Smart Growth Principles

The Smart Growth Network comprises a group of about 32 private, public, and non-governmental partner organizations seeking to create smart growth in neighborhoods and communities across the United States. Much of the information regarding smart growth that is assembled by the Network is available on the Internet at www.smartgrowth.org. One such source is titled Getting to Smart Growth: 100 Policies for Implementation. The impetus for this 97-page publication was the fact that many communities recognize the benefits of smart growth but have not implemented the policies needed to achieve it. This report offers 100 policy options that may be considered by communities across the country. It is important to recognize that only a limited number of the policy options described will be appropriate for a given community.

This newsletter is a summary of the highlights of the report. Interested readers are encouraged to visit the web site and view the full report.

It is important to recognize that no one policy or approach will serve every community. However, an essential first step is to establish a vision of the future for the community or region and how growth should occur. This visioning process requires a community- or region-wide honest discussion of the challenges that the future holds, the alternative growth strategies available, and the benefits and downsides of both current and alternative smart growth strategies. Once these basic decisions are in place, the one hundred policies can be used as a shopping list to select those most appropriate for the area.

The policies are organized in ten sections that represent the ten principles of smart growth. Within each of the ten principles are ten policies that may fit with the local resources and match the local vision for the future.
Mixed Land Uses

Many communities have development regulations that require the separation of land uses. Originally this separation was intended to protect neighborhoods against the intrusion of polluting industries and businesses. However, improved environmental regulation and technological advancements mean that many of these businesses are now cleaner than they were almost a century ago when zoning was introduced. However, separate land uses remains a common practice that forces American households to spend an increasing share of their time traveling between home, work, shopping, and school. Where once zoning protected against environmental risk, a new environmental risk has emerged – air pollution from automobiles. Also, as the demand for cars increases, expansion of streets and parking areas increases the area of impervious surface and forces polluted runoff into rivers and lakes.

Mixed land uses also have economic benefits. For example, businesses recognize the benefits of areas able to attract people. More economic activity exists when there are more shoppers. A leading resource for real estate investors, financers, and builders reported that the best real estate markets are cities with vibrant, traditional downtowns or 24-hour suburbs. Businesses place high value on such areas because they are better able to attract a skilled workforce.

The ten policies that are associated with the Mixed Land Use principle are:

- Provide incentives through state funds to encourage residents to live near where they work.
- Adopt smart growth codes to parallel conventional development codes.
- Use innovative zoning tools to encourage mixed-use communities and buildings.
- Facilitate financing of mixed-use properties.
- Zone areas by building type, not by use.
- Use flex zoning to allow developers to easily supply space in response to market demands.
- Convert declining shopping malls and strip commercial streets into mixed-use developments.
- Provide examples of mixed-use development at scales that are appropriate to your community.
- Create opportunities to retrofit single-use commercial and retail developments into walkable, mixed-use communities.
- Reward communities that create a balance between jobs and housing.

Compact Building Design

According to the Smart Growth Network report, Americans are consuming more land than ever before. They point out that between 1982 and 1997, the amount of urbanized land used for development increased by 45 percent—from 51 million acres to approximately 76 million acres. During this same period, population increased only 17 percent. This increase has been attributed to the growing size of homes and retail space as measured on a per capita basis. Some of this growth has been driven by consumer demand while some results from zoning (e.g., minimum lot sizes and prohibitions against multi-family or attached housing) and tax breaks that encourage larger homes. An alternative encouraged by smart growth is compact building design, which in turn create convenient neighborhood centers that many people want. With smaller building footprints, the land is used more efficiently and the undeveloped open land is able to absorb and filter rainwater, reducing flooding and storm water.
drainage needs. Compact communities also help to achieve a population density that will support economically viable transportation alternatives. Local governments also favor compact neighborhoods because of reduced utility lines for water and sewer as well as streets, curbs, gutter, and sidewalks that have to be maintained.

The ten policies discussed with respect to the principle of Compact Building Design are:

- Use public meetings about development options to educate community members on density and compact building options.
- Ensure ready access to open space in compactly developed places.
- Encourage developers to reduce off-street surface parking.
- Match building scale to street type in zoning and permit approval process.
- Establish model state-level design standards and codes to encourage compact building design that can be adopted by local communities.
- Use density bonuses to encourage developers to increase floor-to-area ratio.
- Ensure a sense of privacy through the design of homes and yards.
- Employ a design review board to ensure that compact buildings reflect desirable design standards.
- Offer incentives that encourage local communities to increase density.
- Support regional planning efforts to encourage compact communities.

Range of Housing Choices

Although the single-family detached home will remain the housing product of choice for many, changing demographics indicate that demand is growing for more alternatives. The share of households comprising two parents and their children is declining. Housing designs will have to accommodate older households with limited mobility, single-parent households, single adult households, extended family households, and immigrant households with their own social and cultural expectations. Housing choices in new developments can be diversified by modifying zoning and building codes or by considering some form of inclusionary housing ordinance. Integrating single- and multi-family units in new developments and existing neighborhoods can help reduce concentrations of poverty. Increasing density slowly while not radically changing the landscape can be accomplished in existing neighborhoods with attached housing, accessory units, or conversions to multi-family units.

