Does Smart Growth = Equitable Growth?

by Leah Kalinosky

In Arizona and Colorado last year, local Habitat for Humanity affiliates resisted ballot initiatives meant to curb sprawl. Habitat builds housing for low-income families. Habitat officials in these states feared that the ballot initiatives would drive up the cost of land, impeding their ability to provide much needed affordable housing.

It's not just affordable housing developers who have raised concerns about efforts to curb sprawl. The City of Austin's much praised smart growth program uses a scoring system that allots points for each positive feature meeting city planning goals, such as proximity to mass transit, urban design characteristics, and compliance with nearby neighborhood plans. However, some neighborhood activists have criticized the program, saying that it has not adequately addressed the potential for gentrification of older neighborhoods and displacement of lower-income families.

These are not the only places where efforts to contain sprawl and revitalize older neighborhoods through smarter growth practices have been contentious. Around the country, from inner cities to small rural towns, the smart growth movement has left many lower-income residents wondering what's in it for them.

OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?

This may leave some planning commissioners thinking, "wait – I thought smart growth was supposed to be a good thing." If it's not smart growth, it's sprawl, and that's not smart, right?
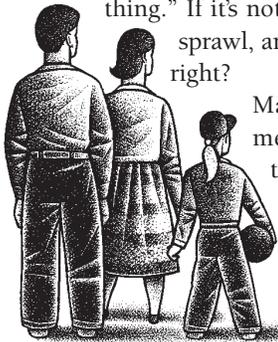
Many local governments are surprised that anyone would be opposed to smart growth. Smart growth is supposed to promise less sprawl, less traffic congestion, cleaner air, fewer wasted tax dollars, better access to transportation and housing options, and revitalized neighborhoods.

But where some see opportunity, others see threats. A major component of smart growth is an emphasis on directing growth and development back into central cities and smaller towns, to take advantage of existing infrastructure and proximity to public transportation systems while revitalizing areas that have been abandoned or neglected. While community development practitioners and advocates for low-income communities welcome new investment in long-neglected neighborhoods, they also fear that this new interest in America's older neighborhoods may lead to rising housing prices, displacing lower-income workers and their families and small businesses.

Directing growth and investment back into existing communities without displacing lower-income residents is the most challenging aspect of smart growth. But the alternative – sprawl – has not been great for communities of color and lower-income families, either. Unmanaged growth has contributed to: racial and economic segregation; a spatial mismatch between workers in older urban neighborhoods and rural communities and suburban job centers; a draining of investment from older communities; and exclusionary housing practices that bar the poor and people of color from suburbs.[1]

Smart growth policies have the potential to reverse these trends. If done

[1] See "Connecting Neighborhood and Region for Smarter Growth," National Neighborhood Coalition, <www.neighborhoodcoalition.org>.

An abandoned lot in Philadelphia's New Kensington neighborhood is being reclaimed as a community garden.

inclusively, with the involvement and guidance of neighborhood residents and community-based organizations from the start, smart growth has the potential to revitalize low-income neighborhoods in a way that benefits residents.

DEFINING EQUITABLE GROWTH

How do you get your community to consider what smart growth means for *everyone* in the community?

To answer this question, the National Neighborhood Coalition (NNC) has worked to define smart growth from a *neighborhood* perspective. NNC has developed a set of "Neighborhood Principles for Smart Growth" that go beyond the physical concepts of sprawl and smart growth to address questions of regional inequities and social justice. These principles promote growth and development as an opportunity to build neighborhoods and community, and achieve racial, ethnic, and economic justice and diversity.

As your community thinks about ways to promote smart growth, ask yourself whether the measures you are considering actively promote these principles. Are you really encouraging growth that meets the social, environmental, and economic needs of everyone in your community or region? Or are you protecting green space but ignoring calls for more affordable

housing options, better access to public transportation, and reinvestment in blighted areas?

Neighborhood Principles for Smart Growth

• All neighborhoods and communities should have a fair share of the benefits as well as responsibilities of growth.

• Growth should meet the economic, environmental, and social needs of low-income and other communities.

• Low-income neighborhoods and communities of color should have a strong voice in decisions about growth.

• Growth should not displace low-income residents or people of color in urban or rural areas from their homes, livelihoods, or communities.

• Growth strategies should promote racial, economic, and ethnic integration.

• Growth strategies should make use of the human, economic, and physical assets within communities.

What does it look like when these principles are put into practice?

