

## Retracting Suburbia: Smart Growth and the Future of Housing

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### *Abstract*

Metropolitan areas throughout the United States increasingly experience sprawl development. States such as Oregon and Maryland have enacted land use legislation that curbs sprawl by promoting denser urban growth. Smart growth, a new method of metropolitan development leading to more compact regions, offers an alternative to sprawl. Given that housing comprises a major share of the built environment, policies that promote denser residential development form a key component of smart growth.

This article provides an analytic review of the ways housing can be used to support successful smart growth policies. It focuses on three areas: the market for higher density housing, land use issues associated with denser housing development, and methods for financing higher density and mixed-use housing. The literature on the link between smart growth and housing remains underdeveloped. We offer this synthesis as a way to advance the state of knowledge on smart growth's housing dimension.

**Keywords:** Growth management; Land use/zoning; Housing

### **The new politics of land use reform**

Buried in the returns from the 1998 midterm elections, where most news accounts focused on the remarkable success enjoyed by Democrats despite the scandal involving President Clinton, was a quiet land reform revolution. Voters across the nation approved more than 160 state and local ballot measures intended to limit urban

sprawl (Myers 1999).<sup>1</sup> Columnist Neal Peirce went so far as to equate such widespread reforms with a new civil rights movement. Though a nationwide consensus does not yet exist, antisprawl efforts enjoy the support of both Democrats and Republicans in a time of sharp partisan disagreement over most other major public issues. The coalition forming around the idea of limiting sprawl includes environmentalists, farmers, big-city mayors, some developers, and, perhaps most importantly, suburban voters who appear to be “fed up” with growth (Bannon 1999).

Suburbanites overwhelmingly supported New Jersey Republican Governor Christine Todd Whitman’s proposal to devote about \$1 billion in taxes and user fees to help preserve half of the state’s 2 million acres of open space over the next 10 years. Interestingly, these same suburban voters ushered Whitman into office just a few years ago on her promise to cut taxes. In New Jersey, at least, the idea of land preservation is so appealing that many suburbanites reversed their typical distaste for more taxes in order to pay for it.

The suburban antigrowth movement is hardly limited to the Northeast. Arizona, land of Barry Goldwater’s libertarian politics and vast open spaces, also is considering ways to limit sprawl. A strong land conservation measure passed overwhelmingly on the November 1998 ballot. Governor Jane Hull has appointed a blue-ribbon “smart growth” commission and environmentalists are planning a major ballot initiative for 2000.

In a western state such as Arizona—one that is conservative but sensitive to issues dealing with the natural environment—the basic question boils down to how to manage growth without derailing economic development or sacrificing affordable housing. At a time when traditional environmentalism is under attack as elitist and insensitive to economic issues, the smart growth movement’s future very much depends on how land preservation reconciles with economic growth and social equity concerns.

Interest in smart growth continues to grow in the development community. Even holdout groups such as the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) recently have switched positions and now ostensibly support smart growth (NAHB 1999). While the NAHB’s smart growth statement hardly embraces the type of growth management that most in the movement think is needed, the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the measures involved dedicating public resources to land conservation, rather than undertaking new initiatives involving land use regulation. In a few places, however, the new land use legislation goes to extremes. For instance, Atlanta’s new Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) legislation essentially places the region under “sprawl martial law,” giving the governor unusually strong powers to control growth, including the authority to stop projects that will add to Atlanta’s traffic problem (Ehrenhalt 1999).

the organization has offered a vaguely positive position on smart growth is testament to how important the movement has become.

### **Smart growth and housing**

The smart growth movement has its origin among land preservation groups. Until recently, it focused mainly on environmental and transportation concerns such as saving ecosystems or reducing traffic. These foci reflect a suburban, middle-income concern for quality-of-life issues. But smart growth can broaden its effectiveness and appeal only by dealing with such basic challenges as how to develop better higher density housing. Given that housing comprises a major share of the nation's built environment, reducing the land it consumes helps promote more compact regions and preserve open space. Land uses, design practices, and financial incentives that improve the costs and marketability of more densely built housing are key to balancing the competing pressures inherent in smart growth.

This article provides an analytic review of the ways housing can be used to promote successful smart growth policies. It focuses on three areas: the market for higher density housing, land use issues associated with denser housing development, and methods for financing higher density and mixed-use housing. The literature on the link between smart growth and housing remains underdeveloped.<sup>2</sup> We offer this synthesis as a way to advance the state of knowledge on smart growth's housing dimension. We also hope to stimulate more research in this emerging area of land use and housing studies.

The comments that follow this article show that smart growth discussions generate debate. The fact that we make a case for higher density housing puts us clearly on one side of the debate. Yet we remain cautious about which policies and practices work best to achieve smart growth. We also recognize that smart growth critics raise many valid issues. To these, we add our own concerns, many of which focus on the tough social equity issues that remain mostly unresolved by the smart growth movement.

