

## Speaking Clearly About Stopping Sprawl: It's A Start

When it comes to suburban sprawl, there is a rhetorical confusion that matches policy confusion. Just what sprawl is, where it comes from, and how to stop it are rarely stated clearly, in part because these are difficult questions. But public leaders also are reluctant to discuss sprawl frankly, as if it were an indelicate subject for public discourse.

That's why New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey's recent "Big Map" sprawl initiatives could be a big step forward, both practically and rhetorically. If the plan can be implemented in a rigorous and comprehensive way (a big if), it could dramatically shape New Jersey's cities, towns and countryside for the better.

The Governor's new Big Map plan is centered around, well, "The Big Map." This map of the state lays out in the colors of red, green and yellow, like a traffic light, areas where growth should halt, go forward, or proceed with caution. Conceptually, this approach is similar to Oregon's famous urban growth boundaries in that it provides developers with both a carrot and a stick. With one hand it takes land away from them, while with the other it promises development will be easier in the designated areas.

With both the map and the words around it, there is an admirable clarity that may help it be effective. The key task will be integrating the Big Map into the official State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP) map, which was adopted in 1992 and readopted in 2001. The Big Map has some similarities to the SDRP map, but some major differences. The strategy is to use the Big Map as a starting point and to agree by Earth Day on amendments to the State Plan Map.

The administration's admirable plain speaking,

if combined with some diplomacy, could make this happen. Let's examine some of the administration's rhetoric in more detail.

**"Stop subsidizing sprawl – for example, by ending the construction of new roads and highways where development makes no sense."**

This is the first of three bullet points at the state's web site explaining the plan,

<http://www.state.nj.us/dep/antisprawl/map.html>.

With this phrase, McGreevey makes the crucial infrastructure/sprawl connection. The point is that the chief cause of sprawl is not amorphous market forces, but public spending in the form of a state's highway budget. Stop building or expanding highways on the periphery of urban areas, and in a few years, sprawl will stop as well. The same logic applies to water and sewer lines.

So where will growth go? This brings us to the second bullet point:

**"Promote and accelerate new growth and redevelopment in already developed urban and suburban communities by improving the quality of life and infrastructure in these areas."**

Restated, McGreevey's team is saying what Portland planner John Fregonese said once: "Spend your infrastructure dollars where people live, not where they don't." As a rallying cry, this has power. Public dollars can go to maintain and improve roads, mass transit systems, sidewalks, and bike paths, so that established towns and cities become better places to live and more able to accept additional growth.

When a state or locality wants development to occur in a new area, it should build infrastructure there. New York City, for example, expanded its subway and elevated train lines into semi-rural Bronx and Queens in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the expectation, quite justified, that it would spur development around the tracks. We shouldn't build

new highways in open country unless we desire development around them. McGreevey and his team say as much.

**“Develop smarter regulations that have clear and predictable standards that make it easier to develop in areas where growth should be promoted and harder where drinking water supplies and threatened natural resources must be protected.”**

This essentially restates the second point, while adding the environmental argument. Make it easy to build where you want grow; make it harder to build where you don't.

On this point, the building community fear the Big Map plan may be a No-Growth plan, not managed growth. It's a valid concern. Jon Chandler, an oft-quoted leader of the Home Builders Association in Oregon, has said that the two things citizens hate are sprawl and density. But in Oregon, building actually has proceeded rapidly, despite citizen opposition, because the state required localities to approve development applications in a timely fashion in designated growth areas. Because of New Jersey's strong tradition of home rule, a similar state requirement would be more difficult here, but perhaps not impossible. State funds, for example, could be tied to localities enacting particular ordinances. If the Big Map plan does not channel new houses and businesses into existing areas, it will be a No-Growth plan, and a failure.

In addition to verbal strength, the McGreevey plan has graphic strength in the decision to develop and use “The Big Map.”

California-based planner and writer William Fulton has said that graphic or vision-based growth management plans tend to fare better than code-based plans. Both planners and the public need to have a vision of what a state, city or neighborhood will look like, in order to pursue the policies necessary to get there. Code-based plans, which prescribe or encourage certain activities based on word-based definitions, in the long run do not produce well-functioning places or regions, Fulton

said. In some ways, Fulton is resurrecting old battles between urban designers, who use maps and drawings, and urban planners, who use words on paper. Fulton, and to some extent McGreevey, was siding with the urban designers.

--Alex Marshall, Senior Editor, RPA

### **Smart Growth, Affordable Housing**

New Jersey Gov. McGreevey's recent “Big Map” address re-ignited an old debate between the anti-sprawl and pro-affordable housing camps. Much of the reaction to the Governor's speech has assumed that Smart Growth means less development, which is bad for builders and leads to higher housing costs. Smart Growth advocates have often failed to focus on issues of social mobility and urban poverty, while affordable housing advocates have largely ignored environmental and economic concerns. But Smart Growth and affordable housing should be complementary, and are, if Smart Growth is defined correctly.

A high housing cost burden can be seen from a number of perspectives. One is that people are paid too little, and wages should be raised. Another is that housing is too expensive. A slight variation on the second point-of-view is that costs of living are too high, and the solution is to lower costs. This means both lowering the cost of housing and increasing the supply of another costly commodity: time. When time is considered, Smart Growth – specifically mixed-use development – emerges as an effective solution.

