

Smart Growth - Is It Really Smart?

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"Smart Growth" is an urban planning movement that encourages high-density development in urban areas near transportation hubs in the hopes that suburban sprawl will be discouraged and folks will use their cars less. The terms "sustainable development," "new urbanism," and "transit village" are also used to describe this process that hopes to achieve continuing growth that is pedestrian and community friendly, while being environmentally "smart."

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This is accomplished by restrictive zoning laws, environmental impact reviews and other pesky regulations that might impede growth. People living in the areas targeted for new high-rise, high-density developments are often labeled "Nimbys" (not in my backyard) for demanding community control over planning. Most residents who find massive developments circling their homes oppose the loss of quality of life in their neighborhoods and feel powerless in the path of this run-away train known as "smart growth."

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Land use decisions are a local matter, usually in the hands of only a few individuals on City Councils and Boards of Supervisors who make the appointments to the Planning Commission. Local politicians are often more in tune with corporate interests than with their constituents, who have very little information or access to the process and no vote on planning decisions. Developers need only dazzle a handful of city council members to take over a community. If there is anything smart about this plan, it is that big business listened and learned from the call of environmentalists to "Think Globally, Act Locally." Where power and money is involved, the devil is in the details.

Redevelopment and smart growth often target our lower-income neighborhoods where seniors, people of color, recent immigrants and working class people live. It's easy to put a "smart growth" spin on efforts to seize this valuable land for private use through a regulatory taking. Redevelopment agencies are a likely vehicle for carrying out the high-density, transit-related urban development promoted by smart growth. Yet, redevelopment law does not insure methods for fair land acquisition, adequate community involvement, or financial oversight.

Equating public good and the use of incentives and disincentives with "economic vitality," "most viable use," or "smart growth" opens the door to abuse. Incentives and disincentives are used to force people out of their homes only to seize valuable property from residents and small, local businesses to amass in larger parcels to deliver to developers for high-rises. While localities in Virginia can only use eminent domain for a clear public purpose (such as a school or fire station), redevelopment agencies take advantage of tax credits, subsidies, and a host of other programs to re-purpose land use.

Redevelopment agencies and local governments give public funds as incentives to private, for-profit corporations

without voter approval. Public-private partnerships often have less to do with increasing affordable housing, easing traffic congestion, or providing good jobs for the surrounding community, and more to do with corporate welfare and a large parcel land grab for big business.

The "pro-growth" scenario often proceeds as follows: In the older, less affluent parts of a community, homes and businesses are replaced by high-rise, mixed use developments, corporate franchises, luxury apartments and upscale shopping areas. The trades and family-owned businesses are replaced by chain stores with their minimum wage retail and service jobs.

The locals didn't see it coming. Cities and counties may require mailed notices within only a few hundred feet of a proposed project that will drastically change zoning. A handful of elected officials cast the deciding vote over the objections of residents. Suddenly a high-rise is under construction next to our homes and everyone wonders, "How did this happen?" A neighborhood is totally transformed. The local shoe repair shop or Mom and Pop deli can't afford the rent at the new project and they don't fit the new "tenant mix." New high-rise housing is primarily market rate. The few (15% required) moderate-income units are calculated on a regional basis, not on the lower income level of the community where they are built.

In a redevelopment area, the consequences are worse. Rather than allowing neighborhoods to grow and change over time in the free marketplace, people are forced out of their homes and businesses through abusive regulations to rapidly gentrify the community. Businesses and homeowners who lose their property can challenge the so-called market-rate price offered as fair compensation, if they have the personal resources to fight big developers and city hall in court. (less than 1% of the people who challenge eminent domain or regulatory taking are successful). Many of the people who lose their homes to eminent domain may not be able to afford even the few lower income housing in new developments.

Is smart growth really a vehicle for big business to use the passion of environmentalists and the power of local government to seize valuable, scarce private property that is owned by someone else? Could the property owner be your 80 year-old immigrant grandmother who spent a lifetime saving to earn a small parcel of the American Dream? Why do we assume growth only inside the growth boundary must be promoted at any cost? How can "livability" and environmental protection benefit from a "build it and they will come" mentality?

