

# Smart Growth & Quality of Life

There is no question that land use has become the subject of great debate in Michigan and beyond. This month's Michigan Forward cover story explores the concept of "Smart Growth" and offers varying perspectives on how best to address land use in Michigan without eroding quality of life.



# Smart Growth, Markets and the Future of the City

BY SAMUEL R. STALEY, PH.D.

Smart Growth has taken off in the states. According to Albany Law School professor Patricia Salkin, more than 1,000 bills were introduced in state legislatures in 1999, and 20 percent of these bills passed. In Michigan, the governor's task force on farmland and open-space sputtered to a snail's pace in recent years, but a Coordinated Planning Act is currently being circulated that would consolidate the Municipal Planning Act, the Township Planning Act, the County Planning Act, and the Regional Planning Act. Michigan hasn't experienced the kind of focused planning reform seen in other states such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, but change is clearly in the winds. Unfortunately, most of these Smart Growth initiatives are likely to backfire. Most fail to consider fundamental changes in the economy and society, or the political environment in which their proposals will be implemented. As a result, conventional Smart Growth planning reforms run the very real risk of unintentionally compromising the quality of life for many, especially lower and moderate income families.

The reasons are straightforward once concerns about urban sprawl are put in a larger context. Smart Growth, as it is typically defined, has a specific meaning for many reformers and planners. Current land-use patterns are low density, separate residential and commercial uses, and automobile dependent. Smart Growth attempts to reverse this trend by redesigning cities as compact, mixed use, transit-dependent centers more typical of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is a vague and sometimes unarticulated principle behind most Smart Growth proposals, particularly those at the state level.

These proposals, however, ignore the fundamental issues that are responsible for putting urban sprawl on the political agenda: public-service costs (and higher taxes), traffic congestion, and environmental quality generally defined. As newspapers such as the Lansing State Journal and the Detroit Free Press publish article after article about urban sprawl, they often fail to men-

tion that most people are objecting to development in general, not a specific type of development. This may be most clearly evident in the debate over Michigan's farmland: many opponents of sprawl don't want any new land converted to urban uses. Yet, most major urban counties in Michigan still have more than half their land in rural uses according to a county-level analysis by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Michigan. Even if recent preliminary estimates by the U.S. Department of Agriculture are true, about 90 percent of Michigan remains undeveloped. Congestion, for the most part, is limited to specific times of the day (and a few key freeways).

## America's changing landscape

Clouding the issue further is the surprising lack of consensus in the research community on the impacts of sprawl. A survey of more than 475 studies by researchers at Rutgers University identified 42 costs and benefits of sprawl. Benefits included potentially more diverse housing choices, lower congestion, and lower housing costs, while costs included potentially higher public-service costs, loss of farmland, and environmental degradation. The study found "general agreement" among researchers on just six items: sprawl increased vehicle miles traveled (from higher automobile use), increased the number of automobile trips, reduced agricultural land, and reduced fragile lands. On the other hand, the automobile is a more efficient form of personal transportation and sprawl resulted in less congestion overall.

The researchers found "some agreement" on 15 other issues, including observations that sprawl may be the result of preferences for lower density living, fostered localized land-use decisions, and reduced the effectiveness of public transit. "No clear outcome" was found for 19 other issues and "substantial disagreement" existed over whether sprawl increased air pollution or fostered suburban exclusion. Rhetoric and news-

paper headlines aside, the “facts” of sprawl are still relatively unknown. In many cases, the impacts—positive or negative—are case specific, not across-the-board.

The public concern about sprawl, research aside, is not mythical. On the contrary, in many ways, it reflects broad-based changes in American culture and society. Rising incomes, the freedom of the automobile, and desire for homeownership have led to explosive growth in traditional suburbs. Population densities have fallen dramatically in most cities as the people have moved out of apartment buildings and townhouses into their own houses with yards; lifestyles previously available only to the wealthy.

## Ironically, sprawl has emerged as a political issue precisely because more and more families have the freedom and financial wherewithal to move to a house or neighborhood that is better than the one they currently live in.

This trend is continuing. Despite the so-called urban renaissance, traditional downtowns are likely to house little more than a tiny fraction of any city’s population. Detroit’s downtown population is expected to increase to 35,000 people by 2010, but this represents just 3.5 percent of its total city population. Most neighborhoods are likely to continue to decline. A survey of 23 cities by the Brookings Institution found that, on average, downtown populations will house no more than 2.3 percent of city populations by 2010. These fractions are even smaller if the metropolitan area were considered.

Technology is also dramatically reshaping the way people live and work. E-commerce is expected to exceed \$1 trillion by 2003, most of it in business-to-business trade. The American Planning Association is already advising cities and towns to revise their zoning codes to accommodate home businesses, because telecommuting and home-based work is increasingly prevalent. Combined with less formal office environments, where people work and how they work will dramatically change commuting patterns. Nationally, passenger miles saved telecommuting already exceeds the impact of public transit according to The Buckeye Institute in Columbus, Ohio.

