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Why “Smart Growth” Won’t Save Us

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Overview

“Smart growth” is an urban growth management strategy that applies planning and design principles intended to mitigate the impacts of continued growth. If properly applied, these principles represent a positive contribution to new urban development. However, the rhetoric of “smart growth” is that population levels and growth rates are not the problem; it’s merely a matter of *how* we grow. According to the “smart growth” program, if we are less wasteful and more efficient in our urban growth, we can keep growing and everything will work out fine. The “smart growth” approach is fundamentally pro-growth and does not envision an end to growth or a need to end growth.

“Smart growth” is cast as a comprehensive solution, whereas it is merely a potential means of modestly reducing the environmental, social, and economic impacts of continued growth while failing to address its inevitable consequences. The “smart growth” formula has been used to discount and transform legitimate public concerns about the amount and pace of growth into a discussion about how we should best continue growing.

What is Smart Growth?

The “smart growth” (SG) movement began to emerge in the late 1990s as a response to the problems resulting from a decade of intensive urban growth. To a large extent, SG is the current incarnation of *urban growth management*, which was bred in the 1960s and 70s. The strategies advocated under SG are not new. They incorporate planning and design practices developed more than 40 years ago. These practices have been packaged into a prescription for today’s growth ailments.

SG is largely a response to widespread public dislike of urban sprawl, and hence, SG advocates identify sprawl as the primary culprit. This relatively low-density, market-driven development pattern uses land in an inefficient manner. Sprawl results in the accelerated loss of undeveloped rural land and open space. Sprawling development is associated with environmental impacts, costly and inefficient demand for new public infrastructure and services, overreliance on automobile transportation, and loss of community character.

SG strives for denser development patterns that require less land. Accompanying this compact development are mixed-use and neighborhood design strategies that help make the denser development more appealing. SG has the potential to make development more profitable by reducing developer costs for land, roadways, parking, and utilities. These savings may be offset by the extra amenities required to make such compact development attractive to homebuyers and businesses.

The five main elements of SG have been effectively summarized by Gabor Zovanyi as:¹

- Growth containment in compact settlements
- Protection of the environment, resource lands, and open space
- Multi-modal transportation systems
- Mixed-use development
- Collaborative planning and decision making

In essence, SG represents an effort to promote greater efficiency in new urban development. Under the SG regimen, new development will use less land and have lower impacts on a per-capita or per-unit basis.

The SG goal of reigning in sprawl is ostensibly based on an underlying desire to protect

¹ *The Role of Initial Statewide Smart-Growth Legislation in Advancing the Tenets of Smart Growth*, by Gabor Zovanyi, *The Urban Lawyer*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Spring 2007, p 371-414.

undeveloped rural lands, farms, forests, natural areas, and open spaces from development. However, the clear impression one gets from SG literature is that, as long as new growth is compact and efficiently-planned, it is acceptable for development to continue consuming rural land and for the urban footprint to keep expanding. In other words, from the SG perspective, it's okay to develop rural lands as long as it's done properly in an orderly and efficient manner.

It is highly notable that SG proponents do not identify growth itself as part of the problem. Instead, all problems associated with growth are attributed to the *manner* in which growth occurs, not the amount or pace of growth. Thus, SG proponents maintain that growth itself is benign and that growth-related problems can be adequately addressed by influencing where and how growth occurs.

Members of the SG movement are frequently quoted in the media prefacing their remarks about local land use, growth, and development issues by saying “We are not opposed to growth.” They may clarify that they are merely concerned that growth occurs in a “responsible way.” Thus, they have preemptively swept critical aspects of the growth debate off the table and out of the public dialogue, shifting the focus to the details of *how* growth should occur.

Smart Growth is *More* Growth

SG is a pro-growth movement, as the name implies. It is ultimately about accommodating and facilitating more growth. It does not include any strategies for slowing or limiting growth and does not envision or contemplate an end to growth. While sprawling development is viewed as undesirable, non-sprawling development is viewed as beneficial and desirable. Thus, SG proponents believe that growth, if done properly, can be transformed from a costly blight on the landscape into an attractive development with predominantly positive impacts on the community.

