

## **Everyone Rallies Behind ‘Smart Growth.’ That’s A Problem.**

A quick survey of recent Smart Growth literature reveals that the term is more and more popular, but less and less clear. Indeed, one finds an agenda-driven battle going on around the nation to dictate the meaning of the term, and thus the outcome it produces. The Environmental Protection Agency has a Smart Growth website, [www.epa.gov/livability/](http://www.epa.gov/livability/), but so does the National Association of Homebuilders, [www.nahb.com/smartgrowth/](http://www.nahb.com/smartgrowth/). Anyone can pick up the term, it seems, and use it for their own ends.

The New York region, including New Jersey, has been a proving ground for what Smart Growth is and isn't. Gov. Whitman's administration bought up farmlands and forests (or their development rights), and (less successfully) attempted to redirect transportation money to maintenance and away from new construction, under the label of Smart Growth.

Maryland popularized the term. There, under Gov. Parris Glendening, the term described policies meant to redirect state infrastructure spending to established areas and away from less developed areas, so as to preserve natural resources, reduce sprawl, save taxpayer money and promote inner-city redevelopment. But some home builders, architects and policy planners now use it to mean higher density development with some urban touches, with little attention paid to location or infrastructure choices.

Last month, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy released *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences*, edited by Terry Szold and Armando Carbonell, with eleven essays, plus a foreword and an afterward, which explores the slippery concept.

Arthur “Chris” Nelson of the Georgia Institute of Technology, in his essay “How Do We Know Smart Growth When We See It?,” comes up with criteria that, in his words, “allows us to separate charlatans from the real thing.” Under his criteria, the New Urbanist community of Kentlands in Montgomery County, Md. is not Smart Growth, because it is built well outside the existing metropolitan area, lacks transit and a diversity of home prices. Also not fully “smart” is Boulder, Co., which has saved its mountain slopes from development, but been less successful in providing housing for all incomes. Nelson praises the small development of Ridenour in Georgia, Silver Spring in Maryland, and the city of Portland and the state of Oregon as true, Smart Growth places because of their balance and attempt to integrate many needs.

Alex Krieger, chairman of urban design at Harvard's design school, offers “seven impractical suggestions” for pursuing Smart Growth. He suggests taxing second homes, “up-zoning” idyllic communities like Cambridge to accept more development, and implementing regional tax sharing.

William J. Mitchell, dean of MIT's architecture and planning school, says policy makers should use public development of digital infrastructure to guide growth to

appropriate places. The telecommunications revolution, he says, “does not simply produce featureless urban sprawl. It has a more complex and subtle effect, allowing a wide variety of spatial patterns to emerge.”

For a wholly different set of meanings of the term, there is the Heritage Foundation’s and Political Economy Research Center’s *A Guide To Smart Growth*, edited by Jane S. Shaw and Ronald D. Utt and published in 2000 by these conservative think tanks. In similar fashion as the Lincoln book, it is an assembly of 10 essays, plus a preface, introduction and conclusion.

Taken as a whole, these writers say that Smart Growth means building more highways and getting rid of government spending and regulation (except when needed to build more highways.) Former U.S. Sen. Malcom Wallop (R-Wy), in his preface, calls Portland, hero of Professor Nelson’s piece, one of the “monstrous experiments in government growth management.”

But if their prescriptions are set aside, some analysis by the Heritage team is surprisingly similar to that of the Lincoln Institute authors and other growth management advocates.

Wendell Cox, a champion of highways and opponent of transit, observes that “traffic congestion is a cause of sprawl as people move to more sparsely populated areas to escape excessive traffic.” But Harvard’s Alex Krieger has often said in lectures that “most sprawl is caused by people fleeing sprawl.”

Samuel R. Staley, of the Reason Policy Institute, criticizes zoning and other land-use laws as pushing up home prices, excluding people of lesser income and being inflexible. Of course, New Urbanists and other growth control advocates have similar criticism.

Ronald D. Utt, a Heritage Foundation fellow, criticizes tax-payer funded stadiums and urban renewal, a criticism shared by many conventional planners. Utt suggests that the 119 million Americans that were added to the country’s population between 1950 and 1998 had to be put somewhere and that this was the chief cause of sprawl.

If there is a flaw in the Heritage team’s general line, it is the authors’ tendencies to discount the effect of publicly-funded infrastructure on growth patterns. The free market, like it or not, did not build the infrastructure of suburbia. Government money and policies did.

The vagaries of “Smart Growth” show that we should choose our euphemisms carefully, or even better, avoid them entirely. It may at first seem like an advantage that Smart Growth can be so easily wielded as a slogan and rallying cry, but in this it is as much a liability as an asset.

–Alex Marshall, RPA Senior Editor

## Big Yellow Taxis

The spacious checker-cab may no longer rule on city streets, but a facsimile will soon be running on the waves, rather than down Broadway. Yellow boats with a trim of white-and-black checkerboard – water taxis – are now debuting on the waters between Brooklyn and Manhattan. They make a startling and welcome sight. Trial runs are now underway, and the taxis will begin paid service Sept. 24.

