

SOLVING SPRAWL

Models of Smart Growth in
Communities Across America



F. Kaid Benfield, Jutka Terris, Nancy Vorsanger
Foreword by Maryland Governor Parris Glendening

Solving Sprawl

*Models of Smart Growth
in Communities Across America*

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Foreword

The desire to move up the social and economic ladder is a fundamental part of the American dream. However, for more than a half-century, millions of Americans have acted as if moving *out* to the suburbs is the same as moving *up* in life. Rather than stopping to think about how to make our communities better places to live, many of us rushed headlong into the countryside. In our haste to move up and out, we too often took our natural resources for granted. We paid little attention to what was happening to agricultural communities as farms were fragmented by development, or what was happening to forests—and the wildlife that lives in them—when roads and malls tore through them.

Gradually, we are beginning to realize that our growth patterns are destroying our cherished landscapes. On top of its impact on farm and forest lands, low-density, sprawling growth has destroyed the beauty of our communities, made congestion worse, and forced our citizens to pay higher and higher taxes to meet the demand for sprawl-supporting infrastructure.

Finally, we are beginning to realize that we need to rethink the way we grow.

The national smart growth movement emerged out of this realization. Sprawl affects all states and all regions, whether their population is increasing rapidly or not at all, whether they are urban, rural, or somewhere in between.

In Maryland, we looked ahead and saw that, if current growth patterns continued, we would consume as much land with new development in central Maryland alone over the next 20 years as we had in the previous 367 years of our history.

In Georgia, air quality concerns, stemming in part from sprawl-related traffic, led the federal government to suspend financial assistance for new highway construction, and the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce expressed alarm that phenomenal highway congestion was killing the region's economic competitiveness.

In Pennsylvania, 25 percent of the state's rich farmland has been converted to non-farm uses since 1970, and local governments expect the waves of growth coming out from urban areas to continue.

In Utah's greater Wasatch area, beneath the majestic Wasatch Mountains, the population is expected to increase from the current 1.7 million residents to 2.7 million in 2020, creating pressure to develop ecologically sensitive land.

Each state is developing its own solutions to these problems based on its own values, traditions, and geography. But all of the states engaged in this effort to better manage growth share a basic starting point: they do not want to stop growth, or even slow it down. They just want to be smarter about how—and where—we grow. We want to stop subsidizing the kind of haphazard, costly growth that has devoured our countryside and destroyed our quality of life at an alarming rate.

In Maryland, we have developed a two-part strategy of protecting our best remaining open space while simultaneously reinvesting in existing communities. Our smart growth program, among the first in the nation, is incentive-based, not regulatory. It respects the land use authority of local governments, but declares that the state has a legitimate interest in how local governments use that authority. In fact, the state's interest is not only a legitimate interest, it is a required and necessary interest: it is the state that often must pick up the cost of poor local land-use decisions. As important, states see the large impact of regional traffic congestion and smog, of lost farm and forest land, and of the abandonment of long-established core communities in a way that is often not visible to purely local planning bodies.

In Georgia, Governor Roy Barnes and the Georgia legislature began to address their transportation problems by establishing the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. This agency has the authority to overrule local transportation, planning, and land use decisions to avoid more sprawl. Surprisingly, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce was a strong supporter of this effort, as they realized that traffic congestion negatively impacts local businesses.

In Pennsylvania, a yearlong study identified land use as the state's top environmental priority. In response, Governor Tom Ridge and his staff developed the Growing Greener initiative to help with local governments' most pressing infrastructure needs and open space preservation.

In Utah, Governor Leavitt worked with Envision Utah to develop a high-quality growth strategy designed to maintain the state's high quality of life.

Governors, of course, are not the only elected officials grappling with the effects of growth. Local governments are on the front lines in this

battle, and they, too, are looking for better ways to grow. This year, the United States' Conference of Mayors and the National Association of Counties have joined the National Governors' Association in focusing on growth management and quality of life issues. This is truly becoming a national movement—a movement for positive change.

To some extent, government policies—even well-meaning policies like the tax treatment of home mortgages or the construction of the interstate highway system—got us into this jam. Reversing government policies that encourage sprawl is one way to attack the problem. Another is to demonstrate with bricks and mortar that we can truly be smarter about how we grow.

In many places around the country, these smarter communities are already rising out of the ground. The examples presented here in *Solving Sprawl* demonstrate the variety of problems that these new projects attempt to address, and the innovative solutions that are used. These stories show that the smart growth phenomenon is not limited geographically. Communities hosting smarter developments are urban and suburban, relatively new and truly historic, wealthy and working class. Some of these projects are the brainchild of one innovative risk-taker; others are the result of years of work by partnerships between communities and public, private, and non-profit sectors. As varied as these projects are, they have one thread in common: each improves the quality of life for those who live or visit there.

