

## **WHAT'S SMART GROWTH GOT TO DO WITH IT?**

### **CONCEPTUALIZING AND CRITIQUING PLANNING'S POPULAR TREND**

#### **Abstract**

Local, regional, state and federal governments employ smart growth for a wide variety of purposes, yet seldom define it except by example. The current national emphasis on smart growth, great diversity of implementing tools, and frequent confusion with other planning trends suggest a need to analyze this particular planning trend. This paper uses a survey of self-identified smart growth tools to conceptualize and analyze smart growth. The results show smart growth isn't really new or innovative. While smart growth's vague appeal to all ideologies currently precludes it from becoming a progressive movement, the trend's pragmatism could unite these competing interests.

#### **Smart Growth and the State of Planning**

What's smart growth got to do with the current state of planning? Apparently, quite a lot. Smart growth tools implemented by various jurisdictions represent a diverse mixture of old and new methodologies used to guide development, from urban growth boundaries, implemented in the state of Oregon in the early 1970s, to location-efficient mortgages, currently in implementation under a pilot program in Los Angeles and Chicago. These tools are also diverse in terms of their goals with some designed specifically to control growth, such as limiting the number of new residential dwelling units approved for development at any given time, and others focused on increasing understanding about the value of the natural environment, such as demonstrating the economic benefits of land

preservation. Still others urge regional cooperation, recognizing the interconnectedness of human impacts to today's environment, or support urban gardens, in a nod to urban sustainability.

Although smart growth seems to be something everyone agrees on, it is seldom defined except by example<sup>1</sup>. It's become a catch-all for desirable planning programs and policies and refers to both specific implementation tools and strategies that proactively direct growth, as well as the processes retroactively undertaken in response to low-density exurbanization or "sprawl." It is praised for saving taxpayer and developer money, benefiting property owners through land use protections that increase property value, conserving the environment, positively impacting the business arena through ensuring a healthier and more attractive physical climate for workers, facilitating historic preservation and protecting farmland, and addressing demands for development. There is a growing sense that it can play an important role in achieving the goals of developing and maintaining livable communities. Yet what smart growth tries to accomplish is thus development – with implications of improved quality of life and environmental protection – versus mere urban growth or economic expansion per se. But make no mistake, smart growth is about growth.

But is it really a progressive, radical movement? The mere semantics of the term smart growth connotes positive planning and development. Yet the current emphasis on smart growth across the country, the great diversity of smart growth tools, and frequent

confusion with two other planning trends suggest a need to make sense of this particular trend in planning practice.

This paper attempts to provide a critical and conceptual analysis of smart growth, including a categorization of collected smart growth tools and illustration of the underlying strategic mechanisms. This leads to a discussion of the patterns and limitations of smart growth as a whole. A commentary on what smart growth could become concludes the paper.

### **Characterizing Smart Growth Tools**

A literature and web survey of government-implemented smart growth tools, undertaken over a three-month period, yielded more than 90 self-defined examples. These tools were then characterized according to primary purpose and implementation mechanism, two critical dimensions that represent how smart growth works: primary purpose, implementation mechanism. The 8 primary purposes include: directing growth; preserving land; reducing auto dependence; controlling rate/amount of growth; redesigning communities; altering perception of the environment; encouraging regional cooperation; and altering the housing market. Tools were classified as incentive-based if they were implemented through the use of government-sponsored incentives, or other voluntary programs, including goodwill; as market-based if they operate within or modify the market and create demand for tools that in turn foster smart growth; and as regulatory if compliance is required of all participants. For example, expedited permitting processes

and reduced fees act as incentives to encourage development in targeted areas, while taxes used to purchase and preserve open space reflect market value.

Table 1 provides a brief descriptive listing of tools identified in the course of this research, according to purpose and mechanism. Most tools are either incentive-based or regulatory, with relatively few market-based tools.<sup>2</sup> About half of all tools identified may be classified under the purposes of either directing growth or preserving land.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

The relationships between purpose and mechanism show that incentive-based tools tend to emphasize directing growth and redesigning community, while regulatory tools control growth and encourage regional cooperation. Preserving land represents a historical focus for managing growth and is not surprisingly addressed fairly evenly by incentive-based, market-based and regulatory tools. A newer focus, increasing livability, is also represented evenly by implementing mechanism, perhaps because of the broad interest in and relatively large scope of ways to address this purpose. Interestingly, there are no market-based tools to reduce auto dependence, such as graduated pricing for parking. Further, tools to encourage regional cooperation are regulatory only, perhaps reflecting the requirement of a mandate to overcome interjurisdictional competition.

