

Smart Growth: New Opportunities for Main Street
by Doug Loescher

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Perhaps your main street is in a small town with little development pressures and you think this issue is just for larger cities. Or maybe your main street is in an urban neighborhood, surrounded by acres of dense city, and you feel insulated even distant from sprawl and growth management debates. If so, then you'll be surprised to learn that "smart growth"(and related movements) are part of a growing "tidal wave" of new thinking that is sweeping the country, and will have a dramatic impact on YOUR main street soon, if not already. And it's not just an obscure debate by Washington policy wonks, or an issue that affects only large cities on the coast. Everywhere, grass roots efforts are fueling an explosion of initiatives, re-shaping how we define and build communities of all shapes and sizes, including many small cities in the heartland. In 1999, for instance, a record 1,000 state land-use reform bills were introduced in legislatures. About 200 were signed into law. While some states have tackled this issue more aggressively than others, Main Street programs everywhere must "catch this wave" and be part of the discussion. But how do we sort out this dizzying array of new words, ideas, and sometimes conflicting beliefs on urban planning? In this article, we'll explore this new wave in community development thinking, who the leading advocates are, where their ideas are becoming reality, and how smart growth and new urbanist concepts will either support, transform, or create tougher competition for every main street in the country, depending on what we do now. What Is "Smart Growth"? Basically, smart growth has been a simultaneous response across the country to the impact of sprawl traffic congestion, loss of open space, glut of commercial development, and the decay of city centers as well as the general sense that we are losing our community identities. On every level, citizens, planners, and officials are grappling with development forces and their effect on quality of life, searching for new solutions through physical land development. Smart growth solutions vary in effectiveness and creativity from region to region, and level to level. In Vermont, elected officials have formed a state Forum on Sprawl to push legislation designed to redirect development away from rural areas toward village centers. Several of California's Bay Area suburbs recently gave voters the right to approve or scuttle new housing developments. In Washington State's Skagit County, meanwhile, residents are underwriting the purchase of development rights to adjacent farmland susceptible to sprawl. Why Should Main Street Care? In a nutshell, smart growth is the logical and necessary extension of our Main Street revitalization efforts. We no longer have the luxury of simply focusing on our downtown districts while ignoring the land-use decisions and development happening in the surrounding region. Kennedy Smith, director of the National Trust's Main Street Center warns that "downtown revitalization doesn't really take place downtown, but in the region where land-use decisions are made." But, while expanding our "mission" may make sense, it can make our work more controversial. No longer will Main Street programs be seen as "nice little projects" that really don't threaten the status quo of developmental sprawl occurring on the outskirts of town. There are powerful opponents who will resist the "smart growth" message. Last month, for example, Charles J. Ruma, president of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), received a standing ovation from building industry leaders in Portland, Ore., after delivering an attack on Oregon's strict land-use laws and the movement to preserve America's farmlands. He also lashed out at the

environmental advocacy group 1000 Friends of Oregon for what he called an unfair critique of NAHB's survey of housing affordability. Robert Liberty, executive director of 1000 Friends of Oregon, parried by saying "We have builders and developers on our board who support our work and whose work we've honored." How can we plug Main Street into the Smart Growth equation? As obvious as the connection between a healthy downtown and smart growth/sprawl is to us, it is not obvious to the general public, not even to many of our "comrades" in the smart growth movement! We must make the connection for them that less sprawl and smart growth = a healthy downtown and, conversely, that a healthy downtown will inhibit sprawl and encourage smart growth. To do that, we need to become familiar with the principles, practices, and jargon of this new profession. Popular Smart Growth Tools and Practices The toolkit for planners is still being developed, but here are some tried-and-true tools that have been used by early smart growth advocates, and some of the locations where they've been tested:

