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Across New England, communities and developers are getting smarter about smart growth

Smart Growth



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Five years ago only a few planners and environmentalists thought much about “smart growth.” But in 2005, the desire for smart growth—sometimes called sustainable development—has spread to every corner of New England. State planning offices and environmental and transportation agencies have embraced smart growth as an alternative to the pattern of “sprawl” that until recently was accepted as inevitable. Advocacy organizations and coalitions in all six states are leading successful battles for changes in state law and policy and fighting to reshape local transportation and development projects. And dozens of New England communities are rethinking the way that they plan, zone and approve development projects.

What is smart growth? Put simply, it is a way of building better communities by concentrating homes, jobs, and shopping in cities, near town centers, near transit or on previously-developed sites often referred to as “brownfields”. Smart growth development involves housing and a mix of other

uses designed so that the people who will live, work or shop there can choose to walk, bike or use transit rather than relying exclusively on automobile access.

Savvy real estate developers have begun to realize the benefits of taking a smart growth approach. They are responding, in part, to signals from local and state government that smart growth projects will fare better in regulatory and land use processes. Another incentive is that smart growth, especially when combined with environmentally-sustainable “green” development strategies, can address environmental permitting constraints involving water supply, wastewater, wetlands and traffic. Finally, there is a growing realization that there is real market advantage to building smart growth communities. A survey by the National Association of Realtors and Smart Growth America described two types of communities—one sprawl one smart growth—and asked where the respondent would prefer to live. Nationally, 55% preferred the smart growth community—and in the Northeast that figure rose to 62%.

While smart growth may seem like a “mom and apple pie” proposition at this point, developers of smart growth projects still face a number of hurdles. For one, there is no consensus on the specific meaning of smart growth and no single template or definition for

the interested developer to apply. There is, however, more and more guidance—from the Environmental Protection Agency’s smart growth index to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ Sustainable Development Principles to the Vermont Smart Growth Collaborative’s housing endorsement program. It is getting easier for interested developers to figure out how to design a smart growth project.

Because smart growth projects need to be dense to reduce automobile use and preserve open space, opposition has arisen based on two primary concerns: kids and cars. Communities don’t want significant number of densely-clustered homes, fearing the costs of educating the school children who would live there. And many neighbors are skeptical about whether future residents of these smart growth enclaves will really walk, bike and use transit; they fear that large smart growth developments could make traffic congestion worse instead of better. Developers need to tackle these issues head on, engaging in transparent development review processes designed to generate thoughtful and innovative solutions to their project’s fiscal, design and transportation challenges.

Broader public policy changes are also needed, both to address the community concerns about “kids and cars” and to “fast track”

smart growth development so that it is advantaged relative to sprawl. The Dept. of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has finalized regulations to implement a new law with the unexciting name of Chapter 40R. Under Chapter 40R, communities voluntarily create special zoning overlay districts where developers can build housing as-of-right, located in smart growth locations near transit or in town centers. Once DHCD approves the overlay zoning, communities are eligible for three kinds of incentives: one-time payments of up to \$600,000 for enacting the zoning, \$3,000 per housing unit payments as building permits are pulled and preferential treatment when state agencies distribute infrastructure funding for sewer lines, water supply and local transportation improvements.

Chapter 40R and similar innovations can help communities and developers replace sprawl with smart growth. Smart growth development can and should be a “win/win” situation for developers and communities, generating housing, jobs, tax revenue and returns for developers while preserving open space and natural resources and alleviating traffic congestion.

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