#### *The challenge of smart growth*

Smart growth advocates argue that, if done right, building more compact regions should not conflict with economic development

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<sup>2</sup> There is an enormous literature in areas of related interest such as growth management and sprawl (for a review of the sprawl literature, see Burchell et al. 1998a, 1998b). Much less has been written, however, on how housing specifically relates to smart growth. For a quick summary of the literature on smart growth, see ULI—the Urban Land Institute 1998a.

(Ewing 1997). In fact, smart growth policies may actually promote development by lowering some of the NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) obstacles that often slow growth and drive up costs (Richmond 1997). Smart growth proponents argue that regulatory barriers to development should be lowered within designated growth areas to offset the loss of buildable land on preserved open spaces. Developers often appear receptive to the idea of trading the right to build outside growth or service areas for a more deregulated environment inside the line. The jury is out, however, on whether pro-growth policies inside growth boundaries and service limit lines can make up for lost greenfield development.

Perhaps the greatest challenge smart growth faces is community resistance to new development in already built-up areas. Enacting smart growth on a regional scale means that many existing lower density neighborhoods will receive new higher density housing. Suburbanites have a long history of resisting higher density housing for fear of what it might do to property values, and who may reside in such housing (Baar 1992). White suburbanites, in particular, associate higher density affordable housing with neighborhood racial succession (Black 1998; Downs 1994; Haar 1996). No matter how much current politics oppose sprawl, policies adding higher density housing to most neighborhoods remain a tough sell. Americans appear to hate two things: density and sprawl. Smart growth’s fate may depend on which they ultimately hate more.

### *Defining smart growth*

Although smart growth policies are related to previous efforts to curb sprawl, they do not seek to either limit or halt growth. Rather, they aim to shape growth in ways that lessen the effects of sprawl. Sprawl is not inevitable; it is a form of suburban growth that is characterized by very low built densities, unlimited outward expansion, leapfrog development, and segregated land uses (Burchell 1997a, 1997b; Burchell et al. 1998a, 1998b). As Anthony Downs points out, sprawl “is not *any form* of suburban growth, but a *particular form*.” (Downs 1998a, 1; 1998b, 8). Smart growth attempts to recognize this fact and alter the suburban form.

Smart growth is not synonymous with high-density development, although building at higher densities is certainly one important component. Smart growth instead represents a *type* of high-density development, one in which land uses are mixed in such a way that people benefit from greater built densities. High-density suburbs already have sprung up in the most unlikely places without the use of smart development practices. Los Angeles, for example, contains the highest density suburbs in the nation (more than 30 percent of

Los Angeles's suburbanites live at densities of greater than 10,000 people per square mile, compared with 10 percent of New York's suburbanites) (Gordon and Richardson 1997). According to a recent study by Myers and Kitsuse (1999), Los Angeles also has the highest gross population density of the nation's 20 largest metropolitan areas. Myers and Kitsuse offer several reasons for why Los Angeles sprawls despite its density: Its scale is huge, it appears as an unrelieved fabric of developed land, the Los Angeles Basin contains little open space, and it has an overabundance of low-quality commercial space. Los Angeles shows why smart growth is not synonymous with a denser urban form.

Our definition of smart growth specifically refers to land use patterns that

1. Reuse existing infrastructure and land resources to the greatest extent possible
2. Encourage and make possible alternative transit modes
3. Reduce the number of vehicle miles traveled
4. Improve an area's jobs/housing balance
5. Mix land uses to the finest grain the market will bear and include civic uses in the mix
6. Concentrate commercial development in compact centers or districts
7. Reduce community opposition to growth

Smart growth for housing specifically refers to land use patterns that

1. Promote denser subdivisions in suburbia
2. Encourage urban infill housing
3. Place higher density housing near commercial centers and transit lines
4. Phase convenience shopping and recreational opportunities to keep pace with housing
5. Transform subdivisions into neighborhoods with well-defined centers and edges

6. Maintain housing affordability through mixed-income and mixed-tenure development
7. Offer diverse housing options, including “life-cycle” housing

*Smart growth’s possible benefits*

The smart growth literature argues that the following benefits may result from housing developed at densities greater than a subdivision of single-family homes on large lots:<sup>3</sup>

1. Financial savings on infrastructure such as water, roads, and utilities (Altshuler 1977; Burchell 1997b; Burchell et al. 1992; Frank 1989; Real Estate Research Corporation 1974a, 1974b; Windsor 1979)
2. Financial savings on schools due to economies of scale (Ladd 1992)
3. Financial savings on municipal and other service delivery (Altshuler and Gomez-Ibanez 1993)
4. Financial savings on land costs per dwelling unit (Burchell et al. 1992)
5. Preservation of prime local farmland (Nelson 1992)
6. Lower land consumption (Burchell et al. 1992; Landis 1995)
7. Energy savings due to less auto use (Downs 1992; Ewing 1997)
8. A greater sense of community (Langdon 1997a, 1997b)
9. Better access to retail services and employment opportunities (in mixed-use developments) (Black 1998; Calthorpe 1993; Crane 1996)
10. Better opportunities to service areas with mass transit (Bookout 1992; Calthorpe 1993; Porter 1998)

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<sup>3</sup> Many of these smart growth benefits and their unintended consequences thus far have not been subjected to rigorous empirical validation. We compiled this list from an amalgam of literature on the topic, some of which takes an advocacy view. We concur with those who argue that more research is needed before we can know whether these benefits result from smart growth policies.

