

**Attitudes Regarding Smart Growth of
Local Leaders and Officials in Contra Costa County, California**

Eric Panzer

Abstract The ecological impact and sustainability of land use patterns and urban development are increasingly coming under scrutiny. The term “smart growth” has been introduced to describe alternative development patterns characterized by land conservation, transit options, and thoughtful regional integration. It is important to consider what impediments exist to its implementation—most notably at the local to sub-regional level, where stakeholders most directly influence development. This research examines attitudes regarding smart growth held by leaders within Contra Costa County, California, which contains a variety of environments and development types. Officials and leaders were individually interviewed to determine their personal attitudes regarding smart growth and their experience with it in their community. Informants were well informed and generally supportive of smart growth principles; but also expressed concerned with homogenous imposition of smart growth, restricted community involvement, and smart growth’s suitability for certain settings and demographics. This implies that smart growth may gain support by encouraging community input, allowing flexibility in its application, and by providing lifestyle choices more comparable to citizen’s current circumstances.

Introduction

“Smart Growth,” broadly defined, is any growth that is more efficient, more ecologically sound, and provides for a higher quality of life than prevailing forms of residential/commercial development. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate smart growth and suburban sprawl respectively, with private lands shaded yellow, open space shaded green, and mixed uses shaded orange.



Figure 1. Smart growth development features a block structure, compact lots, integrated park space, and accessible higher-density and commercial uses. (Envision Central Texas)

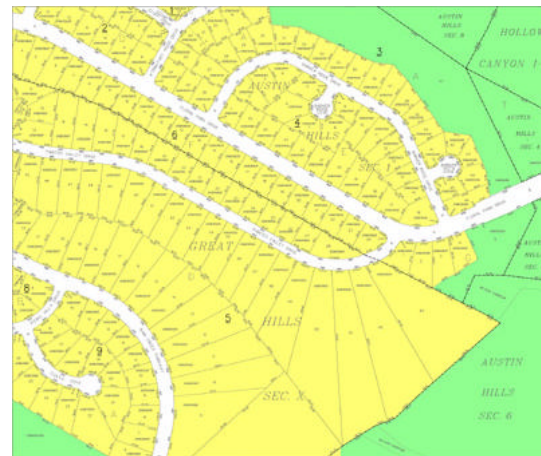


Figure 2. Typical suburban development features large and irregular lots, curvilinear streets, unincorporated open space, and the exclusion of higher density or non-residential uses. (Travis County, TX Tax Appraiser)

This research will use a hybrid set of criteria to define smart growth, developed from characteristics of smart growth provided by the Urban Land Institute (O’Neill 1999) and the National Neighborhood Coalition (2000):

- ? Development is economically viable and preserves open space and natural resources.
- ? Redevelopment of infill housing, brownfield sites, and obsolete buildings is actively pursued.
- ? Urban centers and neighborhoods are integral components of a healthy regional economy.
- ? Mix land uses.
- ? Take advantage of compact building design
- ? Provide a variety of transportation choices.
- ? Create walkable neighborhoods.

These strategies serve to decrease land use as well as consumption of energy and material resources. This stands in sharp contrast to typical suburban development, which not only increases land and resource use, but has been also shown to have negative social consequences.

A wealth of data are available showcasing the effects of typical suburban development, ranging from, most notably, those concerning environmental impact and health, to those concerned with societal ills. An examination of Bakersfield, California suggests that its air pollution problems were directly linked with its sprawl, as greater distance between workplaces and residences resulted in more frequent and longer car trips (Weiser 2004). In the 30 years from the mid 1960's to 1990's, driving rose significantly while walking and mass transit ridership fell proportional to population (Federal Highway Administration 1999; U.S. Census Bureau 1993). These behavioral changes have been largely attributed to the advent and proliferation of suburban sprawl and a recently released report confirms that commute times continue to grow, with associated increases in gasoline expenditure and lost time (Texas Transportation Institute 2005). Additionally, sprawl has been identified as an instigator of major public health problems not just limited to those relating to air pollution; American obesity trends have also been closely linked with degrees of sprawl with cities featuring higher sprawl indices also suffering from higher obesity rates (McCann and Ewing 2003). Sprawl has been further blamed for socio-economic injustice as productivity and jobs are transferred from urban neighborhoods to more affluent suburban edge cities (Duany 2000). Development styles associated with sprawl have also been correlated with proportionally higher crime rates, especially during daytime hours, and increased social isolation resulting in lost senses of place and community (Duany 2000).

