of inquiry and ways a reporter could have been better prepared to cover the action.

They may describe their experience of how similar situations have been handled by the media.

The issue:

Jim McDonald is retiring after 50 years of milking cows. He hasn't saved much for retirement, and he faces a pile of debt after heavy rains destroyed his crops and profits each of the past three years.

But he has a retirement plan: He's cashing out his four-generation, 200 acre Pleasant Township farm.

The farm is on rolling land near an entrance to a new highway that speeds commuters to Central City, some 5 miles away. It includes three woodlots and a small river. Jim figures it's perfect for homes for growing families, and maybe a shopping plaza.

As crime escalates and schools fail, families are fleeing Central City. Folks like Pleasant Township's open spaces and fresh air. The small school system attracts young and enthusiastic teachers. You can always find exactly what you need at the wood-floored Pleasant Township Hardware, and the local bank branch just installed a drive-in window.

The scene:

A meeting of the Pleasant Township Zoning Board to hear Jim's request to rezone his property from agricultural to residential/commercial.

The players (actors assigned the role follow in parenthesis):

Jim McDonald, who tells the board his story. He emphasizes that he has no alternative. He talks of the need for retirement income and the lack of interest by his sons in continuing to farm. The idea is to plant clues for a possible follow-up story on the wider issue of the future of agriculture in general and in farmland preservation. (Jim Fuerstenau)

Paul Builder, a developer who has offered Bill \$2 million for his farm, provided he gets the zoning change. Builder wants to develop the land “the right way” He’ll preserve some of the woodlots and maybe create a park by the river.

He uses jargon like “PUD” although he doesn’t bother to explain it. (One of Builder’s tasks is to see if journalists bother to ask his jargon).

Builder says the development will serve a population that has made a free choice to enjoy Pleasant Township’s amenities. He says it will enhance neighboring property values and build a prosperous community. (Paul Streng)

David Zoner, chairman of the zoning board, is reluctant to part with information, convinced that the township is best served when the board can make a calm, reasoned decision without “too much” public debate. Until now, this hasn’t been much of a problem as few people attend his meetings, and the media ignores them. (Zoner tests whether the journalists pursue his closely held information). Zoner makes an offhand reference to his job selling real estate. (Dave Poulson)

Don Plumber, director of Central City Board of Public Works, is desperately seeking revenues to offset Central City’s declining tax base. He wants to extend the city’s water and sewer systems to serve the new development. He promises that the extension will be large enough for current property owners to use, a big advantage for the environment. Plumber does not publicly say, unless questioned, that the sewer system can also serve undeveloped parcels between Central City and Pleasant Township and perhaps beyond. (The idea is to see whether the students “follow the infrastructure” which typically leads to other stories). (Mark Wyckoff)

Anne Phorest is a local environmentalist worried about the development’s impact on the river running through Jim’s property, the potential loss of a nearby wetland not on Jim’s property and the loss of scenic landscape enjoyed by many. Phorest also questions whether the tax revenues from the development will cover the increased cost of Pleasant Township’s services. (Builder will have the opportunity to refute this assertion). She encourages Jim to look into the state’s farmland protection fund, or to pursue help from a nature conservancy. (Anne Woiwode)

Tom Erban is a Central City Community activist who is worried that the Pleasant Township development will speed the erosion of his city’s core. Zoner gavels him down, telling him that as a Central City resident he lacks standing to comment on internal township matters. If Erban is worried about city issues, he should talk to the city council, Zoner tells him. (The role of this exchange is to point to the lack of regional planning and cooperation). (Mark Wyckoff with a different hat)

Kurt Farmer is Bill’s neighbor and he is nowhere near ready to retire. He’s worried that his new neighbors will object to the smell of cow manure. He used to haul manure onto Bill’s fields, but now he’ll have to haul it to fields a mile away. That will increase his operating costs, and perhaps dirty Pleasant Township’s roads. (Kurt Norgaard)

Sarah Sweet has owned the Pleasant township hardware for 50 years. She's worried about the changes already gripping the community. Sarah says nothing during the hearing, even when Zoner asks her if she wants to speak. Her task is to test whether the journalists follow up after the meeting and ask her why she is there. If they patiently coax her, she will reward reporters with an anecdote or quote that could make their story. Sarah is the only one who knows about the new Wal Mart is interested in moving to Pleasant Township. It will guarantee her business's demise and have a profound effect on the small downtown. But the reporters won't know if it's coming unless they bother to patiently interview her. (Patti Mallett)

Judy Teacher is the Pleasant Township Schools superintendent. She is eager for the development as it will bring new pupils and increase local funding for education. She desperately needs the additional revenue to help operate the new high school that just opened. Voters in her community had recently approved a bond to build the school, primarily because of the new athletic complex that came with it. (The Pleasant Pirates are Class D football state champions.) Those same voters had rejected a bond proposal to expand all of the schools, including the elementary school which is so pinched for space that students share classrooms and overflow into portables. (Judy Putnam)

Dan Nimby moved to Pleasant Township three years ago and is the poster child for the Not In my Backyard syndrome. He loves the rural atmosphere and the last thing he wants is to see a flood of new residents ruin what he views as his personal slice of heaven. He likes to hunt and fish and hates noise and congestion. He also is the parent of two elementary school children. He questions Teacher's push for new residents as a way to help schools. If more students arrive, class size will go up, he says. And room in those crowded elementary schools will be even tighter. "The kids who got here first will suffer." (Dan Farough)