11. Reduction of fiscal disparities between municipalities (Nelson and Duncan 1995; Porter 1997)

Conversely, the following problems and unintended consequences can arise from higher density housing mandated by growth management policies that limit land supply without upzoning for denser uses and lowering regulatory barriers:

1. A speculative market for buildable lots (Lang and Hornburg 1997)
2. The loss of affordable housing (Fischel 1990, 1997)
3. The curtailing of economic growth (Fischel 1997, Easterbrook 1999)
4. An increase in “local” congestion (Gordon, Kumar, and Richardson 1989)
5. A new form of segregation (which can arise when the poor are priced out of high-density areas) (Lang and Hornburg 1997)
6. New exclusionary practices that limit infill development (Black 1998; Simons 1998)

The benefits gained from smart growth housing also depend on the scale of development. At the local scale, it is easy to show how compact development provides direct benefits in terms of infrastructure and land consumption. However, the benefits derived from building an entire compact region are harder to see, and enacting new policies and practices aimed at capturing these benefits have generated heated debate.<sup>4</sup> Smart growth advocates generally believe that smart growth policies can make an important regional impact by alleviating the constant need for new roads and discouraging suburban flight away from poorer inner-city or first-ring suburban areas.

Finally, and we cannot emphasize this enough, policies that limit land supply must be paired with a new regulatory regime that greatly improves the probability that those development projects conforming to smart growth principles will be approved in the political arena, financed by lenders, and brought to market. The politics of smart growth, as it now stands, favor just one part of the equation—limiting greenfield development. Yet the far tougher political fight awaits those who attempt to redress the NIMBYism and regulatory opposition that now face most infill projects. If most

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the exchange between Ewing (1997) and Gordon and Richardson (1997).

regions halt new development at the edge without simultaneously giving the green light to new growth in built-up areas, an affordable housing crisis will result (Lang and Hornburg 1997). This is our single biggest fear and it represents the greatest challenge for smart growth advocates.

### *Higher density housing in context*

We purposely use the term *higher density* rather than *high-density* housing throughout this article to emphasize the fact that the term *density* depends on context. In some outer suburban locations, achieving higher density may mean shrinking large lots slightly to achieve a marginal increase in the number of buildings and maximizing the amount of house on each lot. In suburbs seeking to maximize land use through small-lot single-family homes, higher density housing could range from 10 to 20 units per acre. In the case of urban infill, higher density housing may mean building 50 or more units per acre. Smart growth housing policy also requires a mix of tenures and mixing some uses. The point is that a strategy of developing housing at higher densities and mixed tenures throughout metropolitan America could represent a major component of an overall smart growth plan.

### **The market for smart growth housing**

One of the most contested smart growth issues is the market question. Advocates argue that a large market exists for smart growth developments, but a series of regulatory (Barnett 1995; Calthorpe 1993; NAHB 1999) and finance barriers (Leinberger 1996a, 1996b; Leinberger and Davis 1999; Volk and Zimmerman 1999) prevent them from being realized. They also contend that the federal government subsidizes current low-density building practices (Benfield, Raimi, and Chen 1999; Katz 1998; Nivola 1998; Orfield 1997; Rusk 1998).<sup>5</sup> Smart growth critics argue that low-density development reflects consumer preferences (Easterbrook 1999; Fischel 1997; Garreau 1991; Gordon and Richardson 1996, 1997; O'Toole 1999; Peiser 1989; U.S. General Accounting Office 1999).

To us, both perspectives have merits. It is easy to document the barriers to smart growth housing and the incentives that favor low-density development. Low-density, auto-dependent suburbs also happen to be popular. But the questions we consider are, first, is smart growth development potentially popular if done right, and second, is such a market, while admittedly a niche, currently under-

<sup>5</sup> For an alternative view see U.S. General Accounting Office (1999).

served relative to demand? We explore ways to gauge and exploit what we believe is an underserved market for smart growth housing.

*How large is the market?*

It is difficult to estimate the demand for housing in any market, let alone one as contextually diverse and geographically dispersed as smart growth housing. Smart growth housing includes existing homes in cities and older suburbs, new infill projects in such places, and higher density developments in newer suburbs. Is there a market for denser and mixed-use residential development throughout metropolitan America? The answer is tied in part to the number of Americans who are willing to live at moderate to high densities. That number is in dispute.

