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An Examination of the Smart Growth Initiative in US DOT's Region VI

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Introduction

Smart Growth is a contemporary concept for how communities are approaching anticipated expansion or renewal. Communities implementing Smart Growth strategies seek to efficiently use public and private resources to accommodate increases in population, while positively addressing side-effects of growth, such as traffic congestion and air pollution and reduction in open space and farmland. Another key component is the efficient utilization of land by encouraging infill, in contrast to leap-frog development patterns. The goals are livability, economic vitality, and environmental sensitivity. Over the last decade, renewed national emphasis has been directed to improving communities; planning officials added terms such as livable community and sustainable community to the vernacular of traditional coordinated land use planning.

In early 1999, Vice President Al Gore announced his "Smart Growth" initiative that encourages communities to grow in a manner that enhances quality of life and supports economic growth.¹ The concept includes protection of older neighborhoods, prudent development of new neighborhoods, protection of farmland and green space and attention to recreational and relaxation needs. An important component is attention to transportation resources, in terms of conservation of fuel, managing congestion and individual travel time and reducing emissions. Conferences are being held around the nation to enlighten residents about Smart Growth, examine successful demonstrations of the concept, and facilitate the movement toward Smart Growth.

¹Vice President Al Gore's Initiatives, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/EOP/OVP/initiatives_bottom.html 3/15/99>.

Although ideas about how communities should grow encompass many disciplines and land use principles, discussions about wise, well-planned growth generally drift to transportation. Therefore, while transportation is not the only focus of Smart Growth, transportation components are at the core of the concept. Without the appropriate transportation background and infrastructure, Smart Growth principles could not be effective. In essence, planning our transportation systems is an important element in growing wisely and defining the much sought after variable, *quality of life*.

Included in the Smart Growth initiative is the notion that “communities know best and that each community should grow according to their own values”.² The key question for this research is how should “Smart Growth” be approached in communities that have vast open space, not hindered by physical barriers and where the public has varying views about Smart Growth practices. This perspective may represent many communities in the rapidly growing Sunbelt.

Research Focus: This study will describe several “Smart Growth” initiatives around the US, identify their components and determine the common variables underlying the concept. Plans and growth directions of several key communities in Region VI will be reviewed and compared with elements of Smart Growth as viewed by prominent national. This research will focus on whether there is a valid role for Smart Growth in region VI and other sunbelt communities. If so, does Smart Growth vary between sunbelt communities and other parts of the country? In what ways are the elements common across the country and how do they differ?

Background: Coordination of planning and land use with consideration for preservation of open space and farmland has its beginnings early in the 20th Century. From the beginnings of zoning in the 1920s, to initial attempts to work through non-profit development corporations in the next decades. The goals were to integrate social and physical planning and to steer development in desirable ways³. By the 1970s, planning documents explored a “new mood” referring to communities interested in adopting various scenarios prohibiting or slowing growth.⁴ From the transportation perspective, these volumes examined the link between transportation and mobility and available housing stock. More recently, professionals and communities embraced the concepts of sustainability, livability and Smart Growth to pursue goals developed to improve communities.

Recent support for development of more livable communities is seen through news coverage of Smart Growth to initiatives sponsored by elected officials. For instance during the week of February 28, 2000 alone, major daily newspapers carried front page articles on Smart Growth in San Diego, California and Houston, Texas. References were made to changes in the education of law students at University of Missouri relative to addressing litigation with sustainable community sensitivities.

Some communities are touted as having phenomenal success implementing Smart Growth principles. Key among them is Portland, Oregon, but there are others, as well. Other communities struggle with describing smart growth and convincing community and business leaders that there may be a better way. One of the inherent difficulties with

² *ibid.*

³ Goodman, William I. and Freund, Eric C., *Principles and Practice of Urban Planning*, 4th Edition, International City Managers' Association, 1968.