The result, inevitably, is a reconfiguration of work and home life. In previous eras, living and working

were inextricably linked: buying a home was tied directly to the commute to the office. As technology enables telecommuting, more businesses become product oriented, and double-income households generate more buying power than ever before, families will have more choices about where and how they want to live. Technology and productivity growth is more likely to expand than limit the choices people will be able to make about neighborhoods and housing. Ironically, sprawl has emerged as a political issue precisely because more and more families have the freedom and financial wherewithal to move to a house or neighborhood that is better than the one they currently live in.

## The many faces of smart growth

These broader social concerns are rarely considered in the modern Smart Growth movement. In fact, despite the proliferation of Smart Growth definitions, a generally accepted definition doesn’t exist. Nevertheless, many offer prescriptive solutions to the nation’s housing problems that end up narrowing housing choices. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, for example, defines Smart Growth by prescribing a specific type of urban form: high density, mixed used, transit-oriented development otherwise known as “New Urbanism.” The American Planning Association also defines that Smart Growth has higher density and more mixed use, but emphasizes the importance of housing diversity and choice.

On the other end of the spectrum is Tennessee. The state’s Smart Growth Handbook defines Smart Growth as a process, “about finding ways to manage sprawl and improve our total quality of life.” It is also about finding “new sources of vitality for rural towns and counties,” ways to preserve scenic beauty, and rejuvenating decaying cities and suburbs.

With such a wide array of definitions, Smart Growth, like “urban sprawl,” is quickly becoming an “I know it when I see it” phenomenon. Smart Growth, however, is fundamentally different from urban sprawl. Urban sprawl is descriptive; it attempts to capture an image of development. Smart Growth, in contrast, is prescriptive; it attempts to prescribe a certain urban form and is quickly becoming an important driver of public policy, particularly at the state level.

Without a clear definition, however, policy goals are difficult, if not impossible, to articulate. Moreover, Smart Growth plans typically confuse means with ends—transit-oriented, mixed-use development becomes an end in itself, not a means for improving neighborhood quality. As a result, Smart Growth policies quickly become separated from the problems they attempt to address.

Take the issue of congestion. Many Smart Growth advocates cite widespread automobile use as a cause of traffic congestion. They then argue for higher hous-



ing densities with transit access with the expectation that the mere presence of a transit alternative will significantly reduce automobile use and congestion. In practice, higher density housing simply puts more cars in a smaller land area, increasing local traffic congestion, and has virtually no significant impact on freeway congestion. The rule of thumb in transportation circles is that people must live within a quarter mile of a transit stop before they will use transit. Even in these cases, most residents continue to use their cars.

The reason is simple: transit is organized on a hub-and-spoke system where the traditional downtown is the hub. Most jobs are no longer in the downtown core, and many workers now have the luxury of staying in their house or neighborhood longer than their current job. While transit might make sense when they first move into the neighborhood, they (or their spouse) will likely have a new job within a year or two, making transit accessibility useless. Of course, in the vast majority of cases, public transit still takes longer than driving by car once wait times and travel to the transit stop are considered. Thus, most Smart Growth reforms misdiagnose the problems or fail to address problems directly. Higher density, transit-oriented development is not a solution to traffic congestion; it's a prescriptive approach to urban design. In the end, the prescriptive approach to Smart Growth becomes arbitrary: a nineteenth century urban form is imposed on a population

that lives and works in the 21st century, regardless of its impacts on quality of life.

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The flaws of current Smart Growth plans should not obscure the real problems that are putting urban sprawl and planning on the public agenda. Development often imposes costs on communities, and population growth can lead to lower environmental quality and increased traffic congestion unless public infrastructure keeps pace and local regulations allow land markets to respond to the more discriminating tastes of the 21st century housing consumer. Ironically, solving many problems associated with growth may involve deregulating land markets further so that land markets can respond more quickly and effectively. These solutions also require local communities to look hard at their own policies to ensure all costs are fully incorporated into development decisions. ♦

Editor's Note: This article is the first in a two-part series on Smart Growth. Look to the December 2000 edition of Michigan Forward for the second article which will address specific market-based solutions to growth management problems. This series is based upon remarks given at the annual meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council in San Diego, California, July 2000.



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*Sprawl and the Michigan Landscape: A Market-Oriented Approach*. A resident of Ohio, Dr. Staley currently chairs his local planning board.

# Growing Pains: Quality of Life in the New Economy

BY JOEL S. HIRSCHHORN

All the talk about sprawl in recent years has missed the larger issue, which is how the loss of quality of life threatens future growth and prosperity. Sprawl is simply one form of suburban development that has come to symbolize a negative form of growth, but other forms are available.