In Columbus, Ohio, the Central Ohio Transit Authority has worked with an organization called Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity (BREAD) to improve access to public transportation for the poor and unemployed. They have added 38,000 hours of bus service, making it easier for city residents to get to suburban job centers, and a new transit center that serves as a hub for bus routes and includes important services like childcare and healthcare facilities and employment training. *For more on this project, see page 14.*

In Minneapolis-St. Paul, the Metropolitan Council (the regional planning agency for the area) is adopting an "alignment" policy that will tie funding decisions for transportation spending (through federal TEA-21 funding) to a jurisdiction's performance in providing affordable housing. They have developed a scoring system to assess how well cities and counties meet affordable housing performance criteria. The Council has also requested a TEA-21 set aside to support transportation investments in locations that are linked directly to affordable housing production.

In the San Francisco Bay region, the Bay Area Transportation and Land Use Coalition (BATLUC) is working to address regional inequities in transportation spending. In 1998, Coalition members successfully campaigned to restore full funding for four regional transit operators after the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) proposed to cut their budgets by $375 million.

The coalition has since developed its own alternative regional transportation plan and is promoting it as part of a larger smart growth package, which includes changes to land use and affordable housing policies. The MTC and the Association of Bay Area Governments, with assistance from BATLUC, will lead a series of public workshops on a new regional Smart Growth Strategy.

GETTING TO EQUITY

In moving toward an equitable vision of smart growth in your community, give some thought to the following issues:

Affordable Housing

There is virtually nowhere in the United States where a minimum-wage worker can afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent.[2] Local communities must plan to meet their share of affordable housing for their region, and need to link housing issues to those of transportation, jobs, open space, schools, retail, and services. *For more on this point, see "Providing Affordable Housing" on page 6.*

Affordable housing has recently become a major point of interest for both smart growth advocates and those who wish to discredit the movement. Anti-growth control interests raise the specter of growth boundaries putting a squeeze on land and, consequently, housing prices. But a recent review by the National Neighborhood Coalition found little evidence to suggest that smart growth is behind the current housing shortage.[3] At the same time, smart growth and more compact development, standing alone, do not guarantee the availability of affordable

housing. A commitment to affordable housing must be part of a comprehensive approach to growth.

Working with Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations can be an important resource in the planning process, providing a direct link to residents, helping to educate the public, and ensuring that smart growth is fair and inclusive. Building relationships with community groups early in the process to find solutions to both the environmental and social consequences of sprawl reduces battles and creates a better community for all.

Ron Barnes, General Manager of the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) says that working with BREAD has been of tremendous value because it has given him a real sense of the community and its concerns. BREAD members provided critical input to the region's transportation planning process, helping COTA secure

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Resources:

Three useful publications by the National Neighborhood Coalition are:

"Connecting Neighborhood and Region for Smarter Growth," which examines the connections between smart growth and community development, and looks at the role of community-based organizations in promoting better neighborhood-focused and regional approaches to growth.

"Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods: Communities Leading the Way," a collection of fifteen case studies on how community-based organizations, faith-based groups, and grassroots coalitions are working to promote equitable regional growth.

"Smart Growth for Neighborhoods: Affordable Housing and Regional Vision," discusses the effects of smart growth on affordable housing.

For information on the availability of these publications, either visit: <www.neighborhoodcoalition.org>, or call: 202-408-8553.

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2 See "Out of Reach," National Low Income Housing Coalition, <www.nlihc.org>.

3 See "Smart Growth for Neighborhoods: Affordable Housing and Regional Vision," National Neighborhood Coalition, <www.neighborhoodcoalition.org>.

federal "TEA-21" transportation funds for developing transit centers. "An important part of TEA-21 is getting public input. Because of BREAD we had constant participation rather than one-shot compliance."

Taking a Regional Perspective

Community groups are awakening to the importance of expanding their work beyond traditional neighborhood boundaries and getting involved in broader regional issues. As most planners realize, addressing affordable housing, job creation, transportation, and education all require thinking – and planning – beyond traditional municipal boundaries. Coordination among municipalities within a region can be difficult, but it is essential.

SUMMING UP:

With its emphasis on compact development, transit-oriented development, and reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure, smart growth has great potential for bringing new investment to older urban, suburban, and rural communities. However, it can also lead to displacement of lower-income workers and families and small businesses if measures to preserve and expand affordable housing are not part of the picture.

Affordability of housing and the inclusion of low-income communities in planning for smart growth have only recently come onto the radar screen of many smart growth advocates. A strong commitment must be made to preserve existing affordable housing stock and increase housing opportunities throughout a region, and to coordinate planning for housing with the provision of transportation and social services. By working to expand opportunities for all residents of a region, smart growth can also be equitable growth. ◆

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