When affordable housing is considered one “use” in the panoply of “mixed uses”, the many health benefits of Smart Growth – parks, open space, and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods – can accrue to those segments of the population who have the most to gain. Mixed-use developments especially benefit those who cannot otherwise pay for convenience. By locating housing, childcare, employment, health and shopping in close proximity or even on the same site, more time is saved for the working poor.

The question is who defines Smart Growth and how? Some Smart Growth plans focus on infrastructure spending, others on producing “better projects” – i.e. more subdivisions on rural land, often at relatively low density.

Arthur “Chris” Nelson and three other academics make the point in the recent Brookings Institution paper, *The Link Between Growth Management And Housing Affordability: The Academic Evidence*, <http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/es/urban/publications/growthmang.pdf>, that there is no inherent connection between limiting the development of open land, which should be a goal of Smart Growth plans, and limiting the production of housing. It’s possible to restrict the development of land and actually create more housing in areas that are zoned for it. Conversely, it’s possible to develop a lot of land and supply relatively little housing.

An upscale suburban community that allows 100 homes to be built on 100 acres of former farm land is doing nothing to support affordable housing. Conversely, a city that restricts development of farm land, but allows the production of 1000 units of smaller homes and apartments on already urbanized land, and also invests in mass transit, may produce a more affordable environment.

Most conventional land regulation, Nelson says, restricts the production of affordable housing, often intentionally. “Traditional zoning and other planning and land use controls limit the supply and accessibility of affordable housing, thereby raising home prices by excluding lower income households.”

The effect of infrastructure spending on affordable housing is more problematic. There appears to be a see-saw relationship between mass transit and housing affordability. In the New York region, people generally pay more than the national average for housing, but substantially less than average for transportation. The converse is true in Houston, where housing is relatively cheap but

automobile ownership is essential. On balance, the Houston pattern is probably worse for people of the lowest incomes because a poor family has to afford both a home and a car.

RPA analysis of census data shows that 28 percent of the region’s households suffer from a high housing cost burden – that is, they pay more than 35 percent of their gross income on housing costs (including utilities, mortgage or rent) each month. This is an even higher standard than the 30 percent of housing costs used by HUD as a benchmark for high cost burdens. In all, the high housing cost burden affects about 2 million households in the region, or almost one-third of our population. And the poorer the residents, the higher the housing cost burden. Forty percent of homeowners in the \$35,000 to \$50,000 income bracket pay too much for their housing each month, while only 2% of those earning more than \$150,000 suffer from this burden.

Ethan Seltzer, a professor at Portland State University, says that growth management has some upward effect on home prices, but if done correctly, can produce a greater supply of affordable housing than more conventional suburban land policies.

“There is no free pass here,” Seltzer said in a telephone interview. “All of the different alternatives affect housing costs. But it’s a myth to believe that doing nothing is free of costs. It’s also a myth to say that the market by itself will provide the housing people need. Advocates of growth management have to be honest and admit that growth management does incur some costs on housing. But we have found in Oregon that the costs incurred by doing growth management are relatively minor compared to the costs incurred by not doing it.”

--Alexis Perrotta, Associate Planner, RPA, and Alex Marshall

### **Davos, A Year Later**

It was just a year ago that the World Economic Forum, alias “Davos,” came for five days to New

York City and occupied the Waldorf-Astoria on Park Avenue in Midtown Manhattan. Police barricaded blocks around the hotel, so many New Yorkers felt the forum's presence. The forum's theme that year was "Leadership in Fragile Times: A Vision for a Shared Future," which included examining global security and poverty.

This week, Davos returned to its namesake town in Switzerland. In somewhat predictable fashion, the forum's leaders have chosen "Building Trust" in corporate governance and globalization as this year's theme, a decision sparked by the Enron, WorldCom and other corporate implosions.

That the group has moved on, both physically and thematically, seems indicative of the general diminishment of New York City and the region in the nation's, and even in the world's, sights. A year ago, towers of rubble still stood on the WTC site. President Bush and other national leaders had committed themselves to the city's revitalization, and had put \$20 billion of the nation's money where their mouths were.

Now, as the nation prepares for war against Iraq, New York's health is on the periphery of the nation's radar screen, if it is there at all. Financially, politically and bureaucratically, Washington has moved on. The Bush administration denied the city its own office in the new Homeland Security department, while granting one to Washington D.C. Sen. Chuck Schumer, once quick to praise Bush for his financial support, is criticizing him for his proposed tax policies. Some argue that Washington's focus on war with Iraq has diminished its focus on the war on terrorism, including hunting down Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, of great concern to New Yorkers.

In these chilly days, Mayor Bloomberg is attempting to reorganize the city's school system, balance its budget, produce more affordable housing and realign Lower Manhattan economically. In these worthy efforts, he, Gov. Pataki and other regional leaders are increasingly on their own. In Davos or in Washington, the words "New York" are heard less frequently.

--Alex Marshall, Senior Editor, RPA

### Calendar

**Feb. 2** – 11 am. Along the Water's Edge: New & Old Waterfront Development in Lower Manhattan. Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance program director Carter Craft leads this Municipal Art Society promenade, from the River Project, Pier 26 on the Hudson @ N Moore St (#1/9- Franklin St station) to the Fulton Fish Market. \$15/\$12 members. RSVP: 212 439-1049.

**Feb. 10** – 6 pm. Public hearing on The Hudson Yards comprehensive