A host of impacts from the traditional style of growth have sparked public concerns, including traffic congestion, a variety of environmental impacts, and loss of open spaces. These impacts may backfire and stifle future growth. The challenge is to prevent strong economic growth from eroding quality of life. In the past, growth has equaled prosperity, and prosperity has equaled quality of life. But when growth produces too much pain as well as prosperity, it is no longer quality growth. Only quality growth can keep the engine of prosperity running in a sustainable mode.

## Responding to the call for action

Many Governors have recognized that the adverse effects of the traditional style of growth will produce two undesirable outcomes, unless significant and effective actions are taken:

1. Higher Government Costs. High infrastructure costs for new suburban communities confront state and local governments. Often this makes it difficult to maintain infrastructure systems in older cities and suburbs that are not fully utilized because of depopulation or slow development. Because new suburban developments are often subsidized by government and the broader tax base, local and state governments—and taxpayers—face high costs. These costs could be minimized by making more use of older urban centers and suburbs with infrastructure that can accommodate more development.
2. Threatened Economic Growth. The effects of growth on quality of life jeopardize future state economic growth. Companies deciding where to expand or locate new operations are sensitive to unchecked sprawl, environmental issues, and loss of quality of

place. This is particularly relevant to New Economy, knowledge-based companies that may shift their locations because of talent needs, but effects on older sectors such as agriculture and tourism may also be significant in some states. Unless something is done to preserve quality of life, growth today will stifle growth tomorrow.

**“Smart growth” does not mean no growth or slow growth, but rather quality growth that supports quality of life in a place.**

Governors are in a unique position to understand that the best solutions for growth problems must be regional in scope. Local governments lack the resources and legal powers to effectively address the many complex growth conditions and impacts that cross governmental boundaries. The federal government is handicapped by policy tools that are not finely tuned to the distinctive and diverse needs of regions and states.

## Governors’ strategies to influence growth

A wide array of approaches have been used individually or in concert by Governors. Growing Pains: Quality of Life in the New Economy identifies and illustrates these options within a framework of three broad groups of initiatives.

### Leadership and public education

One of the most effective ways for Governors to influence statewide development is to harness the power of public opinion. The public’s attitude about growth and continued development outside of older cores of metropolitan areas is the key to reshaping America’s growth patterns because public opinion shapes most





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around those resources.

The Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Association (MAPA) has worked in the past 10 years on ideas to encourage local units to work together to foster coordinated interjurisdictional planning and cooperation, and to put some teeth in the planning process. After a series of conversations with several groups last spring and summer (and importantly, with the early support of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce), those ideas were introduced in October in the form of legislation, which will provide for a new Coordinated Planning Act.

The legislation, first of all, consolidates four current planning acts into one. Second, it sets up the guidelines by which planning, whether local or regional, would occur. Third, it requires that a Capital Improvement Plan must be part of the plan. Fourth, it provides funding for the planning process. Fifth, it establishes that all zoning must be consistent with the adopted plan. In short, it would provide greater certainty and predictability to land use and infrastructure decisions.

The plan, a rolling 20-year plan, must be shared with other units of government for comment, and regional planning is encouraged. Once adopted, the provisions of the plan would remain unchanged for five years. The frequency of planning to zoning is critical. It puts teeth in the planning process. It gives residents, builders and developers a one-year window in which to implement plans without fear that at the last minute zoning decisions will be reversed. At five years the plan is reviewed and may be amended. There is also a provision that under certain "emergency" situations (Bill

...es wants to move the proposal to your township but your current plan does not allow for it) the plan can be amended before the five-year period has elapsed. A separate piece of legislation would establish that only those units that have adopted a plan, under the Coordinated Planning Act, would be eligible for an expedited response from the State on grant applications, requests for roads, parks and bridges, and the like.

The legislation is not a panacea, but it is an important tool to address growth in a responsible fashion. One of the concerns about any legislation that deals with local units of government is whether the legislation erodes local control. This legislation encourages local units of government to engage in planning their own futures and in the process must share those plans with neighboring units. Getting neighboring units to talk to each other is a simple way to work toward coordinated interjurisdictional planning. We should not be surprised at what reasonable persons working together using the tools of democratic government can accomplish; that notion, after all, is what defines a democracy. ♦

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State Rep. Jon Jellema is a Republican from [unclear] [unclear].

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## Envisioning a Sustainable Future For Michigan

BY CONAN SMITH

Michigan's greatest challenge in the next decade will be to design a set of land use policies that allow for individual freedoms without sacrificing opportunities for future generations: in short, sustainability. How we ultimately choose to manage Michigan's 37 million acres will determine our economic viability and the health of our own ecosystem. In the words of the Detroit Free Press in 1999, "The three most critical environmental problems in Michigan are land use, water use and land use."

