

Smart Growth in Focus

Smart growth is a topic about which there are a lot of opinions. Recently, the *Hartford Courant* sponsored a forum and ran several guest opinion pieces on the topic. Here are a few of the opinions...

Stirrings of Smart Growth

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Frustrated by years of relentless and poorly planned development, activists in East Hampton last fall challenged the status quo at the ballot box. They formed a third party, called the Chatham Party after an early name for the town. They won a majority of seats on the town council on a platform of smarter residential and commercial development, preservation of the town's rural character and protection of its natural environment.

Thus far the five Chatham council members are walking the walk. They've created a commission to protect the town's signature body of water, Lake Pocotopaug. They've passed ordinances to limit big-box development, create a design review board and discourage blight, and are acquiring open space.

The East Hampton experience is hardly unique. Across the state, citizens are beginning to appreciate the cost of sprawl development - more driving, more traffic and more fuel consumption, loss of farms and forests, air and water pollution, higher costs of services, isolation of the poor and elderly, limited housing choices - and are organizing to do something about it.

It's imperative that the incoming governor and legislative leaders get out in front of the nascent smart growth movement and nurture it with changes in state policy.

Because, as we cannot emphasize strongly enough, the work is not finished; it is just getting started. Compared with most other Northeast states, Connecticut is late to the game of halting sprawl. Farms and woodlands are still being bulldozed willy-nilly, roads are still being widened as traffic increases, urban areas are still challenged.

These trends are being challenged at the local level in towns across the state.

Canton: The poster child for strip-mall sprawl when it replaced a lovely nine-hole golf course with a shopping center a few years ago, Canton has emerged with a strong citizens group, Canton Advocates for Responsible Expansion Inc. Among other things, CARE questioned the town's ability to enforce land-use regulations after members discovered that a builder in Collinsville had ignored the stipulations of his inland wetlands permit.

Simsbury: Residents organized "Save The Woods" to preserve 424 forested acres that the Ethel Walker School was considering for a housing development, and created Simsbury Homeowners Advocating Responsible Expansion to oppose a big-box development on Route 10.

There's now a proposal to sell development rights to the Ethel Walker land to the town, which voters must approve in November. The developer of the big-box proposal has radically changed the project to a mixed-use, New Urbanist design.

Waterford: With assistance from the University of Connecticut's Center for Land Use Education and Research, Waterford produced a model low-impact housing development. The subdivision in the Jordan Cove area used techniques that hydrologically mimic a forested landscape, thus lessening the amount of stormwater leaving the site and polluting nearby waterways. The CLEAR

staff offers education, training and technical assistance to towns, and leads projects such as a recent build-out analysis in East Haddam that shows town leaders how the town will develop under current zoning regulations.

New Haven: It's not enough to slow growth in rural areas; growth needs somewhere to go. The smart growth idea is to make city and town centers more appealing. The New Haven Urban Design League has been integral to the Elm City's comeback, weighing in on the expansion of Yale-New Haven Hospital, the downtown move of Gateway Community College and virtually every other recent project in the city.

These grass-roots efforts are beginning to coalesce into a statewide coalition under the banner of 1,000 Friends of Connecticut. This group, formed over the past two years and based on a model developed in Oregon and elsewhere, includes business, government, education, labor and religious leaders. It recently distributed a briefing book advocating growth management legislation to leaders at the Capitol, and members will be in the halls during the 2007 session pushing for these changes.

But while local action is essential, so many growth issues transcend town boundaries that there must be a state effort to encourage wiser growth management.

About 20 states have adopted some kind of growth management strategy, and in each case the governor led the way. That suggests that if Connecticut is to make headway against relentless development, it's got to be the governor's baby, a top priority. And it must be an issue in the gubernatorial campaign this fall.

The object is to protect natural and scenic resources by encouraging development in areas with existing infrastructure, and making those areas more attractive by increasing housing and transportation options. To get there, the governor and legislative leaders must:

Change tax policy. This is the elephant in the living room. Study after study says the state's heavy reliance on the property tax to fund local education pushes towns toward poor land-use decisions. The need for more property-tax revenue led Canton to abandon its golf course for a mall. Though it is politically daunting, officials have to move a substantial amount of school funding to a different source of revenue - or nothing will change.

Strengthen planning. There have to be strong local, regional and state plans that are consistent with one another. This is another difficult but essential step toward sensible growth management. Good planning should coordinate smart growth efforts. For example, in the past year the state has made major commitments to transportation and affordable housing. Why not connect them, by making the funds available for transit-oriented development?

