
Smart Growth Strategies for New England

It will take the concerted efforts of government agencies on all levels, non-profit and professional organizations, engineering firms and an educated public to effectively manage growth.

CYNTHIA CHABOT & BRIAN BRENNER

On February 2, 1999, the first Smart Growth Strategies for New England Conference was held in Boston. The concept of the conference grew out of discussions among staff and leaders of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) New England office and many of the agency's partners in preserving and protecting this special corner of the country. The purpose of this one-day conference was to provide attendees with an opportunity to hear about ways to foster economic growth while protecting natural resources and quality of life.

Specifically, the conference's agenda was comprised of a morning plenary session, followed by concurrent breakout sessions that focused on the barriers to and incentives for achieving smart growth. Using a working lunch

format, the agenda then provided for the identification of specific actions needed to create and support livable communities in urban, suburban and rural settings. The conference agenda closed with a plenary summarizing the lunch-time breakout sessions and a call to action.

The speakers and chairs of all of these sessions represented the region's leaders and experts from various facets of the development, planning and conservation communities. The conference planning committee was comprised of representatives of diverse organizations. The committee worked together in a cooperative and collaborative manner, reflecting the overall spirit needed to create and support livable communities in New England. With EPA-New England, the following organizations planned and co-sponsored the conference:

- National Association of Industrial and Office Properties;
- National Trust for Historic Preservation;
- The Nature Conservancy;
- New England Chapters of the American Planning Association;
- New England Governors' Conference;
- Trust for Public Land; and,
- Urban Land Institute.

Also participating in planning the conference were representatives of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and the Maine State Planning Office.

Fostering Smart Growth

After welcoming the approximately 1,000 attendees, EPA Regional Administrator John DeVillars described the uniqueness and variety of New England — its villages, urban centers, forests, mountains and estuaries. He also described the adverse land use and fiscal effects that unplanned growth is having on the region, including:

- the loss of more than 1,200 acres of New England's open space a week to development — including nearly 2 acres each hour in Massachusetts alone;
- the development of 26,000 acres in Rhode Island over the past ten years — an area the size of two Providences — while the state's population has remained stable;
- the expenditure in Maine of \$727 million (1970-1995) on new school construction in fast growing towns, while the state's public school population shrank by 27,000 students; and,
- for every \$1 in revenue a low-density housing development brings to a New England municipality, it costs the community as much as \$1.50 in increased expenses to pay for schools, roads and other services.

DeVillars then provided numerous details regarding the environmental impacts of this unplanned growth. Among these impacts:

- more than half of all New England's water pollution now is due to non-point sources;
- habitat destruction and fragmentation are threatening more than 80 percent of the endangered species in the region; and,
- New Englanders are driving nearly a third more miles than they were just a decade ago, an increase of another third from the previous decade. (This increased travel accounts for about 40 percent of the smog pollution that causes violations of health-based air standards for more than 20 days a year in parts of New England.)

Given these statistics, DeVillars said there is a need for all levels of government, as well as other organizations and groups, to work together to solve these problems. He subse-

quently announced the "EPA-New England Smart Growth Action Plan" as the agency's contribution to solving these problems. The plan has four major components:

- building effective partnerships with a wide variety of organizations such as the conference co-sponsors and associate sponsors, as well as EPA-New England's federal and state agency partners;
- reshaping EPA-New England's programs and policies by using federal authorities to oppose or modify projects that contribute to sprawl, as well as to further develop and support efforts such as Brownfields projects and the Urban Environmental Initiative;
- strengthening local capacity through a "Fundamentals of Smart Growth" training program and a new competitive grants program; and,
- elevating public awareness through workshops, outreach and local conferences across New England.

In conclusion, DeVillars said it was particularly important for EPA-New England to engage a wide range of business, government and nonprofit stakeholders in these efforts, given New England's long and rich history of local rule. (The full text of DeVillars' speech and the Smart Growth Action Plan can be viewed on the EPA-New England web site at www.epa.gov/region01/.)

Legislative Initiatives

The Governor of Vermont, Howard Dean, gave the conference's keynote address. He provided an overview of Vermont's efforts to combat unplanned growth, beginning with a description of Act 250, the state's land use law that guides and supports economic growth without "paving over the state." While Act 250 is not without its faults, Governor Dean said that, for example, the law's prevention of speculative development had a critical role in averting major real estate and banking failures during the recession of the early 1990s. He stated that good land use planning can have economic and unexpected benefits. Nonetheless, Vermont is developing rapidly. In the past 20 years, vehicle miles traveled have doubled, despite only a 25

percent population increase. Meanwhile, areas such as the City of Burlington and the rest of Chittenden County are experiencing enormous growth from commercial development. As a result, the private sector has been an important participant in Vermont's overall efforts to control sprawl. Among the initiatives the Governor mentioned are:

- Government agencies should not be funding roads and sewers that facilitate sprawl. Also, state agencies are required by executive order to locate their offices in downtowns. Further, the Vermont Board of Education adopted a policy in 1997 that recognizes that schools are an essential part of the community by requiring all school districts to thoroughly study renovation options prior to pursuing new school construction that could occur in greenfields or outside of a community center. Post offices also were cited as an essential component of most downtowns, even doubling as general stores in smaller communities. Accordingly, the state has discouraged the U.S. Postal Service from relocation to non-downtown sites.
- Incentives are needed to draw people to downtowns. Vermont's "Downtown Bill" is a start, as it provides for tax credits towards reinvestment projects, planning grants and tax rebates for the rehabilitation of historical structures. Further, the state has assisted with the development of downtown parking garages to facilitate people getting to and utilizing downtowns. Also cited were Vermont's successful negotiations with "big box" developers such as WalMart, which facilitated their location in two instances in either an existing development or in a downtown.
- Land conservation is an essential component of growth management. Governor Dean cited an example of a corporate headquarters that received an initially inappropriate curb cut to locate near national forest land. Instead of using litigation to stop this development and potentially allowing future development by another party, an agreement was negotiated with the developer where a perma-

nent conservation easement was placed on lands adjacent to the headquarters. The conserved land then was deeded to the Vermont Land Trust.