Clear vision, investment and realistic policies can form a framework for success in creating more sustainable economies that do not devalue the communities & environments that keep them strong.

In the eyes of the environmental community, there are three major policy developments that must occur at the state level to reverse current damaging land use trends. First, Michigan must adopt a comprehensive set of statewide land use goals and priorities. Second, the state should revise its fiscal policy to eliminate incentives for sprawl. Third, local governments need greater authority to manage direct growth. This framework facilitates partnerships between government and the private sector to develop sustainable growth policies. It is a method we call "Smart Growth."

Maryland Governor Parris Glendening coined the term "Smart Growth" when he led his commonwealth through a series of dramatic policy shifts that enabled the state to invest in redeveloping urban areas and turn

the resources of the private sector to the same purposes. A shared vision for the future of Maryland was at the backbone of his program. Today, Governor Glendening is the chair of the National Governors' Association and has pledged to promote creative land management strategies. The new NGA vice-chair is Michigan's own John Engler. Governor Engler will head up the NGA Center for Best Practices, which will also focus on ways of using entrepreneurialism to new purposes. With national attention on both land use and the State of Michigan, the time is ripe for fundamental reforms.

Businesses, environmentalists must envision a common future

Any successful land use reform must be the product of multiple constituencies. Businesses and environmentalists must envision a common future. In Michigan, this means setting strong goals to preserve our economy and our natural resources. An influential report on the travails of land use in Michigan, *Toward Integrated Land Use Planning*, recommended the state adopt a series of broad shared goals, including:

- Conserve and protect the natural and cultural resources and scenic beauty of the state;
- Improve the competitiveness of the state economy;
- Insure that agriculture is a component of the economic diversity of our state;
- Provide adequate, safe and efficient transportation facilities and services; and
- Ensure support for revitalization of urban centers.<sup>1</sup>

As in Maryland, principles like these could not only guide state investment but also guide local governments and private industries in their land use decisions.

Whether it's a township backing down in fear of a lawsuit from a developer or a city obsequiously courting a major corporation to increase its tax base, money still drives many development decisions in Michigan communities. The state can be a player in that game.

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Maryland limits many of its investments to those communities that cooperate with the state's land use agenda. Here, Michigan could underwrite a more dynamic partnership between developers and governments based on tax and revenue incentives, inducing a new spirit of cooperation. Financial aid in coordinated planning among local units of government, major tax breaks for agricultural land preservation and urban industrial development tax credits are just a few of the ways that can help create sustainable growth.

Many small local governments, however, do not need more money to implement a comprehensive land use plan. They do need a set of growth management tools endorsed by the state so as to provide a united defense against financial incentives. Several promising policies that would easily transfer to Michigan are already being used successfully around the nation. Pennsylvania, for example, has saved thousands of acres in perpetuity through a well-funded purchase of development rights program. In Oregon, cities retain their vitality by limiting the extension of

water and sewer facilities. In Georgia, local commitments to mass transit supported by state and federal dollars are increasing productivity and reinvigorating stalled commercial centers.

Vision, investment and realistic policies can form a framework for success in creating more sustainable economies that do not devalue the communities and environments that keep them strong. Enacting such a structure, however, cannot be done without the full cooperation of sometimes competing interests, like business leaders and environmentalists. Fortunately, across Michigan, leaders are breaking down those imaginary barriers between communities and creating solutions that enable positive growth.

## A successful alliance

One such successful alliance is the Michigan Economic and Environmental Roundtable (MEER). With a diverse membership that includes the Dow Foundation, the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, the Michigan Municipal League, and the Michigan Environmental Council, MEER is promoting just the sort of public-private, profit partnership that can make Smart Growth a success. An important project for MEER is a small grants program that encourages businesses to support nonprofit community education projects regarding land use. In 2000, MEER awarded over \$10,000 to support projects throughout the state.

In Michigan, for example, the Lenawee Citizens for Land Stewardship and the Lenawee Chamber of Commerce are initiating a community involvement process for sustainable development. They have applied their MEER grant to conduct workshops with citizens and township governments to facilitate the writing of a new county land use master plan.

The Lenawee Sustainable Development Initiative and dozens of other partnerships active across Michigan prove that diverse interests can find common ground in protecting the health of our economy and the beauty of our land.

It is crucial to the future of our state that these types of partnerships become the norm. A strong economy allows us the luxury of using for our pleasure the incredible natural world that defines Michigan. That natural world, in turn, provides us the food, shelter, and jobs integral to a high quality of life. One cannot exist without the other. Michigan must take significant steps to alter the patterns of development that are devouring our land. Our vibrant economy depends upon it. ♦

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## ENDNOTES

1. Toward Integrated Land Use Planning. *Integrated Land Use Task Force, Michigan Natural Resources Commission. (1996)*