The ten policies presented that address expanding the Range of Housing Choices are:

- Enact an inclusionary zoning ordinance for new housing developments.
- Provide homebuyer assistance through support to community land trusts.
- Revise zoning and building codes to permit a wider variety of housing types.
- Plan and zone for affordable and manufactured housing development in rural areas.
- Educate developers of multi-family housing units and non-profits on the use of limited-equity components.
- Educate Realtors, lenders, and homebuyers on the use of resource-efficient mortgages.
- Implement a program to identify and dispose of vacant and abandoned buildings.
- Adopt special rehabilitation building codes to regulate the renovation of existing structures.
- Enlist local jurisdictions in implementing a regional fair-share housing allocation plan across metropolitan areas.
- Give priority to smart growth projects and programs that foster smart growth in the allocation of federal housing and community development block grant (and other) funds.

**Create Walkable Communities**

In the mid-1900s, urban communities and neighborhoods were designed to move people to their destinations. In the past fifty years, however, dispersed development patterns have increased reliance on the automobile to the detriment of the pedestrian. Unfortunately, contemporary land-used regulation hinders creation of walkable communities. Wide streets, few cross walks, long blocks, limited sidewalks or median strips, and few traffic-calming features are disincentives to pedestrian activity. Walkable communities, however, are an essential element of smart growth because they enhance mobility, reduce negative environmental impacts, and foster stronger communities through improved social interaction.

The ten policy options that can encourage walkable community development are:

- Provide grants or other financial assistance to local communities to retrofit existing streets and sidewalks.
- Concentrate critical services near homes, jobs, and transit.
- Require building design that makes commercial areas more walkable.
- Adopt design standards for streets that ensure safety and mobility for pedestrian and non-motorized modes of transport.
- Adopt design standards for sidewalks.
- Require traffic-calming techniques where traffic speed through residential and urban neighborhoods is excessive.
- Beautify and maintain existing and future walkways.
- Provide persons with disabilities easy access to sidewalks, streets, parks, and other public and private services.
- Connect walkways, parking lots, greenways, and developments.
- Identify economic opportunities that stimulate pedestrian activity.

**Strong Sense of Place**

Smart growth supports the idea that development should not only acknowledge basic commercial and housing needs, but should result in communities that are distinctive and unique. Such communities create a sense of civic pride and support a more cohesive community. Communities with a strong sense of place reflect the residents’ values as well as their unique historical, cultural, economic, and geographical context.

The ten policy options that encourage the construction and preservation of buildings that prove to be assets over time are:

- Modify state funding processes and school siting standards to preserve neighborhood schools and build new schools to a “community level.”
- Create a state tax credit to encourage adaptive reuse of historic and architecturally significant buildings.
· Plant trees throughout communities and preserve existing trees during new construction.
· Create active and secure open spaces.
· Simplify and expedite permitting regulations to allow vendors to offer sidewalk service.
· Create special improvement districts for focused investment.
· Define communities and neighborhoods with visual clues.
· Preserve scenic vistas through the appropriate location of telecommunication towers, and through improved control of billboards.
· Create opportunities for community interaction.
· Enact clear design guidelines so that streets, buildings, and public spaces work together to create a sense of place.

**Preserve Open Space**

Communities across the country are recognizing that open space preservation is an important component of creating and maintaining a better place to live. An interconnected network of open space and waterways forms the “green infrastructure” for a community. This network helps to direct new growth in the most cost-efficient places such as where utility infrastructure exists. In addition, the green infrastructure can increase local property values and associated tax revenue, prevent flood damage, and positively influence businesses seeking a new location.

Ten policies and approaches that can help communities in their preservation efforts are:

· Use transfer of development rights, purchase of development rights, and other market mechanisms to conserve private lands.
· Coordinate and link local, state, and federal planning on land conservation and development.
· Expand use of innovative financing tools to facilitate open-space acquisition and preservation.
· Employ regional development strategies that better protect and preserve open space in edge areas.
· Adopt a green infrastructure plan.
· Create a network of trails and greenways.
· Design and implement an information-gathering and education program.
· Design and implement zoning tools that preserve open space.
· Provide mechanisms for preserving working lands.
· Partner with non-governmental organizations to acquire and protect land.

**Development in Existing Communities**

As communities have expanded at their edges and as their central core has experienced disinvestment, many are questioning the wisdom of abandoning older neighborhoods and its infrastructure only to build new developments further out. A basic component of smart growth is to direct development toward existing communities where infrastructure already exists. Directing development to existing areas provides a stronger tax base, closer proximity of jobs and services, reduced development pressure in fringe areas, and
preservation of open spaces. Unfortunately, green field development remains more attractive to developers because of the lower land cost, ease of access and construction, and the potential for assembling a larger parcel.