Regional surveys have indicated high levels of public support for smart growth projects, signifying that impediments to smart growth likely arise from other sources, such as unfavorable transportation policy or reluctant developers. One particularly inclusive survey of 12,000 central Texas residents demonstrated that residents found smart growth scenarios to be the most attractive options for a variety of given facets (Envision Central Texas 2003). Residents found the scenario which corresponded to smart growth development patterns to be most desirable for the objectives of wise land use, high quality of life, and transportation choice (Fregonese Calthorpe Associates 2003). Evidence shows that certain groups are not only expressing these preferences, but following through with them, with many couples without children living at home now choosing to settle in urban areas (ULI 2003). There is also evidence to support the

notion that state and local elected officials are in cases also supportive of smart growth. For instance the state legislature of West Virginia in 2004 enacted new planning regulations more permissive of smart growth (Andrews 2004). James McGreevey, Governor of New Jersey, even went so far as to “declare war on sprawl” in 2003, although business leaders were swift to denounce his comments (Riordan 2003). This study provides an opportunity to more broadly examine the knowledge and sentiments of community leaders and public officials beyond these specific cases.

Faced with physical and financial limitations on typical suburban development as well as mounting evidence of its observable disadvantages, many citizens and planners view “smart growth” as an attractive alternative (National Neighborhood Coalition 2000). With smart growth perceivably providing such a positive alternative to current patterns of development, it is worthwhile to investigate what may be preventing a greater interest in and pursuit of such innovative urban design. Given this framework, the question posed by this research is, What are the attitudes of neighborhood and community leaders in Contra Costa County regarding smart growth, and how do these attitudes affect the pursuit and implementation of smart growth policies by municipal and community government? Naturally, answering this question requires an explicit definition of “attitudes” and of smart growth. For the purposes of this study, “attitudes” will refer specifically to a particular subject’s perceptions of what smart growth is; agreement or disagreement with the goals and implementation methods of smart growth; and the strength with which they hold these views and how they promote or discourage smart growth.

Methods

Subjects for this study consisted entirely of appointed and elected civic officials from within Contra Costa County, California. Contra Costa County contains a variety of land uses, ranging from agriculture in the far eastern areas of the county, to industry and petrochemical refining in the western, more urbanized areas, and also currently faces choices in regard to type and direction of development. Patterns of



Figure 3. Map of Contra Costa County in context (<http://www.homefinder.com/contracostatimes>).

human development feature a comparable variety with categories extending from high-density urban, to low density suburban and rural settings. Many of the lesser developed portions of the county are being compelled to consider how to accommodate increasing populations and expansion, and even urbanized areas are deliberating urban infill and redevelopment policies. In combination, these factors create diverse field of informants with great variance in individuals' attitudes towards and experience of smart growth. All subjects were drawn from communities along the Pittsburg/Bay Point branch of the Bay Area Rapid Transit or BART Line due to the particular efforts of communities along the transit corridor in exploring smart growth, as well as the accessibility of these locations. The cities targeted for examination along this line included Orinda, Lafayette, Walnut Creek, Pleasant Hill, Concord, and Pittsburg.

For reasons of privacy, the location of each particular informant is not revealed. Subjects were found through the use of city governmental websites, which provided contact information for city leaders and appointed officials. A spreadsheet containing all relevant name, contact, and position information was compiled to enable mass e-mailing and systematic calling of potential subjects. Interviews were conducted with willing officials at mutually agreed upon times, with approximately two officials per municipality being interviewed.



Figure 4. Map of BART line and study area (BART.gov).