⁴ Scott, Randall, David J. Brower and Dallas D. Miner, editors. *Management & Control of Growth*.

implementing Smart Growth is that the concept conjures different ideas for different individuals. Proponents maintain that our financial and physical resources could be utilized more efficiently. Opponents argue against government's intentionally swaying development counter to market forces. Many purport that the suburban home with the yard is exactly what the consumer wants. The Greater Houston Partnership is considering a resolution termed "sensible growth". It includes many of the elements of smart growth, but also reiterates the Partnership's commitment to market-driven responses. Within the five primary goals enumerated in the resolution are commitments to a low cost of living and housing at "market driven densities."⁵ A hindrance to implementation of smart growth is that numerous surveys indicate that most Americans desire a single family home with a yard. On the other, side smart growth proponents argue that consumers should modify their desires. The editor of **Land Development**, a publication of the National Association of Homebuilders Land Development Committee, wrote "citizens and local governments must accept and encourage higher-density housing."⁶ However, people in cities across the country are moving to renovated and new high density developments within the traditional urban core. Often these properties are upscale and expensive. The follow-up question, then, is how large is the potential market for smart growth communities?

The divergence between these those advocating generally lower cost, lower density suburban development and those proposing higher density, housing for a variety of income scales shows one area for disagreement associated with Smart Growth. For

Issues, Techniques, Problems, Trends. The Urban Land Institute; 1975.

⁵ Memorandum, Draft Resolution Regarding Principles for Sensible Growth, June 6, 2000. (To: Board of Directors, From: Charles McMahan), Chairman Business Issues Advisory Committee.

⁶ Molinaro, Joseph R. "Can We Take Smart Growth All the Way?" Land Development Fall 1999; 3.

Sunbelt communities with few physical barriers, there may seem little incentive to infill or increase densities.

Consensus does seem to exist among many elected officials and bureaucrats about the need to be more proactive in decision about better managing growth. Frederick Schneiders Research prepared a survey of state and local officials regarding livable communities for the American Institute of Architects. The national survey requested that local and national policy makers rate nine categories of concern for their region. Traffic congestion received the highest rating followed by urban sprawl. Viewing the responses regionally shows the same ratings, traffic and sprawl, for the south and west. Respondents from the Midwest rated sprawl their greatest concern and housing 2nd. Northeasterners expressed greatest concern about increasing their levels of commercial development with sprawl rated 2nd⁷.

Methodology: Approach

Several tasks will be conducted to meet the research objectives outlined in this report. Dominant principles that underlie Smart Growth concepts will be assembled and analyzed for similarities and differences between communities characterized as in the Sunbelt compared to other communities. A second research component will begin to define characteristics of Smart Growth and suggest how the concept could be measured.

⁷ Frederick Schneiders Research, Survey of State and Local Officials on Livable Communities, Prepared for The American Institute of Architects, July 1999.

Elements of Smart Growth

A number of national and local coalitions and organizations have formed recently to promote the ideals of Smart Growth. The more visible of these organizations and key individuals representing the national perspective served as the basis for delineating the common elements of smart growth. Table 1 shows the themes of Smart Growth according to national advocates. The overarching intent to improve individual lifestyles within communities and make wiser public and private development decisions are the basis for the key components. The following four elements can be culled as common across organizations.

Preserving farmland and open space – Protection of green space and rural lands is of principal importance. Construction on vacant parcels has increased substantially over the past five years. Continued increases in population will place additional pressure on developers to plow virgin territory without a balance in the perspective to slow the rate of development.

- ***Preserving the environment and improving air quality*** – One of the most discussed topics in communities across the country is improving the quality of ground and drinking water and reducing pollutants that lead to smog and other detrimental atmospheric conditions.
- ***Revitalizing core areas and downtowns by supporting infill development*** – Advocates suggest that developing inner areas before more remote locations reduces overall infrastructure costs and minimizes the amount of pavement required to meet travel needs. Less pavement results in lower levels of intrusion of run-off and less interruption to natural water flow.
- ***Providing housing choices that accommodate a range of household income levels*** – Inherent in the concept of Smart Growth is inclusion. Social and economic goals of equity are perceived to result in better quality of life for all within the community.