One source that measured people's willingness to live in higher density settings is the American LIVES (1995) survey. American LIVES, Inc., a San Francisco-based market research firm, mailed a four-page survey to 1,665 people. The sample was drawn evenly from people who had purchased a home or who were recent shoppers at planned communities in California, Texas, Florida, Colorado, Michigan, and Washington. The survey was designed to estimate the market for New Urbanist design features, including smaller lots with higher densities.<sup>6</sup> Three distinct groups of respondents emerged from the survey based on factor analysis: About a fifth liked New Urbanist design elements, including higher density subdivisions; nearly half favored New Urbanist design, but preferred standard suburban densities; and the remaining three-in-ten respondents liked the suburbs the way they are and rejected New Urbanism.

The NAHB completed a recent survey of 2,000 randomly selected households nationwide that queried people regarding housing and neighborhood preference (NAHB 1999). The question was stated as follows:

You have two options: buying a \$150,000 townhouse in an urban setting close to public transportation, work, and shopping or purchasing a larger, detached single-family home in an outlying suburban area with longer distances to work, public transportation, and shopping. Which option would you choose? (NAHB 1999, 16)

Eighty-three percent of the respondents chose the detached home in a suburban area and 17 percent picked the town house in a city.

<sup>6</sup> See Katz (1994) and Fulton (1996) for definitions of New Urbanist design.

The two surveys obviously try to gauge different housing demands. The first survey specifically asked people already willing to live in a master-planned community whether they were willing to tolerate higher than standard densities. The second survey measured preferences for urban versus suburban living. These surveys reveal how complicated it can be to separate the image of denser housing from preconceived notions regarding the differences in neighborhood quality between cities and suburbs. Together, the surveys point to both the opportunities and challenges that face those trying to market higher density housing. On the positive side, a significant share of the market will accept higher density master-planned communities. Yet, in a straight comparison between an urban town house and a suburban detached house, the suburbs still win overwhelmingly.

*Selling higher density housing: neighborhood conditions and quality of life*

Selling higher density housing requires more than clever marketing. As Laurie Volk and Todd Zimmerman note, “unlike other purchase transactions of goods . . . housing is a product that is fixed in place . . .” (Volk and Zimmerman 1999, 4). When people buy a house, they also buy a place. Consumers currently associate low-density housing with a bundle of desirable community characteristics such as good schools, low crime, and moderate taxes. Conversely, they associate high-density housing with an opposite set of undesirable community characteristics. Such perceptions are very difficult to turn around once they are fixed.

Yet many home buyers seem most concerned with the type of suburb to which they are moving and care little if the lot is a bit smaller than most. Robert Burchell (1997a), for example, showed that, if zoning permits, typical house lots could shrink from 20 to 25 percent before purchasers objected. Thus, large-lot zoning requirements are the result not only of market preferences but also of local political pressure to maintain an area’s exclusivity. Altering lot sizes therefore requires a change in the political climate even if it conforms to market reality.

Indeed, there is some evidence that home buyers are willing to trade away low-density living if they receive an attractive package of community amenities in return. It does not surprise us that some residents of master-planned communities accept medium to high densities. The restrictions on how owners manage their property in these places reassure home buyers that even clustered housing will not lose value. Residents also tolerate a modest degree of income

mixing within the development, again because regulations ensure that minimum property standards will be strictly enforced. Smart growth advocates should not overlook the lessons of master-planned communities: Middle-income and affluent suburbanites will buy higher density housing if they believe it will not diminish their quality of life or devalue their investment (Lang and Danielsen 1997; Langdon 1997b).

In high-priced markets, the most popular products are often zero-lot-line, courtyard, and other small-lot housing. From surveys, many residents report that they are as satisfied with housing at six or seven units per acre as they are with housing at three or four units per acre (Ewing 1997). In many of these markets, such as California's Silicon Valley, some suburbanites have begun to conclude that living in higher density housing offers a better quality of life than living at lower densities but having long commutes from distant suburbs. A poll done for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1997 found that 60 percent of those asked "would choose, given the same cost, a smaller home closer to where they work than a larger one farther away" (Wilson 1998). *Professional Builder* magazine reports that about half of all home buyers are density conscious and that consumers regard density as negative. Yet the story goes on to note that buyers will enthusiastically choose to live closer to the city to reduce their time in traffic (*Professional Builder* 1999).

The market for higher density urban housing may expand if infill projects can better manage the inconveniences of urban life (Langdon 1997b). Consumer research shows that many suburbanites identify culturally with cities but are frustrated by the daily problems of living at higher densities, such as having to fight for a parking space (Lang, Hughes, and Danielsen 1997). Developers of infill housing seeking to expand their market to suburbanites should make creative provisions for automobiles. They also need to maximize security and privacy, because former suburbanites are likely to insist on higher standards in these areas than are city dwellers.