Interviews were semi-structured and open ended, with subjects explaining their views of, experience with, and reservations about smart growth. This format was deemed most appropriate given the subjective nature of attitudes and the data necessary for their evaluation. Recorded one-on-one interviews provided for the most rapid and candid expression of opinion, without allowing highly premeditated responses. All interviews began with a question resembling the following: "What are your understanding and feelings regarding smart growth, and how have you and your community experienced it?" Questioning continued based on the responses given by each informant, with the goal of encouraging elaboration on essential or intriguing points, such as those related to the provided criteria or items with which the informant particularly took issue. The criteria for smart growth listed in the introduction were also used during the course of

interviews to provoke discussion and as a means of comparison for official's personal views. Interviews concluded when all smart growth criteria were covered and subsequent lines of questioning exhausted.

The methods of analysis for the collected interview responses are qualitative, analytical, and critical in nature. Each recorded interview session was reviewed and central ideas and themes were culled from each informant's response. These core elements are supported through the use of direct quotation and their implications are considered in relation to the position, ideology, and geographical location of the participant. Themes common across interviews or municipalities were given particular attention and reflect the main thrust of the conclusions of this research.

Results

Through the interview and review process, many pervasive themes emerged, some of which were limited by geography and others which were consistent throughout all interviews. The findings of this study are organized according to these common themes. Figure 5 illustrates these and their occurrence among informants:

	City A		City B		City C	
	Official 1	Official 2	Official 1	Official 2	Official 1	Official 2
Supports smart growth generally	•	•	•	•	•	•
Views smart growth as having limited applicability (community "built out")			•	•		
Stresses maintenance of civic character	•	•		•	•	
Stresses community involvement	•	•			•	
Perceives fear of change in community		•			•	•
Concerns regarding lifestyle choices, quality of life, and/or affordability		•			•	

Figure 5 Themes shared across interviews and their incidence with each subject

The single most common theme, which consequently proved most fundamental, was consistent support for the most basic principles of smart growth; all interviewees expressed a desire to see some adherence to the provided criteria by whatever growth was to occur. The following quotations are characteristic of what was heard in all interviews:

- ? “We allow dense development, compact development, we promote transit oriented development, we require affordable housing, so we apply all of those concepts of smart growth in the downtown area” (Official 1, City A).
- ? "I love [smart growth] ideas, because, quite personally, they are my philosophy" (Official 1, City B).
- ? “We locate the housing in the core areas rather than continuing sprawl” (Official 1, City C).
- ? “Because there is so much growth, we need to grow in a way that's not going to further negatively impact the rest of the community” (Official 2, City C).

Though every informant echoed these sentiments in some form, each subject had their own unique perspectives and caveats.

In one instance, city officials, while supportive of smart growth, were nonchalant regarding its relevance to their particular community. as they perceived it as “built out,” or not subject to further large-scale development. One particular official in this locality was noted as saying that aside from one moderately large project underway “it's individual lots, small subdivisions--nothing's left that is large” (Official 2, City B). The official went on to further assert, “I don't think they [the citizens] view smart growth principles as applying around here. There isn't much more to build on” (Official 2, City B). Another official from the same community repeated these same observations exactly, asserting that “other than the occasional lot here and there, there isn't a whole lot of future development that can take place” (Official 1, City B). Despite this perception of stagnancy, officials in this area were nevertheless supportive of what smart growth they viewed as possible. Official 1 expressed support for “a new building that might have top floor residences... and down below that art galleries and boutiques,” as well as “classic infill” for future city offices (Official 1, City B). While supportive of these projects, the official 2 from this location expressed a concern for preservation of character, warning “One problem would be if someone said, ‘Well you have a BART station here...let's put housing on top of it.’ That wouldn't fly as it would destroy the look and feel of our city” (Official 2, City B).

The maintenance of civic character is a particular concern in interviews from all of the examined cities, be it through view corridors, environmental protection, or the preservation of established neighborhoods. Officials in other municipalities were much more ardently protectionist than those who felt their cities would not experience much further growth. One

official warned of smart growth's potential to "force [unwanted] development into a neighborhood" and as possibly compelling "people to live in forms of housing they don't necessarily want to live in" (Official 2, City A). While this worry was a caveat of a hesitantly supportive stance, the same official's comparison of smart growth of 1960's urban renewal might demonstrate deeply rooted anxieties. Another city official stated similar apprehensions more mildly and as part of a more receptive attitude, saying "I think smart growth has a place...we need to start thinking smart and planning smart, however it isn't a one size fits all solution and shouldn't be applied as such" (Official 1, City A).

