Principles of Smart Growth

Create Range of Housing Opportunities and Choices

Providing quality housing for people of all income levels is an integral component in any smart growth strategy. Housing is a critical part of the way communities grow, as it constitutes a significant share of new construction and development. More importantly, however, it is also a key factor in determining households’ access to transportation, commuting patterns, access to services and education, and consumption of energy and other natural resources. By using smart growth approaches to create a wider range of housing choices, communities can mitigate the environmental costs of auto-dependent development, use their infrastructure resources more efficiently, ensure a better jobs-housing balance, and generate a strong foundation of support for neighborhood transit stops, commercial centers, and other services.

No single type of housing can serve the varied needs of today’s diverse households. Smart growth represents an opportunity for local communities to increase housing choice not only by modifying their land use patterns on newly-developed land, but also by increasing housing supply in existing neighborhoods and on land served by existing infrastructure. Integrating single- and multi-family structures in new housing developments can support a more diverse population and allow a more equitable distribution of households of all income levels across the region. The addition of units -- through attached housing, accessory units, or conversion to multi-family dwellings -- to existing neighborhoods creates opportunities for communities to slowly increase density without radically changing the landscape. New housing construction can be an economic stimulus for existing commercial centers that are currently vibrant during the work day, but suffer from a lack of foot traffic and consumers in evenings or weekends. Most importantly, providing a range of housing choices allow all households to find their niche in a smart growth community -- whether it is a garden apartment, a rowhouse, or a traditional suburban home -- and accommodate growth at the same time.

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Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place

Smart growth encourages communities to craft a vision and set standards for development and construction which respond to community values of architectural beauty and distinctiveness, as well as expanded choices in housing and transportation. It seeks to create interesting, unique communities which reflect the values and cultures of the people who reside there, and foster the types of physical environments which support a more cohesive community fabric. Smart growth promotes development which uses natural and man-made boundaries and landmarks to create a sense of defined neighborhoods, towns, and regions. It encourages the construction and preservation of buildings which prove to be assets to a community over time, not only because of the services provided within, but because of the unique contribution they make on the outside to the look and feel of a city.

Guided by a vision of how and where to grow, communities are able to identify and utilize opportunities to make new development conform to their standards of distinctiveness and beauty. Contrary to the current mode of development, smart growth ensures that the value of infill and greenfield development is determined as much by their accessibility (by car or other means) as their physical orientation to and relationship with other buildings and open space. By creating high-quality communities with architectural and natural elements that reflect the interests of all residents, there is a greater likelihood that buildings (and therefore entire neighborhoods) will retain their economic vitality and value over time. In so doing, the infrastructure and natural resources used to create these areas will provide residents with a distinctive and beautiful place that they can call “home” for generations to come.

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Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair and Cost Effective

For a community to be successful in implementing smart growth, it must be embraced by the private sector. Only private capital markets can supply the large amounts of money needed to meet the growing demand for smart growth developments. If investors, bankers, developers, builders and others do not earn a profit, few smart growth projects will be built. Fortunately, government can help make smart growth profitable to private investors and developers. Since the development industry is highly regulated, the value of property and the desirability of a place is largely affected by government investment in infrastructure and government regulation. Governments that make the right infrastructure and regulatory decisions will create fair, predictable and cost effective smart growth.

Despite regulatory and financial barriers, developers have been successful in creating examples of smart growth. The process to do so, however, requires them to get variances to the codes – often a time-consuming, and therefore costly, requirement. Expediting the approval process is of particular importance for developers, for whom the common mantra, “time is money” very aptly applies. The longer it takes to get approval for building, the longer the developer’s capital remains tied up in the land and not earning income. For smart growth to flourish, state and local governments must make an effort to make development decisions about smart growth more timely, cost-effective, and predictable for developers. By creating a fertile environment for innovative, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use projects, government can provide leadership for smart growth that the private sector is sure to support.
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Mix Land Uses

Smart growth supports the integration of mixed land uses into communities as a critical component of achieving better places to live. By putting uses in close proximity to one another, alternatives to driving, such as walking or biking, once again become viable. Mixed land uses also provides a more diverse and sizable population and commercial base for supporting viable public transit. It can enhance the vitality and perceived security of an area by increasing the number and attitude of people on the street. It helps streets, public spaces and pedestrian-oriented retail again become places where people meet, attracting pedestrians back onto the street and helping to revitalize community life.

Mixed land uses can convey substantial fiscal and economic benefits. Commercial uses in close proximity to residential areas are often reflected in higher property values, and therefore help raise local tax receipts. Businesses recognize the benefits associated with areas able to attract more people, as there is increased economic activity when there are more people in an area to shop. In today’s service economy, communities find that by mixing land uses, they make their neighborhoods attractive to workers who increasingly balance quality of life criteria with salary to determine where they will settle. Smart growth provides a means for communities to alter the planning context which currently renders mixed land uses illegal in most of the country.