Governor Dean concluded his remarks by stating that New England has a unique opportunity to create land settlement patterns for the next 100 years. For Vermonters, these 200-year old patterns have created a sense of where their communities begin and end, as well as a sense of the land, since they are able to easily access and use it. While not all of New England's residents live in communities of less than 2,500 (as do more than two-thirds of Vermonters), this sense of community can be created throughout the region through local action. To start, he suggested saving critical pieces of land in individual communities and neighborhoods, and creating bike paths out of railroad beds so people have contact with each other. The Governor stated that maintaining a sense of community will take daily work by all involved in order to measure every proposed project against what effect it will have on a community's settlement patterns.

Resources

The following web sites present useful information on creating livable communities and effectively managing growth:

- www.livablecommunities.gov — Federal Livable Communities web site
- www.farmland.org — American Farmland Trust
- www.epa.gov/region5/sprawl/index.html — Antidotes to Sprawl: Federal Contacts to Help Communities Promote Sustainable Land-Use
- www.brook.edu/es/urban/urban.htm — Brookings Institution: Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy
- www.sustainable.doe.gov/landuse/luintro.shtml — Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development: Land Use Planning Introduction
- www.subjectmatters.com/indicators/index.html — Hart Environmental Data: Indicators of Sustainability
- www.uwex.edu/lgc/growth/growth.htm — LGC Growth Management

- www.lincolnst.edu/main.html — Lincoln Institute of Land Policy
- www.canr.uconn.edu/ces/nemo/ — Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials
- seagrant.gso.uri.edu/scc — Rhode Island Sea Grant's Sustainable Coastal Communities
- www.sierraclub.org/transportation/ — Sierra Club
- www.smartgrowth.org — Smart Growth Network Homepage
- noel.pd.org/topos/sprawl.html — SPRAWL, an electronic journal.
- www.plannersweb.com/sprawl/sprawl5.html — Sprawl Resource Guide
- 204.97.3.30:8080/apps/sprawl.nsf — Sprawl, Rochester Style (by Mayor William A. Johnson, Jr.)
- www.sprawlwatch.org — Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse
- www.susdev.org — The Sustainable Development Institute
- www.transact.org — Transportation Action Network
- www.tlcnetwork.org — Transportation for Livable Communities Network
- cua6.csuohio.edu/~ucweb/pubs.htm — The Urban Center Publications
- www.vtsprawl.org/index3.htm — The Vermont Forum on Sprawl

The following publications are also good resources on managing growth:

- *Alternatives to Sprawl*, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Mass., 1995.
- *Changing Places: Rebuilding Community in the Age of Sprawl*, Richard Moe and Carter Wilkie, Henry Holt & Co, New York, 1997.
- *Cities Without Suburbs*, David Rusk, Woodrow Wilson Center for Special Studies, 1995.
- *Cityroutes Cityrights: Building Livable Neighborhoods and Environmental Justice by Fixing Transportation*, Conservation Law Foundation, Boston, Mass., 1998.
- *Comeback Cities: A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival*, Paul S. Grogan and Tony Proscio, Westview Press, 2000.
- *Costs of Sprawl: Executive Summary; Costs of Sprawl: Detailed Cost Analysis; and Costs of Sprawl: Literature Review and Bibliography*,

Council on Environmental Quality, Washington, D.C., 1974.

- *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*, James Howard Kunstler, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1993.
- *Land Use in America*, Henry L. Diamond and Patrick F. Noonan, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Mass., and Island Press, Washington D.C., 1996.
- *Why Smart Growth: A Primer*, International City/County Management Association with Geoff Anderson, ICMA-Smart Growth Network, Washington, D.C., 1998.

Another Initiative

The Boston Society of Architects — in cooperation with the Environmental Protection Agency; the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy; the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Planning Association; the Boston Bar Association, Environmental Law Section; and the Urban Land Institute, Boston District Council — will be sponsoring three community-based planning workshops in February and March 2001 to support their initiative Creating Livable Communities — A Civic Initiative for New England.

Finally

One of our biggest asset is our countryside — the mountains, forests, rivers, lakes and valleys. We must not squander what should be cherished. Once we develop land, it is no longer the same. We can look to other countries that have faced these development issues and learn from their experiences — both good and bad. We need to come together as a community, decide what we want for our future and implement plans. We need to create resources that draws people to a community such as good education, affordable housing and places for our elderly and we need to sustain the life of our cities and towns. These decisions and plans beg for community participation and involvement.

CYNTHIA CHABOT is Editorial Sub-committee Chair of Civil Engineering Practice's Editorial Board.

BRIAN BRENNER is Chair of Civil Engineering Practice's Editorial Board.