Community involvement was frequently agreed to be invaluable to smart growth itself and as part of the planning process. Interestingly, all officials advocated at least some accommodation of public demands. One official provided a particularly representative and moderate perspective, remarking that "There needs to be sensitivity to what local needs and local plans say, yet a recognition that every community needs to plan for some amount of higher density" (Official 1, City A). This sentiment was repeated in different form by several officials, with varying degrees of credibility granted to public opinion. In a different city an official was noted as saying:

"We try to get people involved, but at the same time we have to realize that sometimes people's objections are not based on rational things and that's where people who are experts in the field really need to take the reins and move forward—to get people's input, but continue to move forward. I would hate to see smart growth being affected by people that are not very familiar with it and who are just so scared of change that they're against any sort of development or redevelopment." (Official 2, City C)

These statements can be seen as reflective of the tenuous balance between community concerns and stagnation, and also showcase the fear of change officials in many locations believed characteristic of the citizenry.

Fear of change proved to be a basic and pervasive underlying cause of opposition to smart growth and was mentioned in every community, though not every interview. Resident's fear of change prompted some of the strongest statements from officials, both in support of and in opposition to smart growth. In a grand statement, one official declared that "The basic fear is change...There are surface issues that come up that are used, but I think it is more a general fear of change, a fear of change happening too fast" (Official 1, City C). Additionally, another official from the same city reported that reluctance to change had made their experience "very

difficult at times” and went so far as to say, “people start to freak out about any kind of change” (Official 2, City C). Finally, one official noted that the citizenry at large in their community was against smart growth due mainly to fear of change (Official 2, City A). It is important to note, however, that these fears—far from irrational—were fairly frequently grounded in arguably legitimate concerns, including the displacement of current residents, affordability, and preservation of character.

Finally, beyond worries regarding community character, officials expressed concern for smart growth’s effect upon highly tangible conditions including quality of life, lifestyle choices, and affordability within their community, and articulated misgivings about the implications of the “smart” in smart growth. Apropos of the disputation of a one-size-fits-all approach, one official questioned the insinuation by smart growth that other development patterns are inferior stating, “there are people who want their family to live in a single family home and enjoy that type of lifestyle, and I’m not sure that’s any less smart” (Official 1, City C). In a similar vein the same official criticized what they perceived as the constricted choices offered by smart growth to those other than young professionals or childless couples. Another official from a different location addressed the issues of affordability and privacy, illustrating smart growth as potentially “pricing people out of neighborhoods” and prompting resident concerns regarding “people looking down into my backyard” (Official 2, City A).

Discussion

Potential biases and pitfalls of the data collection methods employed arise mainly from the highly restricted and self-selected nature of the data. As these data were gathered from a specific county, in communities on a preexisting transit line, and from willing participants, there is likely a very strong bias in support of smart growth. Furthermore, 0% response rates from communities further along the BART line contribute strongly to potential self-selection and non-response biases. The strong knowledge base and extensive experience the interviewed officials have in regards to smart growth also potentially colors their responses. Therefore, this study may not provide great insight into those who categorically oppose smart growth; however, the reservations held by those who are generally supportive potentially provide a means to improve smart growth in their eyes. Their responses may give clues for the improvement of smart growth’s attractiveness and responsiveness to legitimate criticisms and community concerns. As

such, the results of this study suggest several specific additions and/or changes to smart growth principles.

Figure 5, which illustrated trends regarding particular positions concerning smart growth, demonstrates a great degree of variability. Certain trends, however, may be ascertained, and the results point perhaps in new directions for inquiry. For instance, one might surmise from the discrepancies between cities A and C, and city B, that officials in city B, rather than being intrinsically more favorable to smart growth, instead do not perceive smart growth redevelopment as likely or a threat; therefore they have not developed pointed reservations and concerns. In cities A and C, disparities between officials within each city might indicate that officials in different positions or departments are inclined towards different perspectives on smart growth, perhaps owing to their training or the degree of public accountability inherent to their position. That two officials in different cities expressed overlapping concerns regarding smart growth conceivably indicates that these same doubts may be represented among other officials in these same cities, as well as others across the region. Investigating the prevalence of these qualms could provide a stronger understanding of potential objections to smart growth and may thereby augment the observations and proposals of this research.