The range of Smart Growth literature covers goals of economic vitality and congestion reduction at varying levels of prominence. While virtually all Smart Growth proponents would advocate these two areas, these goals may be viewed as outcomes of the four primary elements. Two visible organizations active in promoting improved growth

Table 1
Components of Smart Growth/Potential Measurement Indicator

Source	Smart Growth Component	Potential Outcome
Land Development Fall 1999	Preserving farmland and open space ¹	Balance between development and protection of undeveloped land
	Preserving the environment ¹	Better air quality, Increase in efficiency of fuel utilization, improvements in water quality
	Revitalizing downtowns ¹	Economic prosperity and more stable tax base
	Concentrating infrastructure expenditures ¹	Utilizing existing infrastructure, Avoiding leapfrog development
	Variety in housing choices ¹	Low and moderate income housing in close-in redevelopment; mix of single and multifamily
National Smart Growth Coalition	Prevent development pressures that threaten farmland/open space ²	Balance between development and protection of undeveloped land
	Prevent development that threatens scenic and historic areas ²	Avert undesirable intrusion into areas of significance
	Prevent development that undermines natural resources ²	Cluster development; higher density; traditional neighborhoods; transit oriented development
	Promote housing affordability/stability ²	Low and moderate income housing in close-in redevelopment; mix of single and multifamily
	Repair/reuse existing infrastructure and buildings ²	Utilizing existing infrastructure, Avoiding leapfrog development
	Promote racial, social equity access to housing, community investment ²	Balanced communities with equal access to goods and services

Bruce Katz, Sr. Fellow, Brookings Institution	Restoring the urban core ³	Economic prosperity and more stable tax base
	Curbing congestion ³	Transportation choices beyond the single family
	Curbing air pollution ³	Better air quality
	Improving economic development ³	Economic prosperity and more stable tax base
	Preserving farmland ³	Balance between development and protection of undeveloped land
	Improving cooperation across jurisdictional boundaries ³	More efficient utilization of regional resources

¹ Molinaro, Joseph R. "Can We Take Smart Growth All the Way?" Land Development Fall 1999; 3

² Chen, Don "New Coalition Promotes Smart Growth" Enterprise Quarterly, Spring 2000; 18

³ Katz, Bruce, "What's at stake in smart growth?" Enterprise Quarterly, Spring 2000; p. 11

management do not define their perspective of what makes “Smart Growth”. Instead the America Planning Association’s “Growing Smart” project focuses on regulatory techniques and state planning and zoning legislation. Literature produced by the Urban Land Institute indicates they do “not espouse a specific universal definition.”⁸ The organization notes that ideas and desires for growth vary; they describe their role as a “tent” for those interested in the process.

The most important aspect across all the Smart Growth literature and initiatives is that the plans and discussions must involve intensive levels of citizen input. The citizen involvement may take a variety of forms including surveys in local newspapers, public meetings and on-going task forces.

Overview of Selected Communities: Approaches to Smart Growth

Federal Region VI is composed of Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas and New Mexico. The states are experiencing steady growth, with Texas and New Mexico growing fastest. Most major urban areas in these states are unconstrained from a physical standpoint and non-urban industries have historically played an important role in each state’s economy. Residents and state officials face the same critical questions associated with growth as their counterparts in other parts of the country. Most would include the four Smart Growth elements noted in the preceding section as items on their public agendas. So how are these states regarding Smart Growth in comparison to those in other states?

8 Urban Land Institute, “Frequently Asked Questions About Smart Growth”
<http://www.uli.org/Pub/Pages/a_issues/A_SmL4_FAQ.htm>

The American Planning Association's **Planning for the 21st Century** evaluates the activities of each state toward improving planning and the provision of statutory tools guiding growth. The document notes that states on the east and west coast lead others in passing legislation that accommodates modern challenges faced in growing communities. Among Region VI states, Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma made only minor reforms in prior year procedures. The study cites Texas as initiating several reforms and 12 new laws providing more avenues that will allow local officials greater influence in community development. This is of note because Texas has previously not actively pursued statewide initiatives with a planning focus. New Mexico legislators requested a study on growth and alternatives to managing growth. Based upon the report's recommendations, the New Mexico House and Senate authorized appropriations to conduct statewide planning, but the Governor vetoed the bill⁹.