To achieve smart growth goals, new high-quality, higher density housing also must become more common. The association between higher density housing and urban problems remains a concern. In the public mind, the single-family home on a large lot is synonymous with a good neighborhood. If the quality of higher density neighborhoods eventually equals that of conventional suburbs, the market for smart growth suburbs may grow.

### *Demographic, lifestyle, and commuting trends*

The market niche for high-density housing is hardly static. Consumer surveys offer a valuable snapshot of current housing de-

mand. Development, however, is fundamentally future oriented, and thus demographic and lifestyle trends are important factors in predicting future demand. These trends indicate an expanding market for higher density housing because the groups that already prefer such housing are a growing market segment (Goodman 1999).

Changes in lifestyle and life cycle—more working women; later marriages; fewer children per family; more gay, childless, and non-married couples; more singles; and more empty nesters—have made nontraditional households more mainstream (Bookout 1994; Moss 1997). These household demographics favor developments that tailor their services to non-nuclear family lifestyles. People in smaller, childless households often look for convenience and in many cases are willing to pay more for it. Higher density housing near places of business can offer these residents short commutes, a high level of amenities, and low maintenance (Bookout 1994; Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington [State] 1997; Sohmer 1999).

Higher density housing built according to smart growth guidelines can serve a family throughout its life cycle. Such housing typically comes in different configurations, sizes, and ranges across the price spectrum. Thus it can accommodate an empty-nester household that may want to downsize but remain in the same neighborhood—a housing option that is unavailable in most conventional suburban subdivisions. Recent tax changes that allow couples \$500,000 in tax-free capital gains on home sales should expand the market for downsized empty-nester housing (Bier, Maric, and Weizer 1999).

Furthermore, lifestyle changes are increasingly “out of sync” with conventional suburban design principles. For example, current trends indicate that commuting patterns are becoming more complex because services are not conveniently located near residential areas. The growth of two-earner households keeps suburban residents on the road longer during rush hours to handle the quick errands that should be within walking distance of the home (Sipress 1999). Trip chaining, as this trend has been tagged, could be reduced substantially by building housing near services instead of in the scattered pattern that exists now.

Some suburbanites also appear to want more vital community spaces and institutions. For developers, meeting this demand means building retail and commercial space in mixed-use town centers within walking distance of housing. Higher density, mixed-use designs also serve telecommuters well, as Langdon observes:

With the growth of computers, faxes, modems, and other modern communication devices, it may be that *more* people, rather than

fewer, will be both living and working in the same place. As it happens, it will be important for these home-based workers to have services and gathering places, such as cafes, close by. Neighborhood gathering places could offset the isolation of working alone (Langdon 1997a, 66, emphasis in original).

## **Land use and higher density housing**

### *Higher density design*

A growing body of trade literature suggests that higher density housing can feature the best elements of low-density suburbs, enhancing quality of life by incorporating amenities such as pools and golf courses (Fader 1999; ULI 1997). If smartly designed, these amenities can appeal to a broader range of consumers than those typically found in standard subdivisions. Imaginative lot use, landscaping, and housing types allow for open space, security, and privacy comparable to that in low-density suburbs. It takes less skill and care to design a standard subdivision than one that uses smart growth principles. Those developing higher density housing have a smaller margin of error. In general, smart growth developers need to spend more time and money than average suburban builders researching what type of housing to propose, creating architectural designs, and meeting with neighborhood and special interest groups in private before their proposals go to a public hearing (Lurz 1999).

Even interior space planning is important in creating successful higher density housing. Urban infill developers, especially, should pay close attention to room layouts and widths when seeking to sell suburbanites on urban living. For example, builders should avoid constructing town homes less than 18 feet wide because rooms in such narrow structures could be too small for some of the furniture that suburbanites will bring from their previous single-family homes. And there is no reason why higher density housing cannot feature the same interior amenities as traditional suburban housing (Kreager 1997). If upscale, low-density projects offer lavish kitchens and bathrooms, for example, so should higher density ones. In fact, if higher density housing is to appeal to a broader market, it should stay a step ahead in offering innovative amenities at each price point. In other words, developers must sweat the architectural details (Bradford 1994).

Designs that reflect local building traditions also enhance the value of higher density developments. Projects that fit their surroundings

are an easier sell—to both local officials and consumers—than those that seem out of context. This point is especially important when building affordable suburban housing, which often meets resistance from local homeowners. Higher density projects featuring housing that resembles more modestly sized versions of single-family homes found throughout the community will gain better acceptance (Bothwell, Gindroz, and Lang 1998).