One potential means of allaying concerns regarding smart growth is the reframing of smart growth as alternative choice rather than prescription; where smart growth is mandated, it must be undertaken as a process over which communities may exercise some degree of control. By framing smart growth as an alternative route as part of an inclusive process, it could be differentiated from other, more rigid movements of the past and perhaps enjoy a friendlier reception, even if owing only to the perception of greater flexibility. If citizens can be shown that change is inevitable, but that smart growth enables a greater degree of control over that change and allows more positive outcomes, this may assuage the fears noted by so many officials and allow greater progress on issues of smart growth and planning.

Broad substantive changes, however, beyond mere presentation are also potentially warranted for smart growth principles. Advocates of smart growth should perhaps consider the allowance of greater flexibility and the recognition of community needs, as well as the accommodation of conditions and lifestyles that, while not entirely consistent with smart growth, can be made more so. By taking this broader and more integrative approach, smart growth could offer a wider suitability and expand its ability to affect the habits and behaviors of those living in

communities outside those directly guided by smart growth principles. The flexibility may also provide for transitional development and gradual community change that will prove more political and financially feasible, as well as publicly palatable.

As it stands, smart growth seemingly offers a positive alternative to current patterns of land use, such as suburban sprawl. However, its current reception among the interviewed officials potentially demonstrates that even its supporters harbor doubts that perhaps deserve redress. If smart growth advocates wish it to become a more viable and widespread remedy to current development, they should perhaps consider retooling smart growth as a dynamic concept open to participation, inclusive of diverse lifestyles, and responsive to community concerns.

References

- Andrews J. 2004. Broad coalition wins new state planning law in West Virginia. *Planning* **70**:38.
- BART. 2005. BART System Map. **2006** <<http://bart.gov>>
- Broos M. J., R. Day. 2005. Measuring Urban Sprawl and Predicting Land Use Change using Geospatial Technologies. **2005** <<http://lal.cas.psu.edu/Research/sprawl.html>>
- Contra Costa - ContraCostaTimes.com. 2006. County Map. Classified Ventures, LLC. <<http://www.homefinder.com/contracostatimes>>
- Duany A. 2000. *Suburban nation : the rise of sprawl and the decline of the American Dream*. North Point Press, New York.
- Envision Central Texas. RMMA Airport Reuse and Redevelopment Plan. Austin, TX: Envision Central Texas; 2004.
- Federal Highway Administration. Summary Statistics on Demographic Characteristics and Total Travel 1969, 1977, 1983, 1990, and 1995 NPTS. Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration; 1999 October 1999.
- Fregonese Calthorpe Associates. 2003. Survey Results - Envision Central Texas.
- Innes J. Taking the Three 'E's Seriously: The Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities Executive Summary **vii-viii**. University of California at Berkeley: Institute of Urban & Regional Development; 2004.
- McCann BA, Ewing R. Measuring the Health Effects of SPRAWL. Washington, D.C.: Smart Growth America; 2003 September 2003.

O'Neill D. Smart Growth: Myth and FactTM. Washington, D.C.: ULI-the Urban Land Institute; 1999.

Riordan K. 2003. Governor of New Jersey delivers sprawl ultimatum. *Planning* **69**:31.

Schrank D, Lomax T. The 2005 Urban Mobility Report. The Texas A&M University System: Texas Transportation Institute; 2005 May 2005. 1 p.

The National Neighborhood Coalition Neighborhoods, Regions, and Smart Growth Project. Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods: Communities Leading The Way. Washington, D.C.: The National Neighborhoods Coalition; 2000 September 2000.

The Urban Land Institute. 2003. Intown Housing: A Development Trend Fueled by America's Tendency Toward More "Hiving" and Less "Cocooning". **2005**
<<http://www.uli.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Research&template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=2503>>

U.S. Census Bureau. Population, Housing Units, Area Measurements, and Density: 1790 to 1990. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau; 1993 8/26/93.

Weiser M. 2004. All choked up: central California finds one more reason to battle sprawl. *Planning* **70**:10.