Excerpt from a Local Leader's Guide to

Smart Growth Strategies

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An introduction

In parts of the state, open land is being developed at unprecedented rates. Without changes in policy and practice, most of this new development will take the form of suburban sprawl. Vehicular traffic is increased as people drive farther from home to the places where they work and shop. Community life and the landscape are fragmented. At the same time, in places where development pressures are less intense, some communities are economically stagnant and are intent on adopting strategies that create quality environments to attract appropriate development.

Sprawl is caused in most communities by zoning district maps that provide for the development of all privately owned land in the community, including land in or around sensitive environmental areas. Land conservation alone—whether by private land trusts, municipal open space programs, or other land acquisition initiatives—cannot prevent sprawl and its negative impacts. An effective approach to concentrating market pressures for development in appropriate places is also required. This same approach is effective in economically distressed areas, where communities need a competitive edge to attract development while protecting critical environmental assets.

Local governments need tools to create balanced land use patterns that will accommodate both conservation and growth. Proper environmental planning requires this balance. Sound economic development also requires it. This book explores "smart growth"—strategies that communities may follow to provide for environmentally sound and economically efficient development patterns. By combining traditional and innovative land use techniques in creative ways, local governments can encourage both appropriate development and resource conservation and can create sustainable communities for current and future generations.

The first part of the book focuses on what smart growth is, how it can be used, and who can use it. The second part begins with an examination of the conventional land use controls that induce sprawl and presents a case study of one set of creative alternative mechanisms that has been employed to create more compact and efficient development patterns. The third section illustrates how local governments implement smart growth strategies to encourage development in appropriate places and to conserve critical landscapes and resources. The book then explores applications of smart growth techniques. An early case study involving the town of Ramapo and several more recent community case studies illustrate how localities can successfully combine growth and conservation policies. The Appendices contain suggestions for further reading, more detailed information on some key smart growth techniques, and the relevant New York statues.

MANAGING GROWTH AND SPRAWL

The problems of communities where economic growth is stagnant are somewhat easier to understand and describe than those of localities affected by sprawl. In areas of stagnant growth, the economy needs a shot in the arm. Communities are managing to grow rather than attempting to manage aggressive growth pressures. These communities need to attract employers. They need to attract tourists. They need to revive the agricultural economy, and to devise other methods of increasing economic activity, employment, and property tax revenues. Using their land use authority effectively—managing to grow efficiently and attractively—is essential to their economic success.

Communities affected by sprawl must concentrate on ensuring that their growth benefits rather than burdens their residents, their regions, and their property tax receipts. Sprawl is defined by the Sierra Club as "low-density development beyond the edge of service and employment, which separates where people live from where they shop, work, recreate, and educate – thus requiring cars to move between zones." The most worrisome statistic in the blizzard of negative data regarding sprawl is that, in most metropolitan areas of the country, as the population grows, the amount of land that is developed to meet that demand increases by seven to ten times the rate of population growth. In other words, the surface area covered by development in metropolitan areas increases by about 70% to 100% to accommodate a 10% increase in population.

The Sierra Club, in a report called "The Dark Side of the American Dream," states that "sprawl contributes to increasing costs for public services, the declining health of central cities, environmental degradation, loss of farmland, and degraded quality of life." In the New York metropolitan area, the specific complaints of city mayors, town supervisors, property taxpayers, and environmentalists parallel this general observation.

In defense of current land development patterns, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) counters that most Americans want to live in detached single-family houses on the urban fringe; that population growth will increase demand for housing on the fringe because new residential development in cities can only accommodate 10% of housing needs; and that there is plenty of land left for development, noting that only 5% of the land mass in the United States is urbanized. Of great moment is the NAHB comment that home builders are building houses and subdivisions in suburban and semi-rural communities that conform to the standards of local land use regulations. In most of the New York metropolitan area, this observation is correct.

"Smart Growth" has replaced "Growth Management" as the current prescription for the cure of slow or stagnant growth as well as of sprawl and its multiple adverse impacts. Both recommend various means of identifying growth areas and concentrating new commercial and residential developments within such areas. In most states, land use decisions of this type are made primarily by local governments, and the difficult political issue is how to encourage or require local governments to draw the boundaries of growth and conservation areas and then enact regulations that encourage greater density development within economically sustainable growth areas and other regulations that greatly limit new development in conservation areas. To begin, we must understand what smart growth is.

WHAT IS SMART GROWTH?

Smart growth aims:

- to concentrate development in existing and new population centers,
- to encourage the revitalization of urban areas,

- to accommodate higher density and mixed-use development, and
- to present a range of housing options, including more affordable housing.

Smart growth strategies are designed to:

- reduce traffic and air pollution,
- make efficient use of existing infrastructure and transportation systems,
- create walkable neighborhoods,
- maintain open space, and
- achieve greater environmental conservation.

