

Government Affairs

Smart Growth Debate Offers Many Tools for Combating Sprawl *Industry leaders agree on issue complexity; need for public involvement and incentives*

by Stephanie Stubbs, Assoc. AIA



Picture a roomful of outspoken architects, home builders, developers, community and environmental activists, public officials, and lawyers—all debating smart growth, an elusive topic near and dear to their hearts personally and professionally. You might assume they wouldn't agree on a thing, yet the National Roundtable on Smart Growth Policy

and Practice, held at AIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., March 19, proved that there are at least three points on which the group could reach consensus:

1. The issue of smart growth is exceedingly *complex* and cannot usefully be considered piecemeal
2. All stakeholders—especially the public—must *participate* from the onset in the process of determining how our cities and suburbs will grow
3. We must consider *incentives* favoring smart growth that would allow everyone—from municipalities to individuals—to gain from its use.

While the participants' opinions on details of what to do about these points ranged all over the map, they at least form a foundation upon which further discussion can be built. Some of the points under debate:

Complexity

- There is no consensus on what sprawl is; correspondingly, there is no consensus on what smart growth is
- There is a lack of knowledge about what the consequences are vis-à-vis alternative growth patterns—we need to explain that to citizens
- Neither textbooks nor codes tell us how to handle smart growth. It must be addressed regionally. We also need to look at the state role in development, and at the concept of stewardship within the development process
- The largest cities are responding to the notion of the need for smart growth already; the suburbs don't get it
- Smart growth contains valuable spots for development outside the urban core
- There are objective means for measuring the environmental impacts of growth, and these environmental effects must be considered:
 - Natural habitat is lost when development occurs;

natural filtration is lost

- As land is developed, runoff is changed, and the speed of flooding increases
 - Air quality worsens as the number of auto trips increases; this also affects water quality
 - Loss of special resources, from species to wetlands to deserts and canyons can also occur
- Any one element considered out of context from the rest of the system is not smart growth. (We might have to call this a “mess” and not a system, because you can't predict how it will work, one participant quipped)
 - The role of public transportation in regional planning is paramount
 - Regionality tends to be too abstract. Web pages explaining the connectivity within a region might help the public understand the ramifications of growth.

Participation

- The best way to achieve a quality plan is to get a synthesis of views
- Citizens don't want a solution placed before them as a done deal. Discussion with citizens is crucial at every level of the project, and most important in the planning stages. The question is, how do you get people involved—on the volunteer level—when they have less and less leisure time? Developers may want to target community leaders to see if they can present the values of the plan to the community and get some buy-in

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PHOTO BY DOUGLASE GORDON, HON. AIA

AIA First Vice President/President-Elect Gordon H. Chong, FAIA, second from right, represented the Institute at the roundtable. Hunter Gee, AIA, was the luncheon keynote speaker who enlightened the group on the R/UDAT process.

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- Immigration is a critical factor. Without it, many cities would have population loss instead of growth. Get *all* citizens involved
- Abstracts don't work with the public—show them the design
- We may be approaching a time when NIMBY (not in my backyard) is becoming NIMBI (now I must become involved)
- Urban design centers downtown might encourage neighborhood participation
- The public will accept higher density if it comes with some green space and high-quality design
- People are often persuaded by “how a project will help keep the status quo”
- Schools need to be part of the planning process.

Incentives

- If the public knew there would be specific green and open spaces, they might not oppose other alternatives out of fear. Increase the certainty that some areas will be protected
- Promote smart growth where it is wanted; don't promote it where it is not wanted
- Make growth incentive-based, not prohibitive. Remove barriers to innovative land use—zoning boards have to understand that smart growth is more important than low density. Remove barriers in the codes
- Reward development at higher density, such as through state aid programs. Give local governments incentives, such as property tax breaks, for higher density
- Have municipalities purchase development rights. Also, governments should pay for better design if they want it
- Restructure how local government is financed
- Inclusionary zoning can ensure low-income housing. Give realtors subsidized commissions to sell houses in lower income neighborhoods
- Offer homeowner credits for urban dwellings
- Penalties are incentives, too. Penalize development that causes displacement of low-income people.

Lessons for architects

Architects concerned with smart growth—both professionally and as private citizens—might want to make use of their training and experience in integrating complex issues to help bring clarity where chaos seems to reign. Emphasized over and over in the roundtable was the need not only to involve private citizens at the programming stage, but also to teach them about

the process, as well as outcomes, of choosing various growth patterns. Many participants also stressed the need to explain outcomes visually. Finally, a plea from a government official: architects should lobby large chain stores to adopt better designs! Oftentimes, she said, small communities that are economically dependent on these chains don't realize they can influence the stores' appearance.

The Urban Land Institute and the AIA hosted this roundtable. Participants in the roundtable included representatives of the International Council of Shopping Centers, National Association of Home Builders, National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, National Association of Realtors, Real Estate Roundtable, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Sierra Club, educators, and neighborhood groups.

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Community Elements Worth Saving

Before the debate about smart growth began in earnest, participants were asked to go around the table and name the elements of their communities most worth safeguarding. Mentioned most often were:

- Mature trees
- Open space; “borrowed” open space
- Good water quality; access to a lake
- My kids can walk to school
- Close to work and school
- Sense of community
- Intellectual social conscience of the community
- Civic environment: public trust and sense of community
- Diversity of people
- Respect for the human being
- Strong architectural identity
- Historical connections
- Rich history
- Historic district.

Among the items participants would most like to change about their communities:

- Add more connections to end the isolation of individual towns
- Upgrade the quality of the public school systems
- Bring residential to downtown urban areas.