U.S. Congressman Earl Blumenauer from Portland, Oregon, has been a champion of SG from its beginnings. He was interviewed on the topic by NPR a number of years ago. When asked if people in Oregon were concerned about too much growth, he replied that Oregon has about the same land area as the United Kingdom, but the UK has 20 times the population. His statement seemed to dismiss well-known concerns in Oregon about population growth as unjustified and implied the state could accommodate 20 times the population without a significant problem or any need for concern.

The NPR interviewer accepted Congressman Blumenauer's statement and did not follow up to ask him if he believed this much growth would be desirable, or if the people he represents in Oregon were in favor of a 20-fold increase in the state's population. Perhaps when the population of Oregon reaches the UK's population of 60 million, the Congressman will cite an example such as Singapore. With a population density of 19,000 people per square mile, Singapore is accommodating 475 times more people per square mile than Oregon.

SG not only means *more* growth, it means endless growth. The principles of SG are based on a fundamental assumption that we can keep growing indefinitely and that any real limitations to more growth either don't exist or are too distant in the future to be of concern – even within the typical 20-year urban planning horizon of most cities.

Is More Growth Smart?

Is SG the solution we are looking for? The answer depends on our understanding of the problem. SG proponents have identified the problem as poorly-planned, sprawling development. However, it seems clear that sprawl is one *symptom* of the real problem, which is growth: growth in population and the associated urban development.

SG advocates claim we don't need to worry about the rate of growth or the number of people we will have in the future if we keep growing. They argue that we can continue to accommodate growth indefinitely through better planning and mitigation of negative impacts. Growth is not the problem, they tell us, it's just how we grow that needs to be addressed. SG has a recipe for growth and, if followed closely, its advocates promise it will keep us on the path of growth without sacrificing our environment, eroding our quality of life, or losing the amenities and attributes that we care about in our communities. Small towns need not worry about becoming overrun by growth, they say, with SG, the "small-town feeling" will be maintained even as the town becomes a city.

The gospel of SG is certainly seductive: we can keep on doing what we've been doing, and with a few fairly easy changes protect all that we care about. But are these claims realistic? Can we really just keep on growing while protecting the environment, our natural resources, and the quality of the community for current and future generations? Many people want to believe so.

However, such belief in SG fails to recognize that even the smartest growth places a heavy burden on our environment and our communities, and creates significant

impacts, most of which cannot be fully mitigated. An expanding local population requires more land, more food production, more roads and other expensive infrastructure, more services, more energy, water, and natural resources, more waste production, and more greenhouse gas emissions.

The biggest and most recent federally-funded study on the “Cost of Sprawl” had a remarkable finding: even the best-case, most-compact, “smart growth” scenario generated big net fiscal deficits for local governments.² In fact, revenues covered only 71% of the costs generated by this future growth scenario, and local governments would amass \$40 billion in deficits. In all likelihood, this study underestimated the costs, and deficits will be much higher.

SG proponents are making an implied tradeoff – they are concluding that the benefits from continued growth are greater than the costs, as long as their SG formula is applied. But what precisely are these benefits from growth? Where are they documented? And how do they compare with the costs? None of this sort of objective accounting is ever performed by the SG proponents. Since continued urban growth will have major impacts on our cities, towns, and rural areas across the country, an objective analysis of the costs and benefits seems like an essential part of the conversation.

The “technological fix” theory argues that we can address the needs of an expanding population and its environmental impacts through technological solutions. SG is a form of the technological fix that tries to solve growth problems through better planning and design. But how far can this type of solution go?

Amory Lovins, in his book Factor Four, estimated that, by fully utilizing technology to achieve greater efficiency and productivity, the world could potentially sustain the same lifestyle and wealth we enjoy today with 1/4th the energy and resource use.³ To make this outcome sound even more appealing, the author suggested we use the achievable savings to double our wealth while halving our resource use. In either case, this seems to offer a remarkable possibility of continued growth without placing more demand on the world’s resources.

However, the book notes that if consumption were to grow at a 4% annual rate, it would

² See pages 78-79 of the summary of this research published in a book called *Sprawl Costs: Economic Impacts of Unchecked Development* by Robert Burchell, Anthony Downs, Sahan Mukherji, and Barbara McCann, Island Press, Washington DC, 2005, 197 pages.

