

"Federation Corner" column
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When smart growth becomes stupid

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In the early nineteen nineties, smart growth was hailed as the answer to sprawl, urban decay, and inadequate infrastructure. Instead of leap-frog development chewing up farmland and natural resources, development would be guided to places where the infrastructure to support it already existed. The development would re-energize cities that were suffering from blight, flight, and crime.

Developing more densely would use up less space, be easier on the environment, encourage residents to take transit and reduce congestion. Mixed use development would enable people to walk to work, shopping, and entertainment. There were lots of lovely drawings of new cluster developments designed around natural features such as ponds or woods, and a wealth of artists' conceptions of lively urban plazas.

Twenty years later, developers, planners and politicians are still single-mindedly reciting the smart growth mantra. But has smart growth actually fulfilled its promise? Let us look first at the smart growth and infrastructure promise.

At the time the smart growth concept was being developed, there were studies showing that sprawl development was costing local government more than the increased taxes it brought. This was largely because the locality had to provide new roads, sewers, and schools to accommodate the new development.

To address this, techniques like adequate public facilities tests were developed. The idea was to calculate upfront how much local government would have to spend for these additional necessities, so that developers could be made to pay their fair share.

Moreover, this analysis would permit localities to stage development so it would be synchronized with the construction of the needed infrastructure. Smart growth was supposed to make this balancing act even easier, because development would be steered to where schools, roads, sewers, and transit already existed.

The reality has not been so rosy. Politicians, desperate for new revenues (and some would say, eager to please big campaign donors from the development industry) often jiggered with the adequate public facilities tests until practically every proposed development project could pass. Like social promotion of kids who had not mastered the curriculum, this approach merely postponed the resultant problems, presumably pushing them back into someone else's term of office. Moreover, when fees or in-kind contributions (like funding for road improvements) were required of developers, these requirements often went unfulfilled.

This, coupled with little public investment in infrastructure, led to the huge maintenance and replacement backlogs we face today. Whenever public officials try to enforce development staging, the developers decry the actions as "anti-business" and complain about a "development moratorium". (That's like complaining you're under a "driving moratorium" because you refused to get a driver's license and insurance.)

So does smart growth avoid this problematic staging scenario? Unfortunately, no. Infrastructure in developed areas does not have unlimited capacity. We experience this all the time with overcrowded subways and buses, unreliable electricity, frequent water main breaks, and roads full of potholes. Remember, this is also some of the oldest infrastructure we have, and it is long overdue for maintenance or upgrading. For example, WSSC has estimated that they have an eighty year pipe maintenance backlog, and it has taken a Federal court order to force them to step up their repair and replacement program.

Not only that, but it can be extremely complex (and therefore expensive) to deal with the plethora of utilities running through the average block in an urban area. If you have to disrupt traffic and commerce to get at those utilities, the ripple effect can be even greater. For example, some work on Route 29 had to be scheduled around the space shuttle program, because one of NASA's main communication lines ran under Colesville Road, and it could not be disrupted while a shuttle mission was underway. Nor is it painless and easy to add transit facilities, as anyone who uses the Silver Spring metro station knows all too well.

So directing growth to developed areas does not mean that adequate public facilities are guaranteed. Instead, it exacerbates the issues caused by already failing infrastructure. My point is not that we should go back to sprawl development; it is that smart growth is not smart enough. According to EPA, "It [smart growth] changes the terms of the development debate away from the traditional growth/no growth question to how and where should new development be accommodated."

I think, however, both those questions miss the mark. It is not enough to ask "how and where". Instead, it is crucial to ask "how much", "how fast" and "at what cost." We simply cannot support infinite growth, no matter where you decide to locate it. Recognizing real-world limitations on growth? Now, that would be truly smart.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com