### **Beg, Borrow or Steal**

The broad spectrum of smart growth tools underscores the fact that smart growth advocates have appropriated a wide continuum of programs and policies from other

planning traditions (Figure 1). For example, municipalities limit the number of new residential dwelling units permitted within a given time frame, easing pressures on water and sewage systems and slowing growth, which in turn reduces air pollution, traffic congestion, and demand for commercial space. Urban gardens provide nutritious food to low-income households, and increase urban green space, capacity to assimilate CO<sup>2</sup>, and youth appreciation for the natural environment. Regional guidance standards or environmental commissions direct growth, link transportation and land use, evaluate the adequacy of infrastructure, and more efficiently allocate limited resources.

[Insert Figure 1 here.]

Regardless of their desirability, these planning options probably don't constitute smart growth, since most have been in the traditional urban planning toolkit for decades, and others more closely tied, historically and conceptually, to the new regionalism and urban sustainability approaches in planning theory and practice. For example, the smart growth tools of preserving open space and agricultural lands, and limiting auto dependence, call for specific action, rather than addressing the underlying sustainability issues of consumption relative to available resources. Similarly, tools borrowed from new regionalism; such as regional plan coordination and tax base sharing is also separated from their equity, economic, or environmental underpinnings. Because smart growth focuses more on land use and less on the long-term implications that drive the new regionalism and urban sustainability movements, it cannot be expected to achieve sustainability or regionalism, and is thus stymied in efforts to affect greater change.

### **Smart Growth or Growth Machine?**

Many of the tools identified are thus not really new at all, rather they represent planning “business as usual” despite being credited as innovations for directing growth in desirable ways.<sup>3</sup> What is new and significant, however, is that there currently appears to be almost universal support to control or direct land development and growth. This excitement may be a simple rhetorical issue – the planning lexicon and positive connotation of the term ‘smart growth’ provide a way to classify any planning or land use action in a favorable light and garner support for it.

Second, it may be a simple timing issue. Residents currently receive abundant information about the links between quality of life, including air and water quality and access to nature, and the effects of mass exurbanization, and in times of rapid economic growth observe firsthand the changes wrought – traffic congestion, air pollution, and loss of open space – from willingness to invest in growth-promoting urban infrastructure. The negative impacts of growth provide their own impetus to oppose additional growth (Logan, Whaley and Crowder, in Jonas and Wilson, 1999).

Finally, just as postwar models of growth made metropolitan boosters anxious about opportunities for continued expansion 50 years ago current zoning, permitting, and environmental controls work against a purely decentralized land market and enhance development opportunities (Jonas and Wilson, 1999, p.12). While smart growth tools

may on the one hand limit growth, they also generate growth by making more explicit the terms under which a locality will allow development, reducing developer uncertainty.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Future of Smart Growth**

Advocates of smart growth assume it refers to their own normative ideology or interpretation of smart growth, yet there is clearly much inconsistency among individual ideologies. Smart growth encompasses both developers who want to minimize risk in the development process, as well as environmentalists who want to constrain development and preserve open space. The current dialogue on smart growth does not uncover these disagreements and varying interpretations, and thus a movement smart growth is meaningless, since it covers the entire spectrum. But could smart growth become a genuine movement, instead of simply a politically convenient term?

In order to become a movement, smart growth needs step back from reacting to individual land use situations, or even land use planning as a whole within a single jurisdiction, and foster a unifying ideological base for determining the appropriate balance between competing land use issues. A smart growth movement that many could agree on is one that recognizes what smart growth supporters share – growth by design, not uncontrolled growth or moratoriums on all growth – and embraces pragmatism in planning. Such a balance might provide for an acre-per-acre split between land developed and land preserved, or require that new development be considered within an overall plan for local sustainability. In any case, its continued land use focus poses problems.

Not everyone will support such a movement. Consider the traditional land use tension in United States planning and policy. Those who traditionally eschew compromise in the land use arena – who believe the market is the sole arbiter of value, who feel the property owner alone is the best judge of how to develop his or her land, or who believe the natural environment should not be developed under any circumstances – will not support such a movement.

