



Smart Growth is Neither

By Russ Harding

Summary

Policymakers should forgo central planning such as smart growth, which hinders private property rights and affordable housing efforts, and let land-owners use their own property as they see best.

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Smart growth has been the orthodoxy of overzealous urban planners for some time. Although it sounds appealing at first blush, smart growth in reality is nothing more than anti-suburban policy. According to the tenets of smart growth, the perceived ills of urban sprawl (suburbs) can be cured once people abandon their automobiles, live in densely populated urban areas and travel by foot or mass transit. These actions supposedly would foster a sense of community and promote healthier lifestyles.

No matter how much smart growth is extolled as the preferred land-use policy, it will not succeed. Smart growth suffers from the same fatal flaw that plagues all central planning — a misguided belief that somehow planners know what choices people should make and if only the “right” incentives are put in place people will do what the planners think they should.

However, a free people making free choices will vote with their feet. This is precisely what has happened in the United States and throughout most of the modern world. In his book “War on the Dream,” Wendell Cox noted: “Among metropolitan areas of more than 1,000,000 population in the high-income world, approximately 95 percent of urban growth has been in the suburbs. In the United States, Canada, Japan, and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand), more than 90 percent of the growth has been in the suburbs since 1965. In Western Europe the share of growth in the suburbs has been even greater, at 114 percent, reflecting the continued central city population losses.”

Another major reason smart growth policies fail to work is that they try to solve a nonexistent problem — preserving limited open space. According to Cox: “The human footprint (urban development, rural development, and agricultural land use) has decreased in the United States, Canada, and Australia, as significant amounts of agricultural land have been withdrawn and turned back into open space. In the United States, the human footprint has been reduced by 15 percent since 1950, an amount equal to the land areas of Texas and Oklahoma combined.” Michigan follows this trend. The amount of urbanized land in Michigan comprises less than 10 percent of the state. Forestland in Michigan has actually grown by 2 million acres in the last 20 years (www.mackinac.org/5653).

If smart growth policies have largely been a failure, why should we worry about their future implementation? For two major reasons: less

continued on back



The Detroit People Mover is an example of mass transit that smart growth central planners attempt to use to influence people's choices.

affordable housing and loss of private property rights. Land use restrictions that attempt to confine development to an urban core area increase the cost of property (a key component of housing affordability). This may provide a windfall for developers but it increases the cost of owning or renting housing. Unaffordable housing has the biggest impact on lower income residents who often have limited ability to relocate to lower cost areas. According to Cox, there is a direct correlation in the affordability of housing and zoning restrictions not only in the United States but throughout the world. In fact, between 1995 and 2005, urban areas that have the most restrictive land use policies showed an increase in the measure of unaffordable housing five times greater than those areas without the restrictive policies.

Implementation of smart growth policies frequently results in the loss of private property rights. Landowners who purchased property prior to smart growth restrictions are particularly affected. Not only do smart growth policies place restrictions on the use of private property, but they make matters worse because affected landowners receive no compensation for their loss. This has led to citizen ballot initiatives being passed in Oregon (a smart growth leader) and Arizona to limit this abuse.

Smart growth is neither smart nor growth. Property owners seem to understand this. Perhaps it is too much to expect urban planners to get it but state and local elected officials should if they want Michigan to once again be competitive.

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