³ *Factor Four: Doubling Wealth - Halving Resource Use*, Ernst Ulrich Weizsäcker, Amory B. Lovins, L. Hunter Lovins, Earthscan, London, 1998, 322 pages.

quadruple in just 35 years and all the savings achieved by this tremendous efficiency improvement would be neutralized. So, while eliminating waste and using our limited resources wisely seems like a good idea, it does not ultimately solve the problem of growth.

We must distinguish between solutions that fix the problem, and solutions that buy us more time to fix the problem. SG buys us a little more time by reducing the per-capita impacts of growth. But if the SG movement fails to recognize the rest of the solution, then any extra time is wasted while the problem grows bigger.

The consequences of this failure are illustrated by Kenneth Boulding's "Dismal Theorems" describing our options for the future and how "technical solutions" like SG impact them:

The "Dismal Theorems" on Growth⁴

1st Theorem: "The Dismal Theorem"

If the only ultimate check on the growth of population is misery, then the population will grow until it is miserable enough to stop its growth.

2nd Theorem: "The Utterly Dismal Theorem"

Any technical improvement can only relieve misery for a while, for so long as misery is the only check on population, the improvement will enable population to grow, and will soon enable more people to live in misery than before. The final result of improvements, therefore, is to increase the equilibrium population, which is to increase the total sum of human misery.

3rd Theorem: "The moderately cheerful form of the Dismal Theorem"

Fortunately, it is not too difficult to restate the Dismal Theorem in a moderately cheerful form: if something else, other than misery and starvation, can be found which will keep a prosperous population in check, the population does not have to grow until it is miserable and starves, and it can be stably prosperous.

⁴ Kenneth E. Boulding, *Collected Papers of Kenneth E. Boulding*, Vol. 2, Colorado Associated U. Press, Boulder, CO, 1971, p. 137.

Those of us working towards the “moderately cheerful” path recognize that relying solely on technical improvements, as SG does, leads to the “utterly dismal” path – the worst possible outcome. If endless growth was truly our fate, then SG might postpone the “day of reckoning,” but would not prevent its arrival. SG may be better than dumb growth, but if it doesn’t ultimately help us solve the problem of too much growth, then it just ends up becoming a diversion, and thereby part of the problem.

Recognizing Limits to Growth

Given the historically-unprecedented magnitude of growth and change we have been witnessing, it’s hard to comprehend the optimism surrounding SG. Globally, more people were added to the population in the past 50 years than in all prior history. We’ve passed the 7 billion mark and added the latest billion people in just the last 12 years. With more than half of these people living in poverty and one billion of them in hunger, it seems heartless and even cruel to actively pursue a policy of growth.

A 50-year-old individual living in the U.S. has been witness to more development of the American landscape than occurred in all previous human history. One-third of all the land ever developed in the U.S. was developed in just the last 25 years. Land converted to development in the U.S. averaged 2.2 million acres a year from 1992 to 2001, a land area greater than South Carolina in just nine years.⁵

Total U.S. farmland is steadily declining as farms become subdivisions. The combination of population growth and farmland loss resulted in an alarming decline in the amount of farmland per-capita from 4 acres to 3 acres in the 20 years from 1989 to 2009.⁶ The US became a net food importer in 2005 for the first time in at least 50 years. Current agricultural productivity is highly dependent on fossil fuels, making it vulnerable to energy price and supply fluctuations.

These are just a few examples of our unsustainable and historically-unprecedented level of growth and land development. The result of continuing the growth we have experienced in the past is that we will quickly grow to absurd and ridiculous proportions that will be unsustainable by almost any definition. The number of people, the size of the economy, and the amount of urban development associated with this growth would clearly overwhelm our planet’s resources. Why would continuing this

⁵ *National Resources Inventory*, 2001 Annual NRI, Urbanization and Development of Rural Land, July 2003, by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

⁶ Analysis by author, May 2010, from US Census and USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service data.

trend make sense to the smart, educated people who coined the term *smart growth*?

There will always be those who remain in denial about the impacts of human expansion on the planet. No amount of evidence will convince them. There are those who think that perpetual growth is desirable. Even if it can be shown that this growth is not beneficial or is harmful, it does not matter because growth is inevitable. So they believe that not only is growth desirable, it's unavoidable.