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Preserve Open Space, Farmland, Natural Beauty and Critical Environmental Areas

Smart growth uses the term "open space" broadly to mean natural areas both in and surrounding localities that provide important community space, habitat for plants and animals, recreational opportunities, farm and ranch land (working lands), places of natural beauty and critical environmental areas (e.g. wetlands). Open space preservation supports smart growth goals by bolstering local economies, preserving critical environmental areas, improving our communities quality of life, and guiding new growth into existing communities.

There is growing political will to save the "open spaces" that Americans treasure. Voters in 2000 overwhelmingly approved ballot measures to fund open space protection efforts. The reasons for such support are varied and attributable to the benefits associated with open space protection. Protection of open space provides many fiscal benefits, including increasing local property value (thereby increasing property tax bases), providing tourism dollars, and decreases local tax increases (due to the savings of reducing the construction of new infrastructure). Management of the quality and supply of open space also ensures that prime farm and ranch lands are available, prevents flood damage, and provides a less expensive and natural alternative for providing clean drinking water.

The availability of open space also provides significant environmental quality and health benefits. Open space protects animal and plant habitat, places of natural beauty, and working lands by removing the development pressure and redirecting new growth to existing communities. Additionally, preservation of open space benefits the environment by combating air pollution, attenuating noise, controlling wind, providing erosion control, and moderating temperatures. Open space also protects surface and ground water resources by filtering trash, debris, and chemical pollutants before they enter a water.

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Provide a Variety of Transportation Choices

Providing people with more choices in housing, shopping, communities, and transportation is a key aim of smart growth. Communities are increasingly seeking these choices -- particularly a wider range of transportation options -- in an effort to improve beleaguered transportation systems. Traffic congestion is worsening across the country. Where in 1982 65 percent of travel occurred in uncongested conditions, by 1997 only 36 percent of peak travel occurred did so. In fact, according to the Texas Transportation Institute, congestion over the last several years has worsened in nearly every major metropolitan area in the United States.

In response, communities are beginning to implement new approaches to transportation planning, such as better coordinating land use and transportation; increasing the availability of high quality transit service; creating redundancy, resiliency and connectivity within their road networks; and ensuring connectivity between pedestrian, bike, transit, and road facilities. In short, they are coupling a multi-modal approach to transportation with supportive development patterns, to create a variety of transportation options.
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Strengthen and Direct Development Towards Existing Communities

Smart growth directs development towards existing communities already served by infrastructure, seeking to utilize the resources that existing neighborhoods offer, and conserve open space and irreplaceable natural resources on the urban fringe. Development in existing neighborhoods also represents an approach to growth that can be more cost-effective, and improves the quality of life for its residents. By encouraging development in existing communities, communities benefit from a stronger tax base, closer proximity of a range of jobs and services, increased efficiency of already developed land and infrastructure, reduced development pressure in edge areas thereby preserving more open space, and, in some cases, strengthening rural communities.

The ease of greenfield development remains an obstacle to encouraging more development in existing neighborhoods. Development on the fringe remains attractive to developers for its ease of access and construction, lower land costs, and potential for developers to assemble larger parcels. Typical zoning requirements in fringe areas are often easier to comply with, as there are often few existing building types that new construction must complement, and a relative absence of residents who may object to the inconvenience or disruption caused by new construction.

Nevertheless, developers and communities are recognizing the opportunities presented by infill development, as suggested not only by demographic shifts, but also in response to a growing awareness of the fiscal, environmental, and social costs of development focused disproportionately on the urban fringe. Journals that track real estate trends routinely cite the investment appeal of the "24-hour city" for empty nesters, young professionals, and others, and developers are beginning to respond. A 2001 report by Urban Land Institute on urban infill housing states that, in 1999, the increase in housing permit activity in cities relative to average annual figures from the preceding decade exceeded that of the suburbs, indicating that infill development is possible and profitable.
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Take Advantage of Compact Building Design

Smart growth provides a means for communities to incorporate more compact building design as an alternative to conventional, land consumptive development. Compact building design suggests that communities be designed in a way which permits more open space to preserved, and that buildings can be constructed which make more efficient use of land and resources. By encouraging buildings to grow vertically rather than horizontally, and by incorporating structured rather than surface parking, for example, communities can reduce the footprint of new construction, and preserve more greenspace. Not only is this approach more efficient by requiring less land for construction. It also provides and protects more open, undeveloped land that would exist otherwise to absorb and filter rain water, reduce flooding and stormwater drainage needs, and lower the amount of pollution washing into our streams, rivers and lakes.

Compact building design is necessary to support wider transportation choices, and provides cost savings for localities. Communities seeking to encourage transit use to reduce air pollution and congestion recognize that minimum levels of density are required to make public transit networks viable. Local governments find that on a per-unit basis, it is cheaper to provide and maintain services like water, sewer, electricity, phone service and other utilities in more compact neighborhoods than in dispersed communities.

Research based on these developments has shown, for example, that well-designed, compact New Urbanist communities that include a variety of house sizes and types command a higher market value on a per square foot basis than do those in adjacent conventional suburban developments. Perhaps this is why increasing numbers of the development industry have been able to successfully integrate compact design into community building efforts. This despite current zoning practices - such as those that require minimum lot sizes, or prohibit multi-family or attached housing – and other barriers - community perceptions of “higher density” development, often preclude compact design.

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