Provide incentives. The state needs to put its money into smart growth by funding incentives for residential and commercial development in town centers and transit corridors. The state cannot tell people where to live, but it certainly can decide where to put its own money.

Study the impact. Though the issue has been heavily examined, there are two studies that would help illuminate the growth question in Connecticut. One is a build-out study, to show what the state will look like in 20 years if current development patterns continue. We suspect this will have the same effect the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come had on Ebenezer Scrooge. It would also be helpful to know how much sprawl is costing the state, when compared with the cost of more compact patterns of development.

Connecticut is on a path to become a giant, undifferentiated subdivision connected by highways and strip malls. State leaders, working with local groups, must develop a strong and sophisticated program that gets us on a different path, one that accommodates growth while maintaining the natural environment that has historically made this state one of the country's best places to live.

There isn't much time.

Groundwork Laid For Smarter Growth

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Commentary By State Rep. Lewis J. Wallace Jr.

It is great to live in Connecticut; we have a quality of life that is the envy of much of America and most of the world. But that quality of life is threatened.

Our major cities are struggling with high property taxes, flat or declining populations, weakening job opportunities, high-need children in public schools and the lingering perception of lawlessness. In many of our smaller towns, the increasing cost of education is pitting old-timers against newcomers and forcing multiple budget referendums.

There is no one answer to these problems. As House chairman of the General Assembly's Planning and Development Committee, I have worked with dedicated legislators to advance our Connecticut version of smart growth. As we held public hearings in municipalities across the state, we heard from Nutmeggers who are living farther and farther from their workplaces and thus spending more time in traffic and less at home. We noted that expensive infrastructure is crumbling and going unused in our core cities while being rebuilt at great expense in formerly rural areas. Connecticut is losing open space at a rate twice the national average.

After hearings and discussions with a range of interest groups, we identified five great needs our state must meet to enhance our quality of life: The need to create jobs and homes, to preserve open space, to encourage people to live in urban areas, to save tax dollars and to encourage participation in planning at the local level of government.

Our committee made a start at sensible management of the state's growth with legislation in 2005. This legislation strengthened the role of the municipal plan of conservation and development. It requires municipalities to consider areas in town appropriate for compact, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use development and for the local legislative body to vote on the plan.

Our legislation encourages consistency between municipal, regional and state conservation and development plans by requiring each town to submit its plan to the region for review and the region to prepare a plan and submit it to the state for review.

It established Priority Funding Areas where state tax dollars for economic development will be directed, reducing the need for new infrastructure investments, and established Corridor Management Areas around interstate highways, rail lines and transportation centers to encourage growth and development in those areas. This year we made bonding available for transportation-oriented development.

This is a start, one that must be built upon. As I leave the legislature and step down as point man on growth-management legislation, I'm convinced we must provide incentives that encourage cooperation, not competition, between our municipalities. Our property tax system does not encourage cooperation because, as currently devised, one town's tax gain is another town's tax loss.

There are four levers to encourage cooperation between municipalities. The voters will soon choose a governor. That leader should:

Allocate funding to Corridor Management Areas and Priority Funding Areas, encouraging transit-

oriented development.

Fund our programs that preserve farmland and open space.

Have an urban strategy focusing not on big buildings but good schools and aggressive policing. Most middle-class families move to the safest neighborhoods with the best public schools they can afford. Our next governor must work with local officials to create more of those neighborhoods in our urban areas.

Strengthen the capacity of the state Office of Policy and Management to provide planning assistance, tools and technical support to municipalities.

Concurrently, organizations such as the Sierra Club and 1,000 Friends of Connecticut must encourage their members to be involved in local planning. Growth management should come from the bottom up, not the top down. We have laid the groundwork; now is the time for a bold agenda for transportation and land use in Connecticut.

State Rep. Lewis J. Wallace Jr. is retiring from the General Assembly after representing the 109th District for five terms. He is a financial planner and lives in Danbury.

A Tradition to Build On

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By PHILIP LANGDON

New England is celebrated for its picturesque, human-scale town centers - which is logical but something of a paradox, since our six tradition-steeped states pretty much stopped giving birth to any new town centers more than a century ago. The most notable exception is Mashpee Commons, in the Cape Cod town of Mashpee. Now 20 years old, this ambitious collection of stores, offices, housing, entertainment and public spaces - laid out like an old town center - is a reproof to the idea that town centers are strictly a thing of the past.

