

Smart Growth

BY JAMES CARROLL and DAVID MOSS

Development patterns around urban and residential areas began exploding in the 1990s, many times resulting in poorly organized, unforeseen zoning problems. This type of growth has been labeled “urban sprawl” and has turned sparsely populated regions into urbanized, high-density developments. These growth patterns throughout the United States have prompted state and local governments to seek more information on these trends in order to better plan and oversee the expansion.

States that have addressed this issue have taken different approaches. Some have adopted new policies to revamp once thriving areas of economic boom and bustle, while other states have drafted policies that attempt to curb and regulate growth before problems arise. Many states have created public-private partnerships to ensure that economic interests are protected as well as those of the taxpayers. As the U.S. population continues to grow, it’s logical to assume that urban planning will remain an integral part of government.

To this end, Maryland’s Governor Parris Glendening signed The Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Policy in early 1998. This state’s commitment to alleviating what Glendening called the “social and environmental costs of sprawl development” illustrates the fundamental ideal behind Smart Growth.

The Waikiki Growth Management Fund was proposed in 2001 to evaluate land development areas. The goal was to protect areas that are vital to maintaining Waikiki a natural wonder. Citizen advocates point out that the city has emerged as thriving economic center but needs to protect the state’s number one resource: its claim as a nature paradise. This public-private partnership is examining how best to curb private growth through effective public policy.

The state government in Iowa has drafted legislation that will build six rural and five urban “renaissance zones.” These areas will be targeted because of their overall lack of tax revenue, making them financially depressed zones. The state plans to waive local and state property taxes for up to 15 years, hoping to create new revenue from these designated areas. Although tax revenue may be lost, legislators explain that extra revenue could be created by future businesses in these renaissance zones, spawning extra tax revenue from jobs created within those zones.

Last year Mississippi implemented similar measures to redevelop residential housing in downtown Jackson. Citizens get a tax credit when they purchase 25-year-old commercial buildings larger than 5000 square feet and divide them into residential domiciles. The city hopes creating residential housing in the downtown district will bring new growth for the entire community.

In 2002, Kentucky Gov. Paul Patton backed legislation that would create tax credits for persons purchasing historic homes in need of renovation. This bill would also create a state planning commission to review state projects that consume more than 50 acres of land.

The Massachusetts Senate approved a bill in April designed to curb what it called “suburban sprawl” by encouraging communities to manage expansion and conserve open space. The bill sets aside

\$50 million for the development of regional and local “sustainable development” plans that would include environmental conservation, economic development and housing. Communities that use the money to produce growth plans would boost their ranking in state grant programs for open space, transportation, housing and other projects.

Proponents of Smart Growth say it is an acknowledgement that development is a natural progression and should not hinder society’s quality of life. However, they add that it recognizes that a specific plan is needed to protect environmental intrusion and administration. Smart Growth can take many forms, as detailed here, including but not limited to setting guidelines on building and zoning laws which might eliminate green fields. Its supporters say it envisions the need for future transit roadways to accommodate growth while still finding ways to promote pedestrian travel.

Legislators across the country have initiated attempts to more effectively coordinate the patterns of development while trying to protect local communities from an R.D.E. (Rapid Density Explosion). The balancing act comes when proponents of an individual’s right to do with their land as they wish clash with those advocating a set blueprint for expansion.



States are looking at smart growth initiatives to coordinate development.

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