The ten options for leveling the playing field between greenfield and infill development are:

- Strengthen state and local brownfields programs.
- Adopt a “fix-it-first” policy that sets priorities for upgrading existing facilities.
- Institute regional tax-base sharing to limit regional competition and to support schools and infrastructure throughout the region.
- Use the split-rate property tax to encourage development on vacant or blighted pieces of land in existing communities.
- Local civic buildings in existing communities rather than in Greenfield areas.
- Conduct an “infill checkup” to evaluate and prioritize infill and brownfields sites for redevelopment.
- Facilitate programs to encourage home renovation and rehabilitation in existing neighborhoods.
- Support community-based organizations involved in revitalizing neighborhoods.
- Create economic incentives for business and homeowners to locate in areas with existing infrastructure.
- Modify average cost-pricing practices in utilities to better account for costs of expanding infrastructure in Greenfield areas.

Provide Transportation Alternatives

One of the objectives of smart growth is to provide people with transportation choices rather than continuing dependence on the automobile in an effort to improve overwhelmed transportation systems. Accordingly many communities are adopting a multi-modal approach to transportation planning. They are striving to better coordinate transportation and land-use planning, increasing availability of high quality transit service, creating redundancy and connectivity in their transportation networks, and insuring connectivity between pedestrian, bike, transit, and road facilities.

The ten policies cited for expanding transportation choices are:

- Finance and provide incentives for multi-modal transportation systems that include supportive land use and development.
- Modify roadway level-of-service standards in areas served by transit.
- Plan and permit road networks of neighborhood-scaled streets with high levels of connectivity and short blocks.
- Connect transportation modes to one another.
- Zone for concentrated activity centers around transit service.
- Require sidewalks in all new developments.
- Address parking needs and opportunities.
- Collaborate with employers and provide information and incentives for programs to minimize or decrease rush-hour congestion impacts.
- Adjust existing transit services to take full advantage of transit-supportive neighborhoods and developments.
· Cluster freight facilities near ports, airports, and rail terminals.

**Predictable Development Decisions**

The private sector must buy into the vision of smart growth embraced by a community. It is the private sector’s money and construction expertise that produces the smart growth developments. Historically, the zoning imposed by local government was intended to separate housing development from business and industrial development. The result has been the separation of homes, schools, offices, and stores and associated dependence on the automobile to get from place to place. Even the designers, developers, financiers, and builders have stratified themselves into residential and commercial specialists. Accordingly, smart growth development frequently requires approval of variances from traditional regulation and players able to cross the residential/commercial boundary.

The ten policy options presented address how local government can create a supportive regulatory environment that will attract the private sector’s participation:

· Provide financial incentives to aid the development of smart growth projects.
· Conduct smart growth audits.
· Implement a process to expedite plan and permit approval for smart growth projects.
· Engage political support for improved coordination on approval of smart growth projects.
· Use a point-based evaluation system to encourage smart growth projects.
· Remove parking from the development equation through public-private partnerships to build community-parking facilities.
· Encourage demand for smart growth through consumer incentives.
· Display zoning regulations and design goals in pictorial fashion to better illustrate development goals.
· Maximize the value of transit agency property through joint development of transit-oriented development.
· Incorporate by-right smart growth redevelopment into existing communities’ master plan.

**Collaborative Development Decisions**

Smart growth development can be successful only if it responds to a community’s own sense of how it wants to grow. This vision of the future, however, can be difficult to specify. Therefore a key component of smart growth is the early and frequent involvement of all stakeholders. The goal of the process is to identify and address the specific needs and concerns of the stakeholder groups. The process can be time-consuming, frustrating, and expensive; it can expose contentious issues; and, yet, it can produce creative solutions to troublesome problems. In any event, collaboration among stakeholders and the community can lead to more timely, cost-effective, and predictable development decisions.

The ten policy options cited are designed to address some of the barriers and constraints of community involvement:

· Seek technical assistance to develop public participation process.
· Use unconventional methods and forums to educate nontraditional and traditional stakeholders about the development and decision-making process.

· Conduct community visioning exercises to determine how and where the neighborhood will grow.

· Require communities to create public access to tax and lien information on all properties to facilitate the rehabilitation of distressed properties.

· Incorporate opinions and interests often and routinely into the planning process.

· Work with the media to disseminate planning and development information on a consistent basis.

· Engage children through education and outreach.

· Cultivate relationships with schools, universities, and colleges.

· Bring developers and the development community into the visioning process.

· Hold a design charrette to resolve problematic development decisions.

Affordable Housing ISSUES is prepared bi-monthly by the Shimberg Center for Affordable Housing for the purpose of discussing contemporary issues facing affordable housing providers. Reproduction of this newsletter is both permitted and encouraged. Comments or questions regarding the content are welcome and should be addressed to Robert C. Stroh, Director.