### *Big homes, small lots?*

A relatively untapped market potential exists to exploit well maintained, inner-ring suburban neighborhoods with higher density housing. Despite the literature warning that most inner-ring suburbs now face the same problems as inner cities (Orfield 1997), a sizable number of smaller-lot, inner-ring suburbs maintain strong property values and a high quality of life. Chris Leinberger refers to such suburbs as being in a region's "favored quarter" (Leinberger 1996a).<sup>7</sup> He finds a continued demand for some of these older, mature suburban communities, many of which have more smart growth qualities than their newer counterparts (Leinberger 1996a, 1996b).

The demand for existing houses in these affluent older suburbs appears to be wavering, however. In their search for community and established services, many home buyers are opting to build new, larger homes that consume most of the space on small lots in older neighborhoods. Dubbed "monster houses," these gigantic structures are replacing more modest homes that had uniform footprints.

Monster houses are generally not popular with neighbors. Communities all over the country, from Levittown, NY, to Santa Monica, CA, are wrestling with how to balance the scale of a neighborhood with the space demands of homeowners (Booth 1999). This balancing act may require setting up special zones in desirable inner-ring suburbs to allow oversized homes at higher densities.

While often considered undesirable by neighbors, monster homes do help achieve one key smart growth goal: that of building more compact regions. Without the monster home option, those who seek to construct oversized homes would be forced out to large suburban

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<sup>7</sup> This idea also has its roots in the work of Homer Hoyt (1939), an economist with the Federal Housing Administration during the 1930s. Hoyt found that high-income housing could radiate from the core in one wedge—often from the corner of the central business district that contained the financial services industry. Hoyt's theory was based on the movement of high-rent districts in 142 American cities in 1900, 1915, and 1936.

lots at the region's edge. The tradeoff, then, is between maintaining neighborhood scale and containing sprawl. This issue reveals the tensions that exist between achieving the local and regional goals of smart growth. Such tensions must be resolved on a case-by-case basis as smart growth policies evolve.

*Urban containment policies and higher density housing*

Urban containment areas (ringed by urban growth boundaries [UGBs]) may become the policy tool of choice as metropolitan America moves to curb sprawl. Higher density housing may be the most important element in the success of any urban containment strategy. Developers and citizens are justifiably concerned that urban containment policies could slow growth and cause house prices to rise sharply. We emphasize the word *could* here because these policies *should not* have that effect. UGBs need not be inflexible growth constraints that cause artificial land scarcities and reduce affordable housing. Emerging UGB models contain varying degrees of flexibility in order to prevent, or at least mitigate, market distortions (Nelson 1998).

All of the strategies highlighted below facilitate higher density housing. The techniques vary in their degree of regulation, with fixed UGBs being the strictest land use control.<sup>8</sup> Three main options that may also be used in combination are available for developing urban containment strategies:

1. Fixed UGBs sharply define where growth is allowed. Oregon uses this model.
2. Urban reserve boundaries encompass areas outside UGBs that will be the target of UGB expansion after the 20 years specified in the original UGB.
3. Urban service areas direct growth to built-up areas or places where the infrastructure to accommodate growth already exists. Maryland uses this technique under its recently enacted smart growth law.

Each state and region will determine which, if any, of these techniques suits their needs. A growing body of case evidence exists to assist policy makers and voters as they consider their choices. The Oregon experience, in particular Portland's, provides one of the most important examples for smart growth strategy (Abbott 1997; Abbott, Howe, and Adler 1994; Howe 1993; Knaap 1987; Knaap and

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed description of how UGBs work, see Easley (1992).

Nelson 1992; Lang and Hornburg 1997; Liberty 1992, 1996; Richmond 1997). Those using Portland as a planning model should consider its key lesson: that UGBs work best when linked to comprehensive regional planning.

Portland's UGB comes packaged with numerous provisions that address concerns such as affordable housing. Portland also attempts to ensure that its land reform does not derail development. The Portland UGB did succeed in its primary goal, preserving open space (Weitz and Moore 1998). If not well managed, however, the impulse to limit sprawl and preserve open space may stifle economic growth, limit consumer choice, and ultimately result in higher housing costs. Some fear that regions will use UGBs indiscriminately to halt explosive growth. (San Jose, CA, and Seattle, to mention just two notable examples, recently instituted Oregon-style UGBs.) This results in harsh limits on land supply precisely when land costs are under the most pressure as a result of growth—a sure recipe for a housing affordability crisis. As we stated above, our greatest fear is that smart growth advocates will achieve only half their goal—preserving undeveloped land at the metropolitan fringe—and will not succeed in creating livable communities at higher densities in existing urban areas.

Seattle may already be experiencing some cost impact from its UGB. ULI's *Market Profiles 1998* finds that:

A persistent shortage of developable land at affordable prices for all types of housing continued to make it difficult for developers to profitably build housing that is within reach of entry-level buyers or moderate-income renters. The housing affordability issue is expected to spread to the middle-class market in 1999. The private sector is providing sufficient new product for the upper-income brackets, and government programs provide a variety of incentives for construction of low-income housing. The middle of the market, however, remains unserved (ULI—the Urban Land Institute 1998b, 350).