In the mid-1980s, Providence native Buff Chace had inherited a mostly flat stretch of land in Mashpee, 10 miles east of Falmouth, that included a dinky shopping center at a rotary. Chace had never liked conventional shopping centers. They seemed non-places to him - buildings of little character, sitting in uninviting expanses of blacktop. So he and his partner, Douglas Storrs, started altering and adding onto the undistinguished little center.

Their idea was to build a downtown by following all the "rules" (mostly unwritten) that traditional Cape Cod and New England downtowns had heeded. They constructed a network of narrow streets. Along the streets, they installed wide sidewalks. Abutting the sidewalks, they erected buildings two or three stories high, so that offices and apartments would be above the shops, adding variety and activity, and so that the buildings would be tall enough to give a sense of enclosure to the street. The feeling of enclosure - of being in a comfortably proportioned "outdoor room" - is one of the things that makes many streets in old cities and towns appealing.

The developers chose traditional styles for most of the buildings, but also hired architects who designed a number of stores in a more contemporary vein. Recently they've been planning to construct nearly 400 units of housing in two brand-new neighborhoods. A quarter of the housing is required to be affordably priced so that some of the workers at Mashpee Commons can live within walking distance of their jobs.

Block by block, year by year, Chace and Storrs expanded and diversified Mashpee Commons, all the while sticking to the idea that people should be able to do things on foot - get to stores,

restaurants, movie theaters, doctors, the post office, the public library - a broad range of everyday destinations. They didn't ban cars, but they had them park at the curb - since on-street parking helps pedestrians on the sidewalks feel shielded from moving vehicles - or in perimeter lots that are better shaped than the oceans of asphalt at conventional shopping centers.

In their decision to revive a traditional, mixed-use form of development, Chace and Storrs were onto something important. Mashpee Commons became a much-studied example of how New Englanders can create compact places amid the sprawling, low-density development that's been the norm for the past several decades. When the mixed-use Storrs Center is built in Mansfield, it can trace some of its principles to the now well-established center at Mashpee.

It's impossible to create a center that pleases everyone. Some have grouched that there are too many national chains at Mashpee Commons, and too many tourists arriving in SUVs. Mashpee is part of the Cape, which reflects contemporary America, both good and bad, so if you go to Mashpee Commons, you'll inevitably see consumerism on display, especially in the summer. Yet given the nature of our advertising-saturated culture and the obstacles to creating mixed-use, pedestrian-scale centers, what Chace and Storrs have accomplished is impressive.

Casual visitors may not notice all of Chace and Storrs' ingenious techniques, so I'll point out a few. Foremost is their method of accommodating small start-up businesses, the kind that can't afford large stores. The developers have found that national and regional chains are unavoidable, but at one edge of the retail area, Chace and Storrs went out of their way to attract independents by constructing a row of tiny, pitch-roofed, gray-shingled stores - very Cape Cod-like. These 16 stores are only 350 to 425 square feet each, a good size for mom-and-pop operations, some of which gradually grow into larger enterprises. The little stores provide a uniqueness that makes shopping interesting. There are doors at both the front and the back, so in warm weather the breezes blow through.

The little shops create a pleasant edge for the parking lot behind them. As soon as the shops were completed, people began walking to this northern end of the development more than they used to - in part because it had become a street with storefronts on both sides, an arrangement that people instinctively enjoy.

The developers placed a small post office in the center of Mashpee Commons, knowing that post offices generate many daily visits, which are good for businesses close by and good for fostering social ties, as people regularly see their fellow townspeople. The developers encouraged other civic uses such as schools, a church and a fire and police station. They paid the architectural expenses for designing a new public library, which fronts on the town common just up a slope from the center of Mashpee Commons.

They required chain operators such as CVS and Stop & Shop to occupy buildings better than the corporate standard. The CVS store, clad in pleasant red brick, features glass on more than one side, so the quality of light surpasses that inside a typical retail box, where artificial illumination takes the liveliness out of the atmosphere. Mashpee Commons and the adjoining North Market Street area, by the same developers, together meet many of the daily needs of the town, which had previously lacked a center.

New England stopped building town centers decades ago partly because automobiles spread activity out, and also because zoning ordinances separated differing uses and made compact, pedestrian-oriented places illegal to build in most jurisdictions. With perseverance, Chace and Storrs have demonstrated that the old way is both profitable and humanly appealing. It is worth bringing back, and not just on Cape Cod.

Philip Langdon is a member of the Place Board of Contributors and senior editor of New Urban News, a national newsletter on community design. He lives in New Haven and first visited Mashpee Commons in 1987.