Rational people know that the limits to growth will have been reached when we begin to degrade the life-supporting capacity of the earth. We have seen this evidence for the past 20 years, with the species extinction rate and declining biodiversity, fisheries collapse, groundwater decline, deforestation, soil erosion, farmland loss, and anthropogenic climate change.

Why I can't be a Smart Growther

After my book *Better Not Bigger* was first released in 1999, I had the opportunity to give hundreds of presentations on urban growth to communities across the country. These were communities struggling with intense growth pressures and the consequences of past growth. In spite of interest in the topic of SG, I felt it would be dishonest to tell people that compact, transit-friendly development would be their salvation. I felt that portraying SG as the solution to problems it cannot solve would be morally wrong. It would be especially reprehensible due to the potential consequences of decades of additional growth that could be spawned by a SG approach.

Instead, I chose to describe the dynamics of growth, to explain why we grow, and to address the real impacts of growth on communities so that people could have better-informed and more-productive discussions about the future of their communities.

If you are knowledgeable about the consequence of continued growth, it is a difficult step to get on the SG bandwagon because it requires you to abandon further discussion about growth itself, to disavow legitimate concerns about continued growth, and to embrace the SG package as the complete and ultimate solution to the problems of growth. You must believe that SG will take us farther than is rationally possible. This requires a leap of faith not unlike a religious conversion.

While I could not bring myself to join the SG movement, I did not initially wish to belittle this nascent movement that was promoting planning and design principles that

I supported. However, after years of observation, I have noted that there is a dark side to SG. Not only does this movement have a decidedly pro-growth focus and misleadingly portrays itself as the ultimate solution to growth problems, but it also seems to be hostile to citizens or community groups expressing legitimate concerns about continued growth. SG advocates often try to discredit and marginalize these viewpoints by casting them as extremist, radical, or illegitimate. This is in spite of the fact that such views are often mainstream, with surveys showing a majority of the public has concerns about too much growth. It is also in spite of ample evidence that most urban development has predominantly negative environmental and fiscal impacts.

Conclusion

The SG program contains sensible planning and design strategies that have been in use form more than 40 years. If properly applied, they should improve the quality of new development. However, SG advocates have taken this formula too far by claiming their medicine is a cure for the growth ailment.

The myth of SG is that it represents the complete and ultimate solution to our growth-related problems. At best, SG is a partial and temporary solution that has the potential to mitigate some of the impacts of continued growth on environmental quality, natural resources, the fiscal condition of local governments, transportation systems, and livability.

The moral dilemma with SG is that it provides a rationale for allowing us to make the problem bigger. To the extent that SG serves to perpetuate growth by commandeering the public dialogue about growth and by misleading citizens into believing it is the complete solution to growth-related problems, it serves to delay real problem-solving while allowing the problem to grow.

SG serves to placate citizens and environmentalists who are legitimately concerned about the consequences of continued urban expansion. People who might otherwise express their opposition to new development, file lawsuits, and object to more growth planning, are instead told that SG will address their concerns and will assure that growth occurs in the least-impactful manner.

Many environmental organizations that sign on to the SG agenda are not being fully honest with their memberships. They must be clear that SG is only a temporary approach intended to modestly reduce the negative impacts of growth while we take

stronger steps toward real sustainability. They must acknowledge that SG buys us more time, but does not fix the problem.

At its worst, SG is a weak and ineffective approach to managing growth that not only fails to fix the problem, but undermines efforts to do so. It is a way to put off until tomorrow what should be done today. It shirks the responsibilities of today's generation and transfers the burden to future generations, forcing them to address bigger problems with fewer remaining resources.

Instead of building more urban development under the SG banner, we need less development. We need to leave our remaining greenfields green. We need to keep our urban footprints from expanding onto more farms, forests, and open spaces. We must move beyond SG and begin to plan stable and sustainable communities that allow humans to prosper without overrunning the landscape and overwhelming the natural life support system. We must respect the local and regional carrying capacity, while leaving ample breathing room for other life on the planet to also prosper. Doing so will assure an enduring legacy of humans in balance with the earth. □

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What Others Have Said

A selection of quotes from other writers and speakers on the topic of “smart” growth:

Advocates of “smart growth” have been unwilling to acknowledge that ongoing growth would inevitably nullify any short-term savings in the amount of land consumed by development, and have instead continued to exhibit an optimistic, pro-growth bias.