Smart growth is also about choosing *not* to grow in some places—the open spaces we value for their beauty, agricultural productivity, and ecological function. This book shows how open space preservation can be tailored to the needs and preferences of very different landscapes.

For those of us looking for new and better ways to grow, these stories provide not only best practices to emulate, but inspiration as well. These examples may be even more valuable for friends and colleagues who are not yet convinced that smart growth is anything more lasting than a public policy fad.

Let's face it: in the vast majority of communities, smart growth development—whether a mixed-use neighborhood, a single transit-oriented building, or an infill, reuse, or preservation project—is still the *hardest* thing to do. In the conservative world of land development, it can be difficult to arrange financing for a smart growth project, and even more difficult to gain governmental approval.

Ultimately, the success of the smart growth movement will be judged not by the harmful developments we stop, but by the smarter growth

we foster. To overcome the institutional and psychological barriers in our path, we need to develop a record of success. That is why this volume is so important.

Sprawl did not spread overnight. It will not stop overnight. Replacing and retrofitting fifty years of development will take time. But, after reading *Solving Sprawl*, I have faith that, by changing our assumptions and our priorities today, we can shape a better world for tomorrow.

Consider the consequences of two very different visions for the future of America. If we fail, we risk:

- ▶ Almost every farm plowed under, and practically every forest paved over
- ▶ Destructive traffic congestion spreading and increasing in intensity
- ▶ The progress towards a cleaner, healthier environment reversed, with native species again on the decline towards extinction
- ▶ Our cities all but abandoned, with houses and businesses boarded-up, like gated communities in reverse where our impoverished citizens are trapped just as surely as if they were imprisoned
- ▶ People moving farther out and farther apart, until our sense of community—our very soul—is irretrievably lost

This is a future we cannot accept. It is within our power to prevent it. We can begin by imagining a different future, a better vision that it is within our power to create. It is a future based not just on economic prosperity, but on community prosperity as well. A future where:

- ▶ People spend evenings having dinner with their loved ones or at a daughter's soccer game, not sitting in traffic jams
- ▶ Vibrant, viable, walkable communities that offer residents a place to work, have dinner, visit a museum, or attend the theater in safety and comfort
- ▶ Precious natural resources that are not just protected, but restored for future generations to enjoy

I firmly believe it is time to change our culture, time to adopt a new ethos: We will work hard to sustain our incredible economic growth. We will preserve the beauty of our nation and we will protect our environment. And we will do so through land preservation, quality design, and support for our traditional communities, and solid long-range planning. If we do that, we can improve the quality of life for our citizens now and, more importantly, for our children's children.

*Governor Parris N. Glendening
The State House
Annapolis, Maryland
May 2001*

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Solving Sprawl with Smart Growth

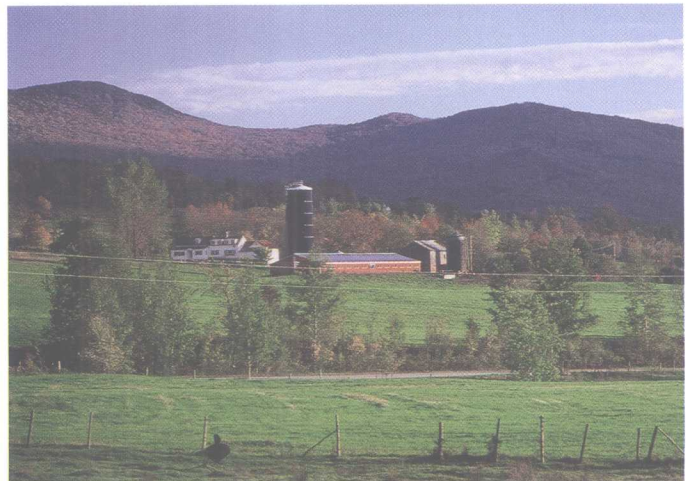
Civilization needs an honorable dwelling place, and the conditions of making that place ought to depend on what is most honorable in our nature: on love, hope, generosity, and aspiration.

—James Howard Kunstler, *Home From Nowhere*

James Howard Kunstler's words provide inspiration to those of us who have been concerned about the American landscape. They also give us optimism because, when we encounter problems, Americans tend to use the attributes that Kunstler celebrates—love, hope, generosity, and aspiration—to devise solutions. We have always been a problem-solving society.