Tom Fox, a familiar figure in the city’s urban planning community, conceived and is running the for-profit venture, New York Water Taxis. The company starts out with three boats and will add another three next year, Fox says. Each aluminum catamaran will

hold 75 passengers and will operate between 14 stops in Brooklyn and Manhattan. The boats have a number of unique features. They will include a full-service bar, LED displays of stops and low-wake hulls. Fares will range from \$3 at rush hour to \$15 for an all day pass for sightseers. Douglas Durst, the real-estate developer, is backing the project financially.

Fox believes the ferries fill a niche.

“The current ferry system is designed to bring folks from New Jersey back and forth from work,” Fox said. “We think a small scale system that meets the needs of neighborhoods along the waterfront will help open up parks and cultural institutions along the waterfront, and bring in new development.”

## **The Fall and Rise of (Some) New Jersey Downtowns**

Walk down Oak Tree Road on a weekend, and the stores are humming with activity. Scents of cardamom and other spices will waft to your senses, as well as the sound of different tongues and the sight of women in colorful silk dresses.

Welcome to Iselin, an old New Jersey downtown that has revived under its adoption by Indian immigrants, and is an example of the resurgence of some state downtowns even as the state struggles to contain sprawl.

New Jersey downtowns began to decline in the roughly the 1960s, as the suburbs expanded further into undeveloped land. Soon, many New Jersey residents depended entirely on the car, and no longer could walk or take a train or bus to downtown. When people moved to the suburbs, the merchants followed. Suburban malls on the highway surrounded by huge parking lots became the norm. Many downtown storefronts were

boarded up, and vacancies were common.

But in the last 10 years, the tide has begun to reverse. Much of New Jersey has run out of room to expand. Commuting farther distances at slower speeds caused commuting times to escalate. Some people have moved to transit-accessible areas and take the train to work, although they still own cars to run their errands on evenings and weekends.

Many downtown success stories of recent years have occurred in towns with NJ Transit commuter rail stations such as Metuchen, New Brunswick, Red Bank, Somerville and Westfield. At almost every suburban NJ Transit train station there is a waiting list for monthly parking permits ranging from two months to four years in length. Some train stations such as Maplewood and Metuchen offer concierge services that include dry cleaning pickup and drop off, film processing, take-home food from local restaurants, and many more.

Parking built for commuters is starting to also serve downtown shoppers. In New Brunswick, for example, parking is available along the street at meters that allow a maximum of 2 hours, or at decks where commuters can park all day and ride the train to NYC. But on weekends, almost all parking in the city is free, even in the decks, to encourage suburbanites from surrounding communities to drive to New Brunswick and shop in the stores, eat at the restaurants, or watch a show at the theatres.

A combination of access to transit as well as parking has helped many Jersey downtowns to revive. Regional Plan Association, in partnership with Project for Public Spaces and New Jersey Transit, has been working with Rutherford, Bayonne, Trenton and eight other

downtowns to demonstrate ways to leverage access to transit into new development.

Still, downtown merchants face stiff competition from the big box malls and outlet centers that buy in bulk quantities and can offer goods and services at lower prices. Downtowns that have revived more fully tend to be those that, by default or design, have become specialized places that offer an alternative to business as usual.

The Little India shopping district along Oak Tree Road, near Metropark train station, is one such example. The Indian immigration started in the mid '70s and has grown about 5-10 percent annually to where the area now has one of the highest concentration of Indian population outside of India. The first few Indian specialty stores on Oak Tree Road opened in the early '80s. This attracted more Indian population, which in turn created a growing market that attracted more stores. When the previously-vacant stores filled up, parking and traffic became a problem.

An important policy lesson is that downtown's fortunes were helped when the Iselin section of Oak Tree Road was narrowed from five lanes to three. Parking was provided on both sides, with a left-turn lane down the middle. This had a traffic-calming effect that made the area more pedestrian-friendly.

Even in this auto-dependent society, New Jersey downtowns are coming back around a range of policies that boost connections to transit, emphasize the pedestrian and create public places that can become a magnet for new development and new communities.

--- By Gary Johnson, RPA New Jersey office

### Calendar

**September 12, 5 pm** - Voorhees Transportation Center Speaker Series, "Making National Transportation Policy: The Next Surface Transportation Act," Emil Frankel, U.S. DOT. 33 Livingston Ave, New Brunswick. 732-932-6812, [cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:cdanku@rci.rutgers.edu)

**Sept. 19, 4-7 pm** – Open House at the New Jersey offices of Regional Plan Association. 94 Church Street, suite 401. New Brunswick, NJ 08901. Tel. 973-623-1133.

**September 21, 2 pm** -- The Future of Public Architecture in New York. Featuring a panel of New York City architects, planners, and historians. The Museum of the City of New York, 1220 Fifth Avenue. Call (212) 426-6891.

**September 24, 6-8pm** -- Auto-Free New York Meeting. Alex Marshall, journalist, senior editor at Regional Plan Association and author of *How Cities Work*, speaks and shows slides on how transportation has shaped cities and neighborhoods. 104 Washington St., (just north of Rector St.), in the community room of the Police Station. Tel. 212-475-3394 or [www.auto-free.org](http://www.auto-free.org).



## Regional Plan Association

### Spotlight on The Region

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