But those who recognize the role that local government must, indeed does already play in land use will support it. In areas characterized by simultaneously increasing development and conservation pressures, the interested parties are typically more concerned with finding a mutually agreeable solution than fighting relatively immutable federal and state environmental protection requirements. A smart growth movement could take advantage of this solution-driven focus and recognize that growth is, at present, inevitable, but needs to be actively managed, rather than stimulated as in growth machine type business as usual.

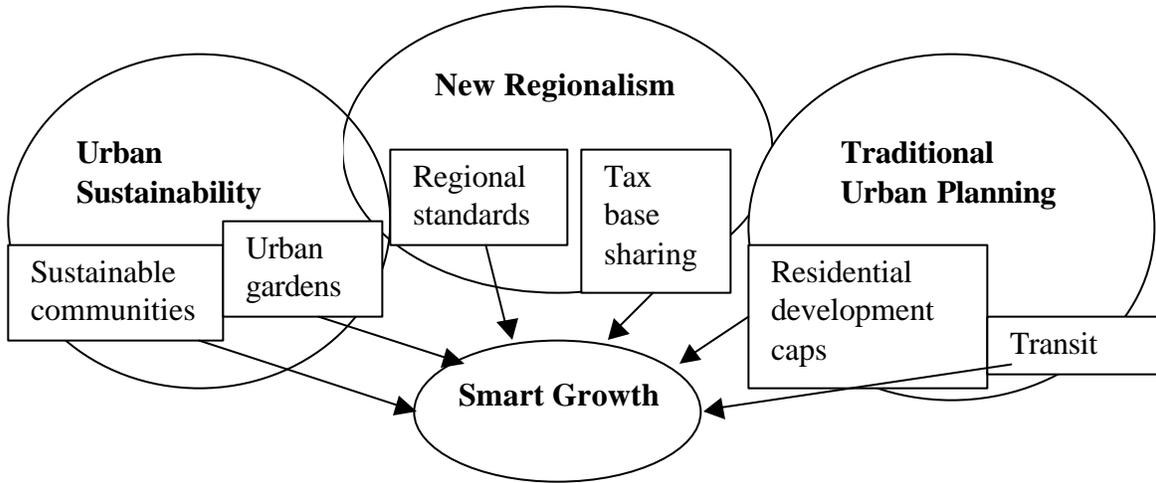


Figure 1:

Examples of Smart Growth Appropriations

Table 1. Smart Growth Tools Overview

| Purpose                | Mechanism       | Tools  |
|------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Direct Growth          |                 |  |
|                        | Incentive-based | Urban service areas, Targeted development areas (TDAs), Infill development, Rezoning, High-density/ transit-oriented development (TOD), Expedited permitting, Financial assistance for reuse |
|                        | Market-Based    | Transfer of development rights (TDRs)  |
|                        | Regulatory      | High-density/ transit-oriented development (TOD), Urban growth boundaries (UGBs)   |
| Preserve Land          |                 |  |
|                        | Incentive-Based | Conversion taxes, Land conservation density bonus, Clustered development, Performance zoning, Agricultural land conservation incentives  |
|                        | Market-Based    | Transfer/sale of conservation easements, Open space land acquisition, Purchase of farmland easements   |
|                        | Regulatory      | Voter control of land development, Sensitive land overlay restrictions, Exactions/fees/ land dedications, Clustered development  |
| Reduce Auto Dependence |                 |  |
|                        | Incentive-Based | Transit options, Provide housing near work   |
|                        | Regulatory      | At-home work provisions, Transportation funding policies   |

|                                  |                 |   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Control Rate or Amount of Growth |                 |   |
|                                  | Incentive-Based | Concurrency, Litigation   |
|                                  | Market-Based    | Fiscal impact analysis  |
|                                  | Regulatory      | Commercial development size constraints, New residential development caps, Concurrency,   |
| Redesign Communities             |                 |   |
|                                  | Incentive-Based | City/nature integration programs, Sustainable communities, Fund site/ building re-use, City center plans  |
|                                  | Regulatory      | Sustainable communities, City center plans  |
| Increase Livability              |                 |   |
|                                  | Incentive-Based | Community/urban gardens, Provide strong political leadership  |
|                                  | Market-Based    | Economic benefits of environmental resources  |
|                                  | Regulatory      | Attach implementation strategies to plans   |
| Encourage Regional Cooperation   |                 |   |
|                                  | Regulatory      | Regional tax base sharing, Regional growth management/ infrastructure allocation, Regional coalitions, Standards to guide growth, Regional impact analysis, Funds for regional planning |
| Alter Housing Market             |                 |   |
|                                  | Market-Based    | Location-efficient mortgages (LEMs), Energy-efficient mortgages (EEMs)  |