In this book, we shine a spotlight on American communities that are finding ways to solve the problem of sprawl—the all-too-familiar haphazard development pattern that has come to dominate our national landscape from sea to shining sea. And the results, though only a beginning, show wonderful promise—if the early models of smart growth are replicated—for our environment, economy, and social fabric. Instead of obliterating our countryside while jeopardizing our financial reserves and weakening our

A working farm in a preserved zone in Pennsylvania.



social bonds, we are learning how to develop and grow in ways that better reflect our values. It's about time.

In a way, this book is an anomaly. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is an unfortunate truth that Americans concerned about the environment seldom have much in the way of progress to enjoy. Global warming, energy shortages, air and water pollution, habitat loss, a continuously spoiled landscape, and other serious problems continue to plague our society, in many cases with trends that portend worsening consequences for the future. As we documented in our 1999 book *Once There Were Greenfields*, many of these serious problems are directly related to suburban sprawl and the way that we have allowed our cities and regions to grow.

As we also noted in *Once There Were Greenfields*, however, it doesn't have to be this way. There is hope, and its name is "smart growth," an approach to developing cities, suburbs, and metropolitan regions in ways that allow us to thrive environmentally, economically, and socially while still providing all the assets of the American Dream and conserving our landscape. In short, smart growth solves sprawl.

What is smart growth? There is no single answer, of course. But one excellent articulation comes from our partners and friends at the Smart Growth Network, an association of businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations committed to promoting alternatives to sprawl: "In general, smart growth invests time, attention, and resources in restoring community and vitality to center cities and older suburbs. New smart growth is more town-centered, is transit- and pedestrian-oriented, and has a greater mix of housing, commercial, and retail uses. It also preserves open space and many other environmental amenities." The network goes on to observe that successful communities "tend to have one thing in common—a vision of where they want to go and of what things they value in their community."

In this book, we use working examples to illustrate these concepts, and to

Smart student housing in California.



SNAPSHOT: FACTS ABOUT SPRAWL

Sprawl's rapid land consumption cannot be explained away by population growth only

- ▶ Between 1960 and 1990, the amount of developed land in metro areas more than doubled, while the population grew by less than half.

Sprawl creates automobile dependence and longer driving distances

- ▶ Total vehicle use more than tripled between 1960 and 1995 to more than 2.4 trillion miles per year.
- ▶ Despite technological improvements, highway vehicles are still responsible for about 60 percent of total carbon monoxide emissions in the United States, 30 percent of the chemicals that cause urban smog, and 50 percent of carcinogenic and toxic air pollutants. Transportation contributes 32 percent of total U.S. emissions of carbon dioxide, the most prevalent greenhouse gas.

Sprawl irrevocably damages natural resources

- ▶ Runoff from new residential development is 10 times that of predevelopment conditions and runoff from commercial development is as much as 18 times higher. Runoff pollution is now the nation's leading threat to water quality.
- ▶ Sprawl leads to habitat loss, fragmentation, and even the extinction of species. Of 20,000 species of native U.S. plants and animals, fully a third are "of conservation concern": extinct, imperiled, or vulnerable.
- ▶ Between 1982 and 1992, the United States lost an average of 400,000 acres of "prime" farmland (the land with the best soils and climate for growing crops) to development every year.¹

tell the story of how smart growth has caught hold in America. We report the good news that smart-growth developments can now be found all across our country, in cities small and large, suburbs old and new. We show that communities embrace these smart-growth neighborhoods, people choose to live and work in them, governments support them and, yes, developers can make money on them. We provide examples demonstrating that, at the same time that we are reinvesting in existing communities and building new ones in smarter ways, we are also strategically saving valuable countryside from the threat of inappropriate development. We bring the good news that communities are implementing a wide array of smart-growth solutions on the ground, and the solutions are working.

Our book also celebrates the American heroes who are leading the way in solving sprawl. We celebrate political leaders, like Governor

SNAPSHOT: **BASIC PRINCIPLES OF SMART GROWTH**

There is no single template, no one-size-fits-all definition of how to solve sprawl, of what makes a community or a development “smart.” Instead, the features that distinguish smart growth from sprawl vary from place to place. The Smart Growth Network has developed a set of ten basic principles that can be applied in various combinations to create smart, nonsprawling communities:

- ▶ Mix land uses
- ▶ Take advantage of compact neighborhood design
- ▶ Create housing opportunities and choices
- ▶ Create walkable communities
- ▶ Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
- ▶ Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
- ▶ Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities
- ▶ Provide a variety of transportation choices
- ▶ Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective
- ▶ Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions

Glendening, who has honored this book with his eloquent foreword and who is often credited with popularizing the phrase “smart growth” while infusing it in his state’s basic philosophy of how to develop. We feature enlightened corporations, like Adidas, who are choosing to redevelop abandoned city properties rather than build still more automobile-dependent “campuses” in the countryside. We honor bold developers, like Atlanta’s Post Properties, who are putting their money and ideas behind new smart-growth communities. We showcase faith-based organizations, like Chicago’s Bethel New Life, that have been instrumental in redeveloping inner-city neighborhoods.

