"Is 'Smart Growth' Really So Smart?"

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Urban areas have a host of issues to deal with, including traffic congestion, air pollution, conflicts over land use and open space, maintenance of a basic transportation infrastructure, and problems associated with the urban poor. Some of these are particularly important in growing cities, since in growing cities there is increased pressure on land use, roads, and other infrastructure. Handling these in effective ways matters a lot . . . each affects the welfare and happiness of the residents of the area.

Lexington certainly qualifies as growing metropolitan area and residents and city officials feel the need to deal with many of the above issues. One approach is turn to what has been dubbed "smart growth" planning strategies. I agree with smart growth advocates regarding the importance for urban areas to deal with the above listed problems. I also agree that successfully addressing these problems makes cities more "livable." My agreement ends there, however. The specific ideas promoted by "smart growth" are not satisfactory in concept or in their actual outcomes.

Smart growth advocates associate the problems of urban areas with urban sprawl: long commutes, road congestion, air pollution associated with traffic, use of greenspace for housing developments, and a low income population that has difficulty affording housing and finding transportation across a far-flung metropolis. Of course, much of what we term "urban sprawl" is due to the historical conversion of agricultural land in the outskirts of cities into suburbs and the subsequent growth in commuting via automobile. Smart growth advocates seem to believe this historical development is the source of urban problems. The specific policies they promote, in many ways, try to roll back this historical development pattern, pushing metro areas into smaller, more densely populated land areas.

Examples of smart growth policies are urban growth boundaries; lot size limitations; encouraging or requiring more high-density housing and mixed-use development; limiting parking availability; discouraging automobile-oriented shopping areas; conversion of traffic lanes to bike lanes; more development of mass transit to attract middle-class car owners. The intended effect is, I suppose, for people to live closer to work and commute less, implying less congestion and less pollution. Housing density would be higher, with greenspace in designated places or else in wide swaths outside the city. This may lead to a re-emergence of small neighborhood shops and stores.

To the advocates of smart growth, this perhaps sounds like idyllic living. But here lies the rub. A lot of people don't want to live like that. There are many, many people who like the comfort of a ranch home, the joy of having their own little

greenspace in the backyard, quiet streets in the neighborhood, and the freedom of movement that an automobile brings. Are we to cast aside the dreams and desires of these folks and allow only the preferences that conform to those of smart growth advocates? I hope we would agree that this is not a desirable outcome. After all, we live in a country that trumpets the freedom we have to express our own preferences regarding what we say, how we act, what we do, and what we buy. Trying to push everyone into the same urban lifestyle box is antithetical to this tradition.

In addition, large urban areas are virtually synonymous with diversity. Cities are diverse in ethnic and cultural backgrounds, in skills and talents, and in attitudes, preferences, and lifestyles. In fact, many celebrate this diversity and argue that it is an important source of the life and vigor of cities. Why, then, embrace the diverse backgrounds, skills, and preferences of urban area dwellers . . . except when they are preferences for a nice lawn, a quiet neighborhood, and a two-car garage?

Now all of this talk doesn't get around the problem that lots of commuting with lots of cars causes congestion and pollution. But there are ways to deal with these problems without mandating lifestyles. For example, some cities have begun to use toll systems for driving on busy roadways at peak times. Local governments could institute annual fees for drivers for the expected emissions of their vehicles (based on how "clean" the vehicle is and the miles driven). These serve to limit congestion and pollution from cars, but still allow individuals to choose their own lifestyles. Rather than trying to force a city into a configuration suitable for mass transit via rail, municipalities can embrace the formation of transit firms such as jitney services and shuttle vans that serve well in low-density cities and are affordable to low-income people.

There is substantial evidence that the "smart growth" approach does not really work well. For example, Portland, Oregon has adopted many of the policies consistent with this approach. Its limitations on land available for development, discouragement of parking availability, and inattention to road capacity have served to *increase* the amount of congestion in the city. Its attempts to promote light rail to middle-class car owners has not been successful. Additionally, the land use restrictions have driven up the price of housing, making it more difficult for low-income families in the city. Similarly, the focus of mass transit on attracting the middle class comes at the expense of developing a low-density transit system that would serve the already existing low-income clientele.[1]

Smart growth is not really smart. It tries to squelch individual desires and preferences and frequently ends up creating more congestion and higher living costs . . . two of the very problems it alleges to solve. In Lexington, let's learn from the missteps of others and be smarter than smart growth.

[1]For more details on the Portland experience, see Randal O'Toole, "The Folly of 'Smart Growth'," *Regulation*, Fall 2001.