Many rural land owners have long envisioned that if they invest their life's work land, they could retire on the profits of future development of their property. But central planning to preserve rural land and limit growth to within the new urban boundaries extinguishes any hope of realizing that dream. How will they support themselves in their twilight years when their only potential source of income is diminished?

The assumption that community culture, quality of life, infrastructure, and carrying capacity of the land will be damaged by unbridled growth is as false now as it was in the past century. We truly need to examine the economic pressure behind these assumptions. Who is benefiting from smart growth policies and who is paying the cost? Each project must be held to a litmus test to see if it is truly "smart" growth. Is growth in the interest of the communities where projects are built or in the financial interests of international corporations who wield a great deal of political power?

Since 2002, further development in already densely populated urban areas is not sustainable. To use the term "sustainable" and "growth" together is an oxymoron. The assertion that "unrestrained growth is not sustainable" is false. It is growth that brings revenue to the community. We must insure that public scrutiny will determine if smart growth is possible or desirable.

Infill development and vertical sprawl are overtaxing urban environments. Dense population places significantly higher demands on limited natural resources and infrastructure. If environmentalists have learned anything, it's the

truism that someone is always downstream. Unrestrained urban development will have its repercussions on adjoining ecosystems.

Recent reports in California, the first to adopt smart growth policies, show that they have already built beyond the capacity of their water systems within the development boundaries and the state legislature is taking steps to limit growth to identified water resources.

In Northern Virginia, planners are promoting a 50% growth influx to the area and calling their plan "sustainable." Are we to assume that just because one lives near public transportation, the use of automobiles will be reduced? Placing housing near rapid transit may slightly increase individual public transportation usage. However, if you dramatically increase the community's total population in high-rise buildings, you increase overall congestion.

What do corporate franchises have to do with living wage, and transportation efficiency? Mixed usually means market-rate condos with minimum wage retail. In Virginia, will all this high-density housing supply a recruited workforce in abundance for corporations, keeping wages down and competition among workers high? Will displaced working class folks be commuting on high-speed rail to run the espresso machines and clean the toilets for the "new economy?"

The regional need for affordable housing is often used by county and city administrators to mask an agenda to increase sales tax by opening the door for corporate franchises in these developments. It is a myth to say that most of these developments are providing a living wage and keeping new, more affluent residents out of their cars. Public transportation is more likely to be used to import lower-income people from other areas to work at minimum wage retail and service jobs in these mixed-use projects. These minimum wage workers are forced to use public transport by economic necessity.

What does all this mean in terms of the national debt? The American Planning Association states on its website that "among the highlights of the Obama administration's FY 2011 budget request are: \$4 billion for a new National Infrastructure Innovation and Finance Fund; \$527 million for new sustainable communities initiatives at the Department of Transportation; \$150 million for HUD's (Housing and Urban Development) sustainable communities grant program; \$250 million for the new Choice Neighborhoods program at HUD; \$10 million for smart growth technical assistance at EPA; \$1 billion for the Housing Trust Fund; ...and a near doubling of funding at HUD for research and technical assistance," along with over \$1.2 billion in other HUD and transportation grants funded by you, the taxpayer.

Second Nature's mission is "to accelerate movement toward a sustainable future by serving and supporting senior college and university leaders in making..."sustainable living the foundation of all learning" in higher education "by modeling ways to eliminate global warming emissions."

It is funded by the Kresge Foundation, a \$2.8 billion private foundation that in 2008 awarded 342 grants totaling \$181 million "to influence the quality of life for future generations."

Sustainable Development advocates are often unaware that the natural consequence of their environmental, social equity, and "new economy" movement is tyranny. If we understand the threat and face the challenge squarely, the deceptive fraud of Sustainable Development will come to light.

Can we plan reasonable growth without sacrificing property rights and displacing vulnerable citizens? Can we have truly affordable housing with the new progressive urban design?

We must safeguard our property rights and economic prosperity as much as we weigh environmental impacts if we are to call this planning process just or "smart".

We must ask ourselves: Smart growth? Smart for whom?

Op-Ed by Donna Holt, President and Executive Director, Virginia Campaign for Liberty