We also celebrate creative local officials, like Ken Montlack of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, who are demonstrating that municipalities can work together to preserve and strengthen older suburbs. We honor visionary architects and planners, like California’s Peter Calthorpe and Miami’s Andres Duany, who are showing how to design communities and regions that solve sprawl. And we feature the work of alert and energetic citizens, like Barry Harper of Almira Township, Michigan, whose organization Save Pearl Lake lived up to its name. We cannot stress enough that these heroes, as well as the others whose stories we tell in this book, and the many more who are working on solving

sprawl, are doing so with great creativity and ingenuity.

This book details 35 diverse smart-growth stories from around the country. We have organized our examples according to their locations: first, we introduce a diversity of smart-growth development and redevelopment projects in cities; second, we highlight examples of smart-growth successes in the suburbs; and third, we concentrate on forest, farm, and landscape conservation in places where development is not appropriate.

Within each of these chapters, we strive to show a wide variety of solutions to sprawl, to include projects of all sizes, and to have geographic diversity—to present many different and colorful pieces of the smart-growth mosaic. Interspersed throughout these principal stories, we include sidebars featuring additional examples of smart growth and reminders of the sprawl-related environmental and social problems that smart growth helps us overcome. We have also provided a glossary at the end of the book that may assist readers in learning more about planning terms and land-use concepts that might be unfamiliar.

Some may find it surprising that an environmental organization would place as much emphasis on “brick and mortar” smart-growth

SNAPSHOT: AMERICANS SUPPORT SMART GROWTH

Polls show that Americans strongly support smart growth and the strategies necessary to implement it. Indeed, 78 percent of voters believe that it is important for the U.S. Congress to help communities solve problems associated with urban growth, according to the Millennium Planning Survey, a comprehensive telephone survey conducted by the American Planning Association in October 2000. Another poll, conducted in September 2000 by Smart Growth America, a coalition of over 60 public interest groups, found a similarly high level of support: more than three-quarters of those surveyed said they favored “giving priority to improving services, such as schools, roads, affordable housing and public transportation in existing communities rather than encouraging new housing and commercial development and new highways in the countryside.”

Respondents of the SGA poll also overwhelmingly supported a number of specific government policies related to smart growth, including giving priority to funding services in existing communities rather than encouraging new development in the countryside; creating zones for green space, farming, and forests outside existing cities that are off limits to developers; requiring that affordable housing be included in all new developments; and giving funding priority to public transportation over new highways.



Car-dependent commercial sprawl in Virginia.

in order to keep “dumb growth” out of our most precious wilderness and rural areas—to solve sprawl—we must embrace growth somewhere else.

For the most part, we have chosen not to write about policies and plans—however enlightened—that have not yet materialized. The developments we highlight are already partially or fully built, and many are occupied. The natural areas we feature are already enjoying protection. These developments and protected green spaces can inspire us with their tried-and-true solutions; even their imperfections, which we also discuss occasionally, provide valuable lessons about what works and what doesn't in the real world of solving sprawl.

Our hope is that the reader will come away from *Solving Sprawl* with a renewed sense of hope and inspiration about smart growth, although not with a false sense of complacency. Indeed, as Governor Glendening's foreword reminds us, the status quo is still suburban sprawl, not smart growth. We will need years of hard work to change our policies to make smart growth easier; for developers to try different solutions; for elected officials to take a long-term view; for planners and other public servants to think “outside the box”; and for citizen activists to be planning ahead for growth, not just opposing developments. As a nation, we must become more ambitious. We must not accept blindly the limited choices that have been presented to us in the past. To solve sprawl, we must pursue our dreams for better places to live.

developments as on the preservation of natural areas. But a basic underpinning of smart growth is the acceptance that growth is inevitable; after all, in the first half of the twenty-first century, the U.S. population is expected to grow by half, adding some 140 million people who will need housing and places to work, shop, attend school, and relax. It is critical that,