

Smart Growth

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The following article is the first in a series designed to highlight some of the key planning issues and questions being discussed today. This article focuses on the emerging phenomenon of “smart growth.”

It seems that “smart growth” is sweeping the nation. Virtually every organization in the country remotely interested in community planning issues has a smart growth policy or program, and every media account of planning issues seems to use the term.

The first thing to understand about smart growth is that it means different things to different people and organizations. It is a catchy phrase that has been used as a rallying cry and an endorsement for an array of positions and perspectives on community growth and planning issues.

An internet search yields over 200,000 hits for “smart growth.” Numerous organizations such as the Smart Growth Network and Smart Growth America exist solely to promote smart growth principles. Thousands of other agencies and organizations have their own smart growth programs, including the federal government, virtually every state, countless regional and local governments, and private organizations.

A quick review of the literature on smart growth reveals a large diversity of issues that are brought under its umbrella: urban sprawl, farmland preservation, mixed land uses, big box retail, light rail, brown fields, green fields, grey fields, the “evils” of cul-de-sacs, the elimination of urban blight, first ring suburbs, pedestrian orientation, battlefield preservation, open space, traffic congestion, traffic calming, town centers, Main Street ... the list goes on and on.

With all of this diversity of perspective, what then is smart growth? Is it

helpful for planning commissioners? Or, has it become so broad and diluted as to be meaningless?

In my opinion, the answer to these questions is that smart growth *can* offer valuable guidance and serve as a rallying cry for good planning. On the other hand, when you hear other people use the term smart growth, you need to understand what they mean by it. Likewise, if you are going to discuss smart growth, you should have a basic understanding of what it means to you.

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A good encapsulation of the mainstream consensus of smart growth is offered by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Their ten smart growth principles seem to embody the ideas that have the most commonality among the array of smart growth ideas promoted by various organizations.¹ The following are those principles, along with my observations.

1. Mix land uses.

There are many in the planning community who believe that the 20th century trend of segregating and separating land uses has created many of our current planning problems, not the least of which is the over-reliance on the automobile. Many of the reasons for originally separating land uses (i.e., maintaining

separate zones for residential, commercial, and industrial uses), such as protecting residents from noxious industrial fumes of early industrial processes, no longer apply. Many planners believe that careful design of a mixture of residential and commercial uses can create more livable communities with less reliance upon the automobile.

2. Take advantage of compact building design.

This is essentially the “anti-sprawl” position. By promoting a more compact regional development pattern, with new development clustered tightly at higher densities around existing development and infrastructure service areas, we can create more efficient infrastructure and service delivery patterns, while minimizing urban sprawl and loss of open space. One big plus: cost savings to government (and taxpayers) in having to build fewer roads, water and sewer lines, and other public facilities. The down side: many people object to higher densities and prefer the prevailing low-density suburban pattern.

3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.

There is concern that too much of our new residential growth, particularly in high growth areas, is limited to single-family detached residences. With changing demographics, including an aging population, there is legitimate concern that we need to provide more housing diversity and affordability to offer a range of opportunities for all persons. Some argue that removing exclusionary zoning practices and developing a more mixed land use pattern (see Principle 1) will promote increased housing diversity.

4. Create walkable neighborhoods.

Many planners, as well as a growing number of public health advocates, want

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¹ EPA's smart growth principles are listed at: <www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/about_sg.htm>

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to encourage more walking, bike-riding, and outdoor exercise. The connection to land use planning is that many of our neighborhoods and business districts do not lend themselves to pleasant or safe pedestrian use, and too many pedestrian systems do not connect to areas outside of their particular development. The answer, according to smart growth advocates, is to pay more attention to providing linked networks of sidewalks, paths, and trails.

5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.

This is a more difficult concept to come to grips with, because it involves the aesthetics of design and subjective judgment. However, many people are concerned that new development looks the same, regardless of where it occurs in the country. The widespread use of standardized development practices and franchise architecture, in this view, has led to the loss of individual community identity.

6. Preserve open space, farmland, and natural beauty in critical environmental areas.

Farmland preservation is often linked to strengthening regional and local economic self-sufficiency, as well preserving an area's traditional character (a benefit also being promoted in a number of regional tourism efforts). Open space and natural area protection is connected to the goal of maintaining an area's character and beauty, while affording recreational opportunities such as hiking, biking, and skiing. Smart growth proponents also often speak of the need to preserve our natural environment for the benefit of future generations.

7. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities.

This issue is related to the compact building design principle discussed above (Principle 2) with a focus on encouraging "infill" development and redevelopment. It is particularly concerned with utilizing existing infrastruc-

ture and expanding that infrastructure in a rational, gradual way, rather than promoting leapfrog, sprawling development patterns.

8. Provide a variety of transportation choices.

The vast majority of our modern "transportation" occurs via the automobile. The use of the personal automobile has increased at a dramatically greater rate than the growth of population. Many people feel that we have become too dependent on the automobile, and on the imported oil essential to its use. Our low-density, segregated land use pattern, however, makes reduction of auto use difficult. This smart growth principle looks at ways of shifting to a less auto-dominated environment, by promoting transportation alternatives such as public transit, light rail, bicycle, and walking. Again, achievement of this principle is closely tied to several of the other smart growth principles.

9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective.

There is concern that too often the pursuit of better quality planning and development brings with it increased bureaucracy and less certainty in the development process. This principle embodies the idea that smart growth principles should be encouraged within the framework of reasonable and predictable outcomes for the development community. Smart growth advocates, including many developers, also argue that adherence to smart growth principles (such as more compact development patterns) will result in lowering the overall costs of development.

10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

Decisions that affect the community ought to be made in an open, inclusive, and participatory process. Citizen participation continues to be important in any planning process, as is the input from major stakeholders. A variety of ways to gain public input should be encouraged to get all perspectives. While this

principle is not unique to smart growth, it is a consistent part of the agenda of those advocating smart growth.

With an understanding of these principles, what can smart growth achieve for communities and regions? The following are some of the potential positive results:

- *Less traffic congestion*
- *A cleaner environment*
- *More preserved open space*
- *Healthier urban cores*
- *Efficient expenditure of tax dollars for infrastructure*
- *Stronger community character and sense of place*
- *Preserved farmland*
- *More affordable and diverse housing opportunities*
- *Better public and individual health*

SUMMING UP:

Many planners will argue that "smart growth" is nothing more than the kind of good community planning that has long been advocated. However, one of the reasons smart growth has taken off as an idea is that it provides a coherent framework for pulling together a range of good planning practices. This has allowed not just planners, but residents of cities and towns across the country, to better see the connections between planning and development policies, and the future of their individual communities. But remember: "smart growth" can mean different things to different people. Make sure your planning commission clearly articulates what smart growth means to your community. ♦

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