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<sup>1</sup> Attendees at the 1999 Annual Partners for Smart Growth Conference disagreed over whether it means growth restrictions, or greater freedom for the market to guide growth (Growth/No Growth Alert, November, 1999.)

<sup>2</sup> Most tools are implemented at a single level, usually local, followed by state, regional and federal. A single tool may be implemented by different mechanisms at different levels of government.

<sup>3</sup> In 1991 the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank established the Sustainable Food System, teaching the principles and techniques of gardening and providing food to low-income households. Since 1988, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) has required regional plan coordination. Beginning in 1982 the State of Florida required state and regional approval of developments for adequacy of public facilities. As early as the 1970s the State of New Jersey has used tax base sharing to compensate jurisdictions negatively impacted by regional planning decisions. Portland, Oregon has had an urban growth boundary since 1979. In 1967, Boulder, Colorado residents began assessing themselves a sales tax, with proceeds used to purchase open space.

<sup>4</sup> The land-use focus of smart growth can thus work at cross-purposes with urban sustainability and regionalism and perpetuate inequities associated with profits derived from land market transactions, as landowners and developers in favored areas continue to reap ever greater benefits stemming from their locational advantage alone.

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American Farmland Trust <http://www.farmland.org>

California Senate <http://www.sen.ca.gov>

Center for Neighborhood Technology <http://www.cnt.org.lem>

The Colorado SmartGrowth home page <http://www.state.co.us/smartgrowth/whallt1s.htm>

EcoCity Cleveland <http://cua6.csuohio.edu/%7Eecocity>

ECOS/AASHTO Conference on Smart Growth 1998 [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org)

Farmland Protection Toolbox <http://farm.fic.niu.edu>

GEO Network [www.geonetwork.org](http://www.geonetwork.org)

The Global Action and Information Network <http://www.igc.apc.org/gain/>

GreenClips .111.01.13.99 and .121.06.02.99 <http://www.greendesign.net>

Historic Preservation materials <http://www.preservenet.cornell.edu>

Information Habitat <http://www.igc.apc.org/habitat/concept/index.html>

International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives <http://www.iclei.org/>

League of Women Voters, Boulder County, Colorado <http://bcn.boulder.co.us/lwv>

University of Nebraska-Lincoln <http://www.unl.edu/>

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National Conference of State Legislatures <http://www.ncsl.org>

New Jersey Office of State Planning <http://www.state.nj.us/osp/osphome.htm>

The Oregon Land Use Information Center [http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ppm/land\\_use.html](http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ppm/land_use.html)

President's Council on Sustainable Development <http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/EOP/pcsd/index.html>

Public Technology, Inc. <http://pti.nw.dc.us>

Resource Renewal Institute <http://www.rri.org>

SD Gateway <http://sdgateway.net/>

Sierra Club <http://www.sierraclub.org/transportation/sprawl>

Smart Growth Network [www.smartgrowth.org/topics/makingithappen.html](http://www.smartgrowth.org/topics/makingithappen.html)

Sprawl-Busters [www.sprawl-busters.com](http://www.sprawl-busters.com)

The Sprawl Resource Guide <http://www.plannersweb.com/sprawl.html>

Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse <http://www.sprawlwatch.org>

Sustainable Communities Network [www.sustainable.org](http://www.sustainable.org)

Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA21)  
<http://www.house.gov/transportation/bestea/tea21sum.htm>

The Trust for Public Land <http://www.tpl.org/tpl/>

The United Nations Environment Programme <http://unep.org/unep>

United States EPA Site <http://www.epa.gov/Rules.html>

United States Fish and Wildlife Service <http://www.fws.gov/>

United States Geological Survey Publications <http://www.usgs.gov/reports/index.html>