These goals are summarized by Michael Pawlukiewicz, the Urban Land Institute's Director of Environmental Land Use Policy, in endorsing the notion of "compact development"—growth that "is focused on existing commercial centers, new town centers, and existing or planned transportation facilities." This, he argues, is necessary to create a sense of community, promote economically viable development, ensure the ease of movement and safety of residents, and preserve open space, natural resources, and sustainable habitats.

Smart growth requires governments, at a minimum, to take two related actions:

- The first is the designation of discrete geographical areas into which private market growth pressures are directed.

- The second is the designation of other areas for recreation, conservation, and environmental protection.

Local governments can use many techniques to enhance the balance between development and preservation. They can direct growth to specific areas of a community by creating higher density districts, by adopting floating zones and overlay zoning, and by using transfer of development rights and incentive zoning. Communities may form intermunicipal agreements to implement shared plans for growth. Initiatives to revitalize

waterfronts, redevelop brownfields, promote environmental justice, enhance existing water and sewer systems, and support the provision of social services and greater amenities in cities and urban villages are also important smart growth strategies.

We begin by analyzing the responsibility local governments have in achieving smart growth. New York's localities have the authority to regulate development to achieve smart growth. This authority can be used to prevent the negative effects of sprawl while expanding the tax base, providing jobs, and supporting land development in appropriate places.

WHO CAN **ACHIEVE SMART GROWTH?**

Local governments are principally responsible for achieving smart growth. Their comprehensive plans and zoning maps create the blueprint for the future development of their communities. In combination, these plans and maps are the blueprints for regional development and conservation. Local citizens also play an important role in planning for smart growth. They can be engaged in collaborative planning to mediate dissimilar interests which can be integrated into a shared vision of the community's future.

The federal government and state governments can encourage and assist communities in this process by providing help with regional infrastructure and housing needs, technical assistance, geographical information systems, and funding for local projects. The availability of state and federal funding is a powerful incentive for communities to adopt smart growth initiatives. Local governments, citizens, and the federal and state governments all have a role in planning for future growth.

THE **LEGAL FOUNDATION**

New York law authorizes local governments to divide the community into zoning districts and to regulate the density of population, the use of land, and the size, shape, and location of buildings within each district. Although this authority has been used in some communities to impose a grid type of development pattern on the land, with residences separated from

retail and commercial areas, zoning itself may be used to designate a variety of growth districts to carry out a local smart growth agenda. Municipalities have designated large parcels of land for mixed-use zones, planned unit development districts, planned residential development areas, floating zones, and conservation areas.

New York State law encourages local governments to adopt comprehensive plans. The comprehensive plan may include a statement of goals and objectives regarding the community's physical development and may describe specific actions to be taken to provide for the community's long-range growth and development. This authority is highly elastic, and can be stretched to fit all development contexts—from urban and suburban to rural—where communities wish to encourage, direct, and control growth.

In addition, the New York State Legislature grants local governments the authority to protect and conserve the environment. It is the policy of New York State to "conserve and protect [the] natural resources and scenic beauty [of the state] and encourage the development and improvement of . . . agricultural lands for the production of food and other agricultural products." The state legislature has enacted several statutes that delegate to local governments the authority to protect local natural resources and agricultural lands. Local comprehensive plans can identify and provide for the preservation of "natural resources and sensitive environmental areas." The Municipal Home Rule Law authorizes each local government to adopt land use laws "for the protection and enhancement of its physical and visual environment."

WHY FOLLOW SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES?

One of the most critical issues in New York is residential development and its effect on the environment. Since 1965, the siting of single-family homes on one- to five-acre building lots has resulted in over 1.1 million acres of land being converted into homes, roads, lawns, and blacktop in the New York metropolitan area. Throughout the country, this type of low-density development has contributed to the deterioration of cities, the underuse of existing infrastructure, and the low demand for public transportation systems, and has harmed natural resources and ecosystem functions. Open space and agricultural lands are being lost. As more and more land is blacktopped, stormwater runoff and sewage discharges reduce

water quality in watersheds that provide drinking water.

Communities that wish to attract economic development must take care to avoid these same problems as they make plans to grow. Simply put, economic growth in competitive times will not seek to locate in poorly planned communities. Smart growth principles aim to prevent the negative effects of increasing development in suburban and rural areas and to encourage redevelopment of existing areas to provide a better quality of community life. Ideally, communities can track development patterns and identify potential growth issues before sprawl occurs, in order to plan for smart growth. In many communities, however, signs of sprawl are already apparent, and it is necessary to act immediately to prevent further damage. In communities where growth is needed, regulations that create smart growth patterns may stimulate balanced and orderly development. Local developers, planners, designers, environmentalists, and others can begin to integrate and collaborate on their visions and techniques to better sustain their communities.

The next section of this book examines the conventional mechanisms that induce sprawl and a number of creative alternative mechanisms that have been employed by the village of Pawling, New York, to create more compact development patterns, as well as to attract appropriate economic development projects.