Stalling Sprawl State Must Take Leadership Role in Shaping Development

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By PARRIS N. GLENDENING, and CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN

Connecticut today looks a lot like Maryland and New Jersey did when we took office in our respective states: a state with a modest endowment of land that is being depleted quickly by rapid, often poorly conceived development.

The goal, of course, is not to try to stop growth and development - a cure worse than the disease - but to harness and shape it so that communities get better as they grow, and so that the state's rural and natural legacy can be passed to future generations. From experience, we know that this cannot be accomplished in any lasting way unless the state government plays a major part (and that is doubly true in a state without counties.) And it certainly helps if the governor makes it a personal priority.

Without pretending to be experts on Connecticut, we are willing to bet that much of the misplaced development is aided and abetted, and even subsidized, by state policies and practices, much as they were in our home states.

It was certainly true in Maryland, where we were funding infrastructure and school construction in areas where neither the locality nor the state had planned for development.

In 1997, Maryland passed a Smart Growth Act. The state began to remove subsidies for sprawl and instead steer funds toward communities that had planned to absorb growth in a smaller, better-planned footprint. Implementing it was hard work, but it is amazing what money can do to focus the mind.

In New Jersey, we faced a double whammy, with much of our dwindling open space disappearing even as our cities struggled to redevelop.

Reversing this took actions large and small. First, the voters committed to preserving 40 percent of the state for posterity, backing it with more than \$1 billion to acquire open space and preserve farmland and historic assets. Then we took steps to make it easier to redevelop in existing areas, reclaim industrial brownfields and adapt older buildings for re-use.

These moves weren't always easy, but when we could demonstrate the benefits for ordinary citizens - holding down property tax bills, creating alternatives to traffic congestion, creating healthy communities, and expanding recreational and other opportunities - they had strong bipartisan support.

The good news is that many other states are adopting these approaches and creating new ones. But change doesn't happen overnight. It is critical that there be three elements to ensure continuity beyond the current governor.

First, there must be a statewide framework adopted in law. A governor can take many steps administratively, but a successor - as we know from personal experience - may not have the same priorities. It is important that a smart planning and investment framework be codified.

It is also crucial that there be a non-governmental advocacy infrastructure to keep watch. Special-interest lobbying, or even mere inattention, can erode the commitment to smarter growth unless credible organizations are there to sustain it. Connecticut is fortunate to have 1,000 Friends of Connecticut, whose counterparts in Maryland, New Jersey and many other states are crucial to

continued progress.

Finally, there must be an ongoing commitment to communication with the public. These issues are complicated. Sprawl- producing inter-relationships aren't always apparent. It is vital that governments and nonprofit groups invest in an ongoing public discussion of the issues. This newspaper is making a tremendous start on that.

Specifically, the state's leadership would do well to think through these four goals:

Ensuring that planning happens, and that it happens with meaningful input from citizens. There needs to be a state agency that is accountable for planning, and there should be someone in the governor's cabinet who is accountable for coordinating state agencies overseeing transportation, environment, housing and the like.

That person should report regularly to the governor, the legislature and the public on progress, or the lack of it.

Connecting transportation and land use. You can spend all the money in the world on transportation infrastructure, whether on roads or rails, but that money will be wasted if it is not coordinated with the pace and form of development. If you build communities so every activity requires a long car trip, no amount of pavement will cure congestion.

At the same time, there is no point in building a rail system if destinations are not clustered at stations. Remember, if you design communities for automobiles, you get more automobiles. If you design them for people, you get walkable, livable communities.

Working with employers and businesses. State governments want economic development, and employers want to know that workers can find housing and transportation close to jobs. State policies can work to the benefit of both.

For example, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich just signed a bill that expands tax incentives for companies that locate within easy reach of affordable workforce housing or public transit. Communities with the strongest sense of place are those that are most competitive in today's knowledge-based economy.

Making sure tax policies are working for, and not against, community and state goals. Too often, competition among local governments for commercial taxpayers leads to a development-at-any-cost attitude, or causes localities to use zoning to exclude all but the largest and most expensive housing. States in which local governments are not overly reliant on property tax revenues have better options and greater leverage in coordinating development and insisting on a high quality of life.

Based on what we've seen, Connecticut has the elements necessary to become a national model for innovations in guiding growth for the betterment of the state's people.

All that is needed is public, private and community leadership to put it in motion.

Former New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman was administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in President Bush's first term. Former Maryland Gov. Parris N. Glendening is president of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute. The two are co-chairmen of the National Smart Growth Council.