

Smart Growth: A View From Capitol Hill

by Senator James M. Jeffords

While the term “smart growth” is new, the concept is not. The difference between today and the 1960s, when I began working on the issue as a State Senator in the Vermont legislature, is the recognition of an unprecedented fork in the growth management road. One road leads to unchecked growth, devouring open space across the countryside. The other leads to growth that will strengthen communities and preserve the working landscape.

More and more communities across the country are taking this second road to smart growth. Citizens such as you are working to promote better patterns of development by contributing long hours of volunteer work with local planning commissions.

Smart growth efforts are also being undertaken by local non-profit organizations and business partnerships. In my home state, for example, the Vermont Forum on Sprawl has been studying growth management issues facing smaller communities. Similar efforts are occurring nationwide. To give just two examples: In Utah, a non-partisan, community partnership called Envision Utah, has held stakeholder meetings, compiled growth options, and solicited input from all residents of the Greater Wasatch Area through local newspapers. In Illinois, the Chicago area’s business community, the region’s 270 mayors, and a coalition of over 90 public, private, and civic leaders, have come together to promote balanced development and sensible growth through a partnership called the Campaign for Sensible Growth.

At the state level, governors have assumed a strong leadership role in improving statewide development patterns. Many have enlisted broad-based task forces to study their states’ development trends and recommend new

statewide policies to improve the quality of life. Others have spearheaded programs that preserve cultural, historic, natural, and recreational resources through land acquisition and conservation easements. Often this is linked to programs designed to draw development back to downtown areas and town centers.

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FEDERAL SUPPORT OF SMART GROWTH

In January 1999, Senator Carl Levin and I established the Senate Smart Growth Task Force. Out of this, a series of legislative initiatives have been put forward focusing on providing the necessary resources and legislative authority to support state and local smart growth objectives.

Supporting Urban Centers. Directing investment to our urban centers is vital to reducing development pressure on outlying areas. Toward this goal, an exciting opportunity has arisen in the form of broad bipartisan legislation, the Brownfields Revitalization and Environmental Restoration Act of 2000 (S.2700). By providing \$200 million in federal funding to the states, the legislation would promote the cleanup and reuse of brownfields, provide financial assistance for brownfields revitalization, and enhance State response programs.

Public transportation projects that improve access to, and between, downtown areas and reduce the strip development associated with automobiles are a critical component of urban revitalization. For example, the High Speed Rail Investment Act (S.1900) would make Amtrak bonds more attractive to investors and raise \$10 billion over 10 years for high-speed rail infrastructure.

Open Space Preservation. While much attention has focused on urban revitalization, preserving open space is equally important. The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) provides funding for state, local, and federal efforts to conserve land and water, provide recreational opportunities, preserve historic resources, and protect fish and wildlife. Unfortunately, the LWCF has not been funded at the authorized level in recent years. There are several pending legislative initiatives which seek to provide permanent funding, bringing critical preservation and recreational money for towns and cities across the country. On May 10, The House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the Conservation and Reinvestment Act; now, the Senate needs to follow suit.

New Englanders are pleased that the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact has been reauthorized through September 2001. The goal of the compact is to halt the loss of small dairy farms. A thriving dairy industry in New England enhances our economy, in tourism as well as agricultural dollars, and protects a working landscape important to small communities across the region. Other parts of the country are now looking at the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact as a model and will be seeking federal legislation in the near future.

Encouraging Collaboration. The federal government will only be a successful advocate of smart growth if it is a partner

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to local efforts, and sets the tone in its own actions. For example, many landowners would like to see their land preserved; however, it is often unaffordable under the current tax code. By providing tax relief, the federal government can take a step toward facilitating the preservation efforts of landowners. Initiatives such as my Conservation Tax Incentives Act (S.808) would reduce capital gains tax by fifty percent for landowners who sell property for conservation purposes.

Congress also must lead by example. The Post Office Community Partnership Act (S.556) would enable local communities to participate in U.S. Postal Service decisions to relocate, close, or consolidate their local post offices. Enforcing consistency across federal agencies and programs is an important first step in promoting a working relationship between the federal, state and local levels.

Planners are vital to the success of smart growth. Your leadership is indispensable in directing us down the road that allows economic progress to move forward, while maintaining the community character and quality of life Americans deserve. This is the path to which I am committed. ♦

Senator James M. Jeffords of Vermont was the American Planning Association's 1996 Legislator of the Year.