- Gabor Zovanyi

From: *Urban Growth Management and Ecological Sustainability: Confronting the 'Smart Growth' Fallacy*, by Gabor Zovanyi, Paper presented at the 2004 meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology, New York City, 2004. Citation for Proceedings: Bengston, David N., tech.ed., 2005, **Policies for managing urban growth and landscape change: a key to conservation in the 21st Century**, Gen. Tech. Rep. NC-265, St. Paul, MN, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, North Central Research Station, 51 p (pages 35-44).

In short, Smart Growth efforts to slow or stop the increase in per capita land use are being negated by population growth.

From: *Outsmarting Smart Growth: Population Growth, Immigration, and the Problem of Sprawl*, by Roy Beck, Leon Kolankiewicz, and Steven A. Camarota, Center for Immigration Studies, 2003, <http://www.cis.org/articles/2003/SprawlPaper.pdf>.

Accommodating growth never ends, therefore the rational choice is to draw the line now while you still have something to save, no matter the consequences.

- Chris Williamson

From: *Is No Growth Also Smart Growth?* by Chris Williamson, *Planetizen*, February 26, 2002, <http://www.planetizen.com/node/43>

**Dumb growth destroys the environment.
Smart growth destroys the environment.
The difference is that smart growth
destroys the environment with good taste.
So it's like buying a ticket on the Titanic.
If you're smart you go first class.
If you're dumb you go steerage.
Either way the result is the same.**
- Albert A. Bartlett

From: *The Meaning of Sustainability*, by Albert A. Bartlett, Professor Emeritus, Department of Physics, University of Colorado at Boulder, Teachers Clearinghouse for Science and Society Education Newsletter, Volume 31, No. 1, Winter 2012, p. 1.

Smart Growth = Growth Accommodation

“The goal of smart growth is not no growth or even slow growth.”

- Parris Glendening, former Governor of Maryland and SG advocate

Source: Parris Glendening, former Governor of Maryland, quoted in U.S. EPA Factsheet #EPA 231-F-01-001A, *What Is Smart Growth?* April 2001. <http://www.epa.gov/dced/pdf/whtissg4v2.pdf>

“It's not a question of whether we will grow – but where and how we will grow.... [Smart growth] moves beyond the traditional no-growth versus progrowth debate to a more enlightened discussion of how best to accommodate growth.”

Source: Urban Land Institute, *Smart Growth – Myth and Fact*, 1999.
http://www.uli.org/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/~media/Documents/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/SmartGrowth/SmartGrowth_MythFact.ashx

Environmentalists for Endless Growth

“Instead of debating whether growth will occur, our communities should be discussing the patterns of development: where we put it, how we arrange it, and what it looks like. If they start from this premise, today’s builders can take several steps to alleviate public opposition to development.”

- Edward T. McMahon

Source: Edward T. McMahon, Director, American Greenways Program, The Conservation Fund, from *Alleviating Opposition to Development: An Environmentalist’s Perspective*, **Land Development**, Spring/Summer 1999.

Smart Growth Flunks in Maryland

(Maryland was the first state to enact “smart growth” legislation)

“The signature element of Smart Growth—withholding of some of the state’s infrastructure dollars from development occurring outside county designated Priority Funding Areas—has been an abject failure. Thirteen years after the enactment of Smart Growth, this non-regulatory approach has had no discernible impact on curbing sprawling development, fostering better land use, or protecting open spaces.”

“The State of Maryland’s own data details the failure: 78 percent of the land on which new homes were built from 1999-2008 was outside the Priority Funding Areas designated for growth. This compares to 75.6 percent from 1990-1998 before the law went into effect. More single family residential housing was developed outside Smart Growth areas than before the law was enacted. Further, the average amount of land used by each home built inside growth zones has crept upward.”

- Gerald Winegrad, former Maryland State Senator

From: *“Smart Growth” in Maryland—Not So Smart*, by Gerald Winegrad, February 14, 2011, in Chesapeake Bay Action Plan, <http://www.bayactionplan.com/2011/02/smart-growth/>

