

# FAQs about the Sprawl Ballot Question

Which Appeared on Sierra Club Election Material in the Spring of 2001

Please Vote YES!

“Why did SUSPS introduced the sprawl ballot question?”

SUSPS was disturbed to find that the Sierra Club’s extensive and expensive anti-sprawl materials had nothing to say about the population component. It is misleading to imply that poor planning and short-sighted laws alone have brought us to today’s state of choking sprawl. The United States has grown from 150 million in 1950 to 275 million today - and we are living with the consequences. The nation’s leading environmental organization owes it to its members to report on these facts accurately.

“How do you know population growth is the root cause of sprawl?”

We believe our eyes. Many of us live in areas that have been noticeably impacted by growth in the last decade or two, where there is increased crowding in schools, public transit and everyday life as well as on the highways. More people need more infrastructure, such as housing, schools and roads — so sprawl happens.

“Would every single sprawl pamphlet and bumper sticker have to be changed?”

No. The SUSPS Sprawl ballot question stated: “The Sierra Club shall emphasize both regional and national population stabilization as essential components in all Sierra Club sprawl materials and programs.” The intent of this question is for population growth to be mentioned in a reasonable manner in principal sprawl materials. There is absolutely no need for bumper stickers and small brochures to be changed to include mention of population.

The Club has sought to confuse the membership, saying that the ballot question is too strong because it says that “all” Club materials must emphasize population education. Yet in November, 2000 management voted against specific compromise wording which did not say “all.” The “all” objection is a red herring. (See full negotiation details).

In fact, the word “all” was added at the insistence of the Sierra Club when the ballot question was first submitted for Club approval. The claim was that without the word “all” or equivalent, the original question was not specific enough. The original wording that the Club rejected stated: “The Sierra Club shall emphasize both regional and national population stabilization as essential components in the Sierra Club’s sprawl campaign materials and programs”.

It would be ludicrous to insist that every paragraph of the sprawl campaign address population or that every single piece of sprawl material be changed in order to implement the ballot question.

“What efforts did the petitioners make to negotiate with the Club?”

SUSPS had worked diligently to negotiate a compromise solution so that the ballot question need not be presented to the membership. The idea was that if the Board would implement the intent of the ballot question, petitioners would withdraw the ballot question.

In September, 2000 SUSPS offered a draft resolution to the Board to consider adopting. The Board essentially ignored the SUSPS wording but instead passed a resolution encompassing some of the intent of the ballot question. SUSPS felt that this resolution was inadequate and continued negotiations with the Board.

In the spirit of cooperation and education, in November, 2000 SUSPS accepted a compromise resolution that was proposed by Director Anne Ehrlich and Executive Director Carl Pope and agreed to withdraw

the ballot question. The resolution stated: "The Sierra Club shall emphasize both regional and national population stabilization as educational components in Club sprawl campaigns." Note that this is an extremely weak resolution; it could be implemented in a very minimal manner.

However, the Board then rejected this compromise, thus forcing the original ballot question to appear on the 2001 ballot. This rejection shows how out of touch Club management has become. (See full negotiation details).

"Didn't the Club say they would do all this anyway?"

The Sprawl Committee suggested that they would address population in a meaningful manner in future publications. Yet in five published sprawl reports totaling 150 pages, population growth was hardly mentioned at all. Clearly, continuing past performance will not get the job done. In fact, if the Sprawl Committee truly wanted to incorporate population growth along with land use issues, they would support the ballot question.

"Won't the sprawl ballot question cause the Club to spend funds in a wasteful manner?"

Since when is discussing important issues a waste of time and funds within the Sierra Club? Our country's population has doubled since around 1945 and, according to January 2000 U.S. Census Bureau projections, will double again within the lifetime of children born today.

This is indeed worthy of some very serious discussion in the Sierra Club. Sprawl campaign materials are revised and released on at least a yearly basis. The ballot question is not dictating that existing material be thrown out and reprinted, but rather that population be adequately addressed in the next revision of the campaign's material. The incremental cost would be negligible.

"Did groups and chapters support this effort?"

Sixteen Sierra Club chapters, along with their constituent groups and committees, had already passed Population-Sprawl Resolutions in the 18 months prior to 2001. Grassroots members want honest debate and comprehensive solutions. Many realize that Smart Growth is a band-aid approach, one that does not address the root cause of sprawl — unending U.S. population growth.

"Wouldn't passage of the sprawl ballot question cause a lot of additional work for the sprawl committee?"

The sprawl campaign has produced some excellent materials, mostly by volunteer effort. No one is asking that the sprawl campaign carry the burden of implementing the resolution on its own — in fact, population growth is not the area of expertise of the campaign. The Club has a tremendous grassroots support base at its disposal, which is infrequently mobilized. In fact, population committees and activists are highly informed on the issue of population and would certainly volunteer to contribute to this effort.

"What is the Sierra Club's 2001 position on population and what actions has it taken?"

Sierra Club policy was adopted in 1970 that stated: "That we must find, encourage, and implement at the earliest possible time the necessary policies, attitudes, social standards, and actions that will, by voluntary and humane means consistent with human rights and individual conscience, bring about the stabilization of the population first of the United States and then of the world."

In fact, an October 1999 directive from Carl Pope stated "The Sierra Club Board of Directors recently clarified — not changed — its existing policy to state that the world and the U.S. should go beyond population stabilization to reduction..."

But population will not be addressed if it is not discussed and presented to Sierra Club members as a legitimate issue. The sprawl ballot question simply requires the premier campaign of the Sierra Club — the sprawl campaign — to include a realistic discussion about population growth as a component of sprawl in its materials.