Planners and developers also should understand the unintended consequences that result from urban containment policies. Consider, for example, Oregon's provision to ensure a supply of affordable housing inside UGBs. The Oregon plan requires that half of all developable residential space be zoned for multifamily or attached housing. The idea is simple. Because multifamily housing is typically more affordable, zoning it in abundance promotes the construction of affordable housing. At first, the strategy worked. But as Portland filled its UGB, developers saw a market for upscale multifamily housing (Lang and Hornburg 1997). UGBs thus can alter the market dynamic in ways that are hard to predict.

An urban growth boundary, per se, will not achieve smart growth goals. Once the lines are drawn, metropolitan areas must encourage creative development techniques. The following zoning and land use principles are needed (Nelson 1998):

1. Zoning flexibility such as residential cluster and zero-lot-line zoning, and mixed-use zoning allowing three or more linked land uses
2. Urban infill and redevelopment at higher intensities than surrounding land uses, often facilitated by redevelopment agencies
3. Creative zoning that encourages diversity of housing opportunities (through “inclusionary” zoning), innovative subdivision designs (through cluster and zero-lot-line zoning), and clear separations between potentially incompatible uses (through nontraditional and “exclusive use” zoning)
4. Minimum density and intensity zoning that assures that land intended for higher density development such as apartments and town houses is not developed as low-density, single-family housing
5. Neighborhood conservation: targeted infill of vacant lots with compatible housing, allowing accessory residential housing in existing older and larger homes, and providing sufficient residential choices to allow for life-cycle and lifestyle housing
6. Strategic uses of new communities, such as transit-oriented developments near transit stations and New Urbanist communities elsewhere

As Nelson (1998) notes, while most urban areas benefit from some form of growth control, growth management does not end at the UGB. Attention also should be given to the open land outside the UGB in exurban and rural areas. Urban development should be discouraged in these areas through zoning to protect farms, forests, and other open space. This can be achieved through rural zoning (setting house lot sizes at 20, 40, or 80 acres, or whatever size can support nonurban uses) and “exclusive use” zoning that prohibits subdivisions or essentially suburban uses even at these extremely low densities.

### **Financing higher density housing**

Alternative financing instruments also can encourage higher density housing development. Building higher density housing with

smart growth principles is made more difficult by lenders reluctant to finance such developments; lenders do not fund projects without a proven record of acceptable risk. According to Edward Starkie (1997), smart growth can be financed as long as development packages are presented in a way that allows commercial lenders to understand and reduce risk to acceptable levels, an approach that obviously requires more work than packaging conventional projects. However, if developers can make innovative projects look more like conventional ones that can be sold into the secondary market or securitized, their projects will be easier to finance.

### *Standardizing smart growth financing*

Three main obstacles currently reduce financing options for smart growth:

1. Difficulties with appraisals and finding suitable comparables
2. Lack of good market research to show the financial feasibility of higher density smart growth projects
3. Presentations of project objectives and risks, and of risk mitigation, that are often unclear

Projects that entail heavy upfront costs, environmentally sound infrastructure, and community building programs also tend to be less successful in obtaining financing. Some of these problems likely will disappear as more smart growth developments are built. At present, developers must search for alternative sources of financing, such as real estate investment trusts, pension funds, and insurance companies. Developers also are compelled to use nationally successful projects rather than local ones as comparables in order to give their financing applications more credibility.

Volk and Zimmerman (1999) offer one solution to the problem of finding suitable comparables for smart growth projects. Their way around this dilemma is to develop alternative forms of market information on which to base investment decisions. They suggest using much more highly targeted market data that indicate potential demand by identifying which demographic groups would likely purchase a category of housing such as higher density units.

On the consumer side, it may be possible to make smart growth projects more acceptable to lenders by recognizing that proximity to community facilities and alternative forms of transportation have an impact on a household's financial capacity to absorb debt. One

example is Fannie Mae's so-called "location efficient mortgage" (LEM).<sup>9</sup> LEMs enable those living near public transportation to qualify for larger mortgages because the financial instrument obligates a household to reduce its transportation costs. These mortgages tap into the "access richness" of living at high density (Nozzi 1998).

The public policy benefits of such mortgages are obvious. They establish a financial disincentive for sprawl, promote higher density development, and increase public transit ridership while reducing energy consumption. LEMs also contribute to an improved quality of life by providing more support for local services and cultural amenities (Hoeverler 1997). Regional and local air quality also improves for each car not needed.

But LEMs also recognize that home buyers who need only one car actually do have greater financial capacity, thus acknowledging that not all houses are alike even if they are "comparable" in traditional real estate appraisal terms. The Natural Resources Defense Council found that significant savings accrue from living in higher density neighborhoods that feature public transit and pedestrian access to everyday services (Benfield, Raimi, and Chen 1999). Mortgage markets should consider these savings when calculating loan risk. The savings from higher density development need to be better quantified; when common measures for these savings are created, standardized mortgage products can be developed.