- * Urban growth boundaries: A true pioneer in growth management, Oregon was the first state to require all of its cities to develop "Urban Growth Boundaries" (UGB), of which Portland's is the most famous. Essentially drawing a line around the perimeter of the city and prohibiting development beyond the UGB, Portland has seen all types of positive spin-offs inside the boundary, including increased density, a center-focus, pedestrian-oriented "transit villages," and what many say is an attributable higher quality of life. One big drawback: Portland is running out of space and home prices are shooting up. Is the UGB to be blamed? Some say definitely, while others point out that many cities with the same desirable qualities as Portland are experiencing similar jumps in land values. A number of states, such as Washington and Tennessee, have followed suit, as well as dozens of cities in California, Colorado, and elsewhere. Developers and homebuilders frequently oppose UGBs.
- * Grassroots advocacy groups: The generator of literally hundreds of ballot initiatives, legislation, and a groundswell of popular furor over sprawl, citizen coalitions are hard at work behind the scenes. Statewide groups such as "1000 Friends" have flourished in Florida, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Montana, New Mexico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Washington, Wisconsin, and elsewhere. These groups are sponsoring symposiums, press conferences, development impact studies, publications, legislation, even "road trips" for lawmakers to view sprawl and solutions to the problems it causes. While only a handful of states have enacted smart growth laws, dozens will do so soon, thanks to these advocacy groups.
- * Land purchase: One way to stop sprawl and encourage smart growth is to buy up the land before the developers do. No property rights battles, and no skirmishes with developers. In some areas, such as in Cape Cod, voters have approved ballot initiatives to fund such activities. Elsewhere, private foundations are footing the bill; the Packard Foundation, for example, is funding the "California Landscapes" initiative by spending \$175 million to acquire sensitive land. In Maryland, the state government is directly funding such acquisitions.
- * Conservation easements: More than 1,200 local and regional land trusts around the country are working with landowners to preserve land threatened by development through conservation easements and other legal mechanisms. The use of easements is primarily a private-sector approach that does not involve governmental powers or legislation.
- * Focused development incentives: Creating incentives to encourage development in targeted areas, long a staple of Main Street programs, is a politically feasible strategy for many communities. Unfortunately, few communities offer incentives for projects other than

building rehabs or business startups. One exception is Winchester, Va., which has created a "Technology Zone" that seeks to lure high-tech employers downtown through tax incentives.

- * Ballot initiatives: If your elected officials won't put smart growth on the agenda, you can! In growing numbers, citizens are turning to the ballot box to curb growth. In 1998, 240 such initiatives were voted upon. This past year, there were 654! And thanks to grassroots advocacy groups popping up in nearly every state, you can expect to see that number grow exponentially in the coming years, perhaps in a town near you.
- * Comprehensive plans: According to Constance Beaumont of the National Trust, "many people think of local comprehensive plans as boring dust-catchers, but...officially adopted plans have real legal muscle to fight sprawl." For example, the comprehensive plan of Lawrence, Kansas, which puts a priority on the CBD, withstood a court challenge from a shopping mall developer. In Haley, Idaho, the plan requires infill downtown before permits can be issued for "greenfield" development.
- * Design guidelines: Bold new guidelines are being put in place for both suburban and downtown districts, with language unheard of just a decade ago. In East Cambridge, Mass., for example, the guidelines require all new developments to be mixed-use, screen any parking, "relate to human dimensions," and "provide a sense of intimacy."
- * Targeted state subsidies: One of the most innovative statewide smart growth strategies has been developed by Maryland, which funnels school construction into existing in-town facilities, offers tax credits to downtown businesses, provides a 25 percent state income tax credit for building rehabs, and directs all state facility development into city cores.
- * Rehab tax credits: Long a friend of preservation and now a great tool for smart growth, the federal rehab tax credit has been paired with state income tax credits in dozens of places.
- * Regional/metropolitan government: While few cities have actually achieved regional governance such as that in the Lexington, Ky., area, where city and county have merged, many are now finding ways to develop collaborative comprehensive planning and coordination such as in Rochester, N.Y.
- * Development fees: Some municipalities have used impact fees or new development for years, but few are as downtown friendly as in Collierville, Tenn., which uses all impact fee revenues to support the local Main Street program.
- * Main Street revitalization programs: (of course!) And let's remind our peers that real main streets satisfy a host of smart growth principles by maximizing existing infrastructure, reinforcing the pedestrian-scale environment, encouraging a mix of uses, and supporting dense, compact development. More importantly, real main streets reflect a community's inherent character and diversity, while offering a "forum" for human interaction and community-building, all important goals of the smart growth agenda. Smart growth and its related movements are a natural and necessary extension of our efforts in revitalizing main street. We must embrace, and participate, fully in the development of smart growth strategies for our communities, if we hope to plug Main Street into the smart growth agenda. While the process may bring us into a more controversial debate, it will ultimately be the only way to lock in our revitalization progress and secure main street's future as the vibrant center of a healthy, growing community. Doug Loescher is the assistant director of the National Trust's Main Street Center. He has written articles and taught on the subject of smart growth and Main Street. The new "Buzz" about development...sorting through the jargon A lot of words and phrases are being used to describe the new land-use movement. The one you hear may

depend on who's talking about it.* Here are a few of the most common terms, and what they mean:

- * Smart growth: Urban planners use this phrase to describe a set of guiding principles on land-use development and policies.
- * New urbanism: Architects are fond of this expression, which focuses more on the physical form of development, in a hierarchy of region, city, neighborhood, block, street, and building.
- * Neotraditional town planning: Developers frequently use this term to describe a particular type of project popularized by early ventures that re-created traditional street grids and architecture, such as Seaside, Fla.; Kentlands, Md.; and the Disney town, Celebration in central Florida.
- * Sustainable development: Environmentalists often prefer this term because it puts the slant on resource conservation as it relates to urban and "brownfield" (i.e., infill) development.
- * Livable communities: Politicians have adopted this phrase to vaguely describe well-planned neighborhoods and cities in terms of both physical development and community services.
- * Town center concepts: Retail developers and consultants, such as Bob Gibbs, are often engaged in this subset of community development, sometimes independent of any plans for adjacent residential neighborhoods.
- * Traditional neighborhood developments: Residential developers use this term to describe a wide variety of projects, some as small as a block, others as large as a new "greenfield" development.
- * "Urban villages": Media reporters have latched onto this phrase, popularized by David Sucher's 1995 book, *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village*, which describes, in a decidedly non-technical way, hundreds of small features that can transform a faceless, alienating city into a familiar and comfortable village.
- * Transit villages: Transportation planners are also weighing in on the new community form, emphasizing the role and importance of the town center and neighborhood organized around multi-modal transit facilities.
- * Note: many professionals see "smart growth" as a policy framework for development, with "new urbanist" codes and developments as a natural outcome or manifestation of these policies. Principles of Smart Growth and New Urbanism: It's Not Rocket Science! For most Main Street veterans, the principles outlined below may not seem earth-shattering. In fact, most of these points may seem obvious and somewhat simplistic. But to the world of "conventional" developers, city planners, elected officials, and bankers, these principles represent a dramatic, and sometimes threatening, departure from the status quo. And, underlying all of these principles is a shift in attitude toward public management of what has primarily been considered a matter of private decision-making: "property rights." Together, some of these "threatened" interest groups will initially resist the tidal wave of popular public sentiment, promising this set of rather benign principles will become hotly debated and highly controversial, until all the dust settles. Here's an unofficial list, compiled by the author, of ideas that seem to be rocking everyone's boat:
- * Land use: At the core of the new movement is an emphasis on frugal land development for human use, saving more open space, farmland, and natural "buffers" to improve the quality of life. The American Planning Association, in its new publication, *The Principles of Smart Development*, supports: "the preservation of land and natural resources...cooperative growth

management...protecting farmland...[and] compact building patterns..."In other words, no more wasteful suburban-style strip centers with seas of asphalt parking chewing up the countryside.

- * Infrastructure: The cost of sprawl is causing governments across the country to rethink their investment in infrastructure. For example, in Fairfax, Va., officials estimate the average new family in a sprawl-type development will pay about \$1,200 in taxes, but demand \$5,800 in services. And, in a recent study of infrastructure demands caused by different types of development in the San Jose valley, planners estimated that sprawl will cost municipal governments \$4.5 million more next year than will be recouped through impact fees or additional taxes, while infill development will cost \$2 million less. Increasingly, local elected officials are being pressured to invest more wisely in streets, utilities, and facilities and that leads to more...
- * Infill development: Taking advantage of empty lots and "underutilized" low-density properties to create a higher density, compact city through infill development may seem obvious, but is proving not to be that easy. Smart growth and new urbanism planners are trying to remove obstacles, such as zoning codes and ordinances that encourage suburban development and thus inhibit appropriate high-density urban design, and overcome the reluctance of developers to tackle small projects they see loaded with red tape. New model ordinances for infill and incentives for small in-town developments are being drafted.
- * Revised new development standards: Realizing that regulations alone do not create appropriate new development, new urbanists are drawing up models of design that look, well, pretty traditional. Requiring sidewalks, putting parking behind buildings, limiting setbacks...all must be re-integrated into design guidelines and standards.
- * Higher density areas: Compact development ultimately means higher density than most new developments in the last 50 years. And these higher densities should occur in town centers, transit nodes, and neighborhood commercial districts. Unfortunately, while most Main Streeters and smart growth advocates understand this, even those who support growth management sometimes do not. The same groundswell that is stopping sprawl often opposes developments of any kind "smart" or otherwise.
- * Downtown revitalization: This is where Main Street programs come in. For example, one of the more popular manifestos, the "Ahwahnee Principles," developed on the west coast by a broad coalition of new urbanists, states that: "Communities should have an appropriately scaled and economically healthy center focus. At the community level, a wide range of commercial, residential, cultural, civic, and recreational uses should be located in the town center or downtown. At the neighborhood level, neighborhood centers should contain local businesses that serve the daily needs of nearby residents. At the regional level...facilities should be located in urban centers that are accessible by transit throughout the metropolitan area."
- * New "town center" development: If you're looking for a controversial element of smart growth and new urbanism, here it is. Many Main Streeters will question why we should support the development of new, "artificial" downtowns, when we have so many real ones that need help, support, and development. And this is no small trend. More than 1,500 traditional town developments are on the boards, most of them with full-scale "downtowns" and neighborhood centers integrated into the plans. More significantly, many strip-style commercial centers are now being revamped using "main street" design motifs, in the hope of eventually regenerating connecting neighborhoods into "real" communities. Mashpee