“What about Detroit? Hasn't it experienced sprawl without population growth?”

Detroit (and Cleveland and St. Louis) are often brought up as the exceptions that disprove the rule that population growth equals sprawl. It is certainly the case that the degree to which population growth affects sprawl varies from region to region.

Detroit has had a unique history in terms of the primacy of the land-gobbling auto industry, that industry's rapid decline and the urban center's abrupt collapse. It may indeed be one of the rare communities which show no relation between population growth and sprawl. However, in the great majority of urban areas, increasing population leads to more sprawl — just as common sense would indicate. For more quantitative information, see [www.SprawlCity.org](http://www.SprawlCity.org).

“What about California?”

Not surprisingly, population growth is associated with sprawl in California. California's population has exploded from a population of 16 million in 1960 to 35 million now, and the resulting sprawl can be seen everywhere. A new report “Sprawl in California,” shows that population growth is a highly associated with sprawl in that state. Unfortunately, what has happened in California is already occurring in the rest of the nation.

“Wan't SUSPS abusing the initiative process once again?”

Too much democracy? SUSPS doesn't think so — we think that more democracy would improve the corporatized Sierra Club enormously! We look at the business entity that the club of John Muir has become and believe that a serious reform and renewal process is needed. The Sierra Club has become concerned entirely too much about book, travel and calendar sales. We agree with David Brower that the core environmental impetus has been lost. Saving the earth must be the prime directive - first, last and always.

Furthermore, in the 1999 annual election, members of Sierra Club rejected the Board of Directors' efforts to severely restrict membership referendums for setting Club policy by increasing by 250% the number of signatures required to place a measure on the ballot. Members opposed the bylaw change by almost two to one. Clearly members of the Sierra Club favor the democratic ballot initiative process.

“Why should a group of outsiders tell the Club Sprawl Committee how to do their job?”

The Sierra Club is organized as a democratic institution. Therefore we are compelled by our interest in stabilizing US population growth to speak out. We would be irresponsible as environmentalists to do otherwise. It is important to note that we are NOT outsiders. Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization is composed of thousands of long-time Sierra Club members who feel that environmental core principles have been lost in political compromises.

“Shouldn't the Club focus on real environmental issues instead of population?”  
Population is the root cause of most of our environment problems, including sprawl. Human overpopulation is THE environmental problem, according to former U.S. Senator and founder of Earth Day, Gaylord Nelson.

The U.S. is already draining the petroleum reserves, fisheries and forests of many other nations on the planet. Our population growth has a disproportionately high impact on our natural environment and the natural environment of the world.

“Wouldn't this ballot question marginalize the work of the Sprawl Committee?”

Not in the least. The Sprawl Committee had produced a highly popular and well-funded campaign. Their materials are excellent but fail to adequately address the population component of sprawl, along with the land-use component. This ballot question is a significant opportunity for members to (in a presumably fair election), express their opinion on the direction of the one of the most successful Club campaigns. As a democratic entity, it is to be expected that Club campaigns and committees respond to concerns of their grassroots constituents.

“Didn’t the GPEPC already deal with overpopulation?”

In reality, the GPEPC (Global Population & Environment Program Committee) deals very little with US overpopulation, the root cause of sprawl. The Sierra Club simply has not put real resources and interest into population issues outside the scope of this small committee. Many Sierra Club members want this deficiency addressed. They want the Club’s expensive sprawl campaign, at the very least, to present an honest picture of the consequences of unending US population growth.

“We already had a population program and committee (GPEPC). Wasn’t that enough?”

No. The Sierra Club proclaimed that it wishes now to deal with population globally, rather than nationally or by bioregion. But its population program receives little attention and is treated like a stepchild by the Board. The Club is willing to tackle a few touchy issues, such as abortion rights and eliminating Glen Canyon Dam, but is strangely shy about mentioning overpopulation, especially within the U.S.

Having a small committee address the issue of U.S. population growth is insufficient, especially when this growth has such far-reaching consequences.

“Wasn’t the Sprawl Ballot Question an Immigration Ballot Question in disguise?”

Not at all. It was what it was — an attempt bring the issue of population back into the environmental mainstream. We hoped to bring the Sierra Club to a more truly environmental position in its expensive anti-sprawl campaign which emphasizes “smart growth” without addressing the root cause of sprawl. While we regard some elements of “smart growth” as valuable (e.g., increased public transit, re-use of urban brownfields, etc.), this sort of planning can only slow — not solve — the problem, given our high level of population growth.

For example, California’s population is now growing at a faster rate than that of Bangladesh (1.7 vs. 1.6 percent, respectively). At this rate, California’s population will double in approximately 41 years. The report Sprawl in California shows that population growth is a very much related to sprawl in that state.

The Club can discuss US population without having to address immigration.

“Wasn’t this initiative sponsored by the same people who brought up mass immigration in 1998?”

SUSPS is a group of thousands of forward-looking Club members who are not afraid to address U.S. population. Human overpopulation was a constant topic of concern only a couple of decades ago and has faded into the background because organizations such as the Sierra Club no longer address it adequately.

We believe that the earth comes first and when its health and survival are threatened, we must then speak out about the human causes of global warming and mass extinction. The United States carries a special responsibility because of our high resource use. In addition, American environmentalists should be leading by example, developing workable approaches to sustainability and limitations on growth.

We understand the consequences of yet another doubling of U.S. population — a burden which America’s children will have to carry. They will thank us for encouraging the Sierra Club to address this serious problem and all of its long-term environmental ramifications.

We believe that the Sierra Club should be a clear voice for saving the earth — not an ally of developers.

SUSPS

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