The report, "Measuring Sprawl and Its Impact," was written by Smart Growth America, a coalition of groups interested in planned development. It evaluated 83 metropolitan areas based on four factors — residential density; neighborhood mix of homes, jobs and services; strength of activity centers and downtowns; and the accessibility of the street network. The four were combined to calculate a "sprawl index."

"For the first time we are able to define sprawl objectively so we can see how it measures up," Executive Director Don Chen said. "What this study tells us is that sprawl has a direct and negative impact on our everyday lives."

Local planners said the Southwest and West hadn't had time to develop the transit systems that the East Coast has. And the report also ignores important issues such as affordability.

"Usually what happens (in sprawl rankings) is, San Francisco, New York, Boston, Chicago and Washington, D.C., are on the list," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, a regional planning group. "They also don't have a lot of accessibility for new housing, and therefore the prices are through the roof."

In North Texas, "People have jobs because of the vibrant economy, and people also have relatively low residential housing costs," he said.

The index average for all the cities was 100, with lower scores signifying more sprawl. Riverside, Calif., scored 14 while Fort Worth-Arlington scored 77 and Dallas scored 78.

"People living in more sprawling regions tend to drive greater distances, own more cars, breathe more polluted air, face a greater risk of traffic fatalities, and walk and use transit less," the report says.

Fort Worth-Arlington scored worst on its lack of city centers and activities. The metropolitan area that received the highest overall score was New York City, followed by Jersey City, NJ; Providence, RI; San Francisco; and Honolulu.

The three-year research project conducted by Reid Ewing, a professor at Rutgers University, and Robert Pendall, a professor at Cornell University, is sure to be controversial.

The report's recommendations are for local governments and communities to focus on dilapidated areas and to provide...