Indeed, standardization of smart growth projects remains a high hurdle to large-scale lender acceptance. If smart growth housing is to achieve parity with low-density, large-lot residential development, it needs better access to the secondary mortgage market. A major challenge facing developers and institutions seeking to standardize smart growth projects is that these developments mix land uses in a way that does not lend itself to standardization. The credit market for single-family homes relies on the creditworthiness of a borrower: the better the credit, the lower the risk. By contrast, large-scale smart growth projects include multifamily rental housing and various commercial uses that traditionally have been developed by a different set of developers working with a different set of lenders using a different set of criteria. The diversity that defines smart growth thus makes assessing risk more difficult.

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<sup>9</sup> Fannie Mae recently announced a new initiative in which it will offer a series of products to support smart growth (Glenn 1999). Fannie Mae is offering products that affect both housing developments and commuting patterns; these initiatives include a mix of housing densities in new communities, new urban infill development, improvements in home energy efficiency, and greater use of mass transit (Fannie Mae 1999).

In short, smart growth prescribes a customized or locally tailored approach to development, while the secondary mortgage market favors standard products. The financial instruments and institutions underlying American development deliberately isolate components of the built environment to better securitize their risk. This remarkably efficient system pumps billions of low-interest dollars into development. Unfortunately, it also produces places that are often just as narrowly focused as their financing structure. Given the structure of the system, there is little wonder that American regions lack integration and unity. Perhaps the single greatest challenge facing smart growth is finding inventive ways to adapt highly focused financial instruments to comprehensive development practice (Leinberger and Davis 1999).

### **Smart growth and the future of housing**

Our argument is simple: housing can and should be developed at higher densities than is now standard practice. Building higher density housing is a goal compatible with smart growth principles and better aligns new development with several recent trends, including:

1. An increasingly diverse and differentiated market that currently underserves customers seeking higher density housing options
2. A deepening problem of the fiscal impact of new housing development, in which even many upscale suburban housing projects generate insufficient taxes to pay their way
3. Political pressure to halt the sprawl development that is rapidly spreading across metropolitan America

While the development of higher density housing is a key precondition to dealing with all of these issues, it likely will not prove to be a panacea for sprawl. Smart growth principles and practices must evolve to correct some of the potential problems that may accompany higher density housing development (Danielsen and Lang 1998).

The lessons of monster houses show that higher density, smaller lot housing does not necessarily mean small houses. Communities should be sensitive to the market that demands “more house” but within the context of the neighborhood. Americans have shown in many consumer preference surveys that size counts. Higher density housing designs have the extra burden of striking a balance be-

tween the space demands of housing consumers and those of the neighborhoods in which they are located.

Like the exurban large-lot housing that they seek to discourage, smart growth practices are open to the criticism that they are exclusionary in nature. The restrictive development environment that accompanies smart growth has the potential to effectively limit who can live where in the name of curbing sprawl. As Easterbrook notes:

Sprawl also sounds awfully similar to exclusionary zoning and other pull-up-the-ladder ideas that comfortable communities have used in the past to keep out unwanted arrivistes—often minorities and immigrants. One person’s greenspace preservation is another’s denied housing permit (Easterbrook 1999, 31.)

Higher density housing should be accompanied by other smart growth methods, including alternative site planning preferences and alternative transportation systems, in order to win success in both the marketplace and the political arena. If the result of an effort to pursue more higher density housing is simply to create denser versions of existing auto-oriented suburban subdivisions, smart growth goals likely will not be achieved.

Affordable higher density housing remains an elusive smart growth goal. Escalating land costs due to regular development pressures and growth boundaries will continue to make lots grow smaller while their prices rise. Many regulatory barriers remain in place in urban and particularly suburban communities that prevent or curtail the development of higher density infill projects and the lot assemblage necessary for high-density projects and innovative higher density designs. Although consideration of specific regulatory barriers is beyond the scope of this article, regulations remain a significant challenge to making the production of higher density housing a routine process.

Sprawl remains the dominant building practice in the United States (Harvard University–Joint Center for Housing Studies 1999), but the political tide may be turning in favor of more contained regions. It has been a long journey. As Maryland Governor Parris Glendening stated, “For 50 years, Americans have been sold on the concept that moving out is moving up” (Glendening 1996). Perceptions, and the development patterns that result from them, change in what often seems to be geological time. But there is now a growing sense that the postwar metropolis may have reached its limits. The comments that follow this article do an admirable job of defending the status quo. Yet they also feel a bit defensive, as if the authors realize they already may be defending a minority position.

Only time will tell if sprawl's high water mark was reached in the 1990s.

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