Commons on Cape Cod, for example, was a failed shopping mall converted into a main street; now planners are designing adjacent pedestrian-scaled neighborhoods.

- * "Traditional" combinations: Long a unique strength of traditional main street districts, mixed-use development of commercial, residential, and office space has been zoned out of existence elsewhere. Now planners are trying to re-inject variety into new projects. Again, obstacles abound, primarily in the form of existing regulations. To solve this problem, governments are developing innovative codes, such as mixed-use overlay zones that allow more flexible development of targeted high-density areas. Officials in Vancouver, Wash., for example, have created a fast-track permitting process that puts mixed-use development projects on an expedited priority list.
- * Creative combinations: "Live/work" space, better known as "living above the store," has experienced a resurgence in new urbanist developments. Following the example of communities such as Eureka, Calif., where officials adopted a live/work ordinance as part of a larger initiative to attract artists and cultural activities back to main street, many new town centers are creating specific buildings for such uses.
- * Public transit: Challenging the unspoken primacy of the automobile, smart growth planners are trying to re-introduce and diversify the way people get around. The higher density of new urbanist developments, as well as obvious quality-of-life issues, has made public transit, in the form of buses, light-rail, and trolleys, an important element in the planning of new communities. One example is Orenco Station, a "Transit Village" in Portland, Ore., which has successfully built a new pedestrian-scaled neighborhood around a light-rail station.
- * Bicycle access: Especially popular in the west, bicycle trails, lanes, and facilities are popping-up in smart growth plans and new urbanist developments throughout the country, as yet another alternative to the car.
- * Taming the automobile: It takes more than transit options to tame the auto; it takes a village. More specifically, it takes an integrated "village" design that minimizes street width, puts parking in the rear, brings new buildings forward to meet the sidewalk, and slows auto speeds through "traffic calming" techniques and dozens of other changes to the way highway engineers usually think.
- * Human-scaled design: The devil is in the details...and that definitely applies to successful pedestrian-scale design, whether in the "suburbs" or on main street. In downtown San Luis Obispo, for example, detailed design standards have been crafted to guide all future development; the guidelines emphasize the importance of a continuous "streetwall" of facades; "permeability" of facades, i.e., window and door openings; compatible building massing and scale; architectural details; and other elements that affect the "walking environment," such as street furniture.
- * Historic preservation: Thankfully, most new urbanists recognize the role of preservation in retaining and enhancing a community's distinct identity an essential goal of their efforts. Here, preservation means more than old buildings, it also means retaining traditional street patterns, vistas, and landscapes.
- * "Local focus": Highly compatible with most Main Street programs is the focus of some smart growth advocates on local assets, such as existing businesses. Again, the Awhannee Principles weigh in, saying "Because each community's most valuable assets are the ones they already have, and existing businesses are already contributing to their home communities, economic development efforts should give first priority to supporting [these] enterprises as the best source of business expansion and local job growth. Luring businesses

away from neighboring communities is a zero-sum game that doesn't create new wealth in the regional economy. Community economic development should focus instead on promoting local entrepreneurship."

- * Design standards: Andre Duany, considered one of the leading visionaries of the new urbanist movement, has been outspoken in his insistence on "vernacular" design, emphasizing the use of traditional materials and styles that reflect a community's unique character and produce structures that respond to the micro-climate and cultural traditions of the area. His first and most famous development, Seaside, Fla., has become a model for this type of site-sensitive design. It also has become a lightning rod for criticism by those who charge that the "traditional" architecture of many new urbanist developments is simply fake historicism.

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