Another assessment of planning tools by APA is titled the **Legislative Initiatives**¹⁰. The report categorizes the types of legislative techniques available to Smart Growth proponents. Table 2 shows that none of the Region VI states have the key methods available to planners, developers or other officials. Oklahoma's legislature is debating two of the areas. For comparison, the table also reflects the techniques available in states proximate to Region VI with similar reputations for rapid growth in relatively unconfined physical space. With the exception of the efforts by Oklahoma, clearly the Region VI states are not approaching Smart Growth as aggressively as some of their counterparts.

⁹ Meck, Stuart. "Executive Summary: Status of State Planning Reform". *Planning Communities for the 21st Century* <http://www.planning.org/plnginfo/growsmart/gindex.html> (23 June 2000)

¹⁰ American Planning Association. *APA Growing Smart Project, States with Smart Growth/Growth*

Table 2
Growth Management Techniques By Selected States

State	Provisions re: density, rate of	Protects Natural Resources/Environm	State Level Planning & Growth	Regional Level Planning & Growth Management	Local Level Growth Management & Planning	Provision of Public Facilities & Infrastructure	Preservation of Community Character	Affordable Housing	Economic Development	Number of Pages*
Arkansas	*	*	*	N	O	N	E	*	*	*
Louisiana	*	*	*	N	O	N	E	*	*	*
New Mexico	*	*	*	N	O	N	E	*	*	*
Oklahoma**			X	X						
Texas	*	*	*	N	O	N	E	*	*	*
Arizona	X	X	X	X						1½
Florida			X	X						1½
Georgia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	2
Oregon	X	X			X	X	X	X		1 ¼

Source: American Planning Association. APA Growing Smart Project, States with Smart Growth/Growth Management Legislation.

<http://www.naiop.org/legislate/growth/initiatives.pdf> (23 June 2000)

*Used as a surrogate to indicate the complexity and magnitude of the legislation

** Pending legislation, including a state level task force

Shaded states are in Region VI

A Review of Smart Growth Activities in Selected Communities in Region VI

Communities in Region VI are at varying stages of examining Smart Growth. Austin, Texas is known for its growth consciousness and assertive pursuit of growth management. In contrast, Houston, Texas, is recognized as one of the nation's best examples of sprawl and uncontrolled growth.

Austin, Texas: Austin is the home of the flagship University of Texas and the seat of Texas State government. It began attracting high-tech companies during the late 1980s and lead the state in housing these modern companies. The city has experienced

Management Legislation. <http://www.naiop.org/legislate/growth/initiatives.pdf> (23 June 2000)

very rapid growth over the past several decades and began discussing growth management strategies, including the option of a *slow growth policy* approximately 15 years ago. The Austin City Council, in conjunction with a larger focus group from the Austin community initiated a series of proposals to manage growth. The stated goals are to decrease sprawl and invest in existing developed areas. Specifically mentioned are the importance of the urban core, making efficient use of public investments, and ensuring the environment is developer friendly. Noted as areas of required attention and concern are establishing trust and consensus between the various stakeholders. Also critical will be determining the financial feasibility of the Smart Growth activities. Although Austin has formalized its Smart Growth efforts, no formalized or adopted plan has gone forward¹¹.

Houston, Texas: The 4th largest city in America and largest among the Southwest and Sunbelt states, is in the early stages of determining the appropriately role for Smart Growth in this community. Long known for its sprawl development where the city limits cover 617 square miles and lack of land use, a core of the community takes pride in its laissez-faire approach to development. In 1999, led by a newly formed organization, the Gulf Coast Institute, a grass root effort to introduce Smart Growth to Houston began. Participants include numerous individuals and organizations whose traditional roles are geared to urban design and environmental advancements. As one of its first initiatives, the group sponsored a conference entitled, **Building Choices: A Smart Growth Conference**; more than 400 attendees gathered to dialog about choice and building the greater Houston area in a wiser, more sustainable manner. Subsequent to the conference

¹¹ Austin City Connection. Smart Growth Initiative, <http://www.ci.austin.tx/smartgrowth/smrt_q&a.htm>
[growth/smart_q&a.htm](http://www.ci.austin.tx/smartgrowth/smart_q&a.htm)>

and ad hoc coalition began meeting monthly to chart a course for implementation. Six task forces were spawned that are currently formulating an agenda for broader community consideration.

Simultaneous to initiation of the efforts by Gulf Coast Institute, a member of the Houston City Council sponsored a one-time session to discuss Smart Growth for Houston. He condoned the activities sponsored by Gulf Coast Institute and challenged the attendees to identify appropriate city policy that would improve planning and management of growth in Houston.

Key business leaders expressed early concern for the Smart Growth initiative and worried that Houston's "can do" developer freedoms might be compromised through adoption of the principles. In June of 2000, the Greater Houston Partnership, the community's premier leadership organization, circulated a draft of its *Sensible Growth* principles. The draft document espouses the spirit of most of the four Smart Growth elements described previously in this report. However, it stresses "the market" as the driver for decision making and a commitment to a low cost of living. There is no reference to infill development. The document notes, "...the marketplace is the best forum for development ideas to ferment and grow. Sensible growth policies should.....ensure that both the community and developers maintain profitability"¹². While perhaps subtle, the Partnership's memorandum reflects the acceptance of Houston's sprawl development pattern as acceptable and underlies a community that may have problems agreeing on the type of Smart Growth plan that has been adopted in other communities.

Summary Characteristics of Successful Smart Growth Initiatives In US Communities

Several communities lead the nation in implementing Smart Growth; the state of Maryland and the city of Portland are noted for forging consensus and instituting policies that are reversing some of the undesirable characteristics of unmanaged development. The outcomes of policies enacted in these communities are consistent with those element desired from better planning and decision-making about growth and development. For instance, Portland's land area has grown by roughly 2% over the last ten years. This is in contrast to the US average where land utilization over the last 5 years doubled when compared to the previous 10 years. In Portland, pricing strategies made single occupant drivers bear a higher portion of their costs, while transit incentives and transit oriented developments were encouraged. The primary negative outcome of Smart Growth efforts is that the infill housing and transit oriented development tend to be in the higher income ranges, unachievable by lower and moderate income families. These groups are thus driven to the fringes where higher transportation costs and less available public transportation create additional problems.

Findings

There is a difference in perception of the need for smart growth and other sprawl management techniques given the comparison of laws enacted by state legislatures in Region VI. Still, stakeholders in these communities tend to recognize there is a need to perhaps modify past practices. This is evidenced by the pending legislation in Oklahoma, the Smart Growth project in Austin, Texas and the Sensitive Growth and Smart Growth activities of the Greater Houston Partnership and Gulf Coast Institute in Houston.

¹²ibid. Memorandum, Charles McMahan.

However, the responses and implementation of tools and methods to slow down continued sprawl are proceeding slowly in these communities. This may, in part, be a reflection of the varying views of how the communities would look after implementing Smart Growth. It may also result from the seeming abundance of available land to continue expansion. But increased infrastructure needs in the face of constrained infrastructure funds, air quality issues and other environmental issues are likely to pressure officials in these communities to initiate more aggressive planning and institute more growth management initiatives. The best manner in which to proceed should be the next point of focus for Region VI.

Recommendations and Implications for Transportation Professionals

Based on the assessment of the successful Smart Growth projects across the US and given the status of similar initiatives underway in the Southwest, the following recommendations are made for Smart Growth Advocates in Region VI.

- 1) Recognize that community-wide initiative may not be appropriate for Southwest communities. Instead, a more neighborhood-oriented approach will likely enable consensus from a smaller area, while still allowing traditional southwest-style development. These communities should, then, deliberately focus clusters and enclaves of Smart Growth rather than institute regionwide initiatives that will increase resistance and will not be successful.

- 2) Communities should embrace a set of smart growth indicators to become a baseline measures against which the success of their clusters and Smart Growth neighborhoods can be assessed.
- 3) Transportation professionals must recognize that decisions regarding roadways, transit and pedestrian movements are critical components and outcomes of Smart Growth projects. Thus transportation decision should be made in a holistic, integrated way which may give higher value to criterion beyond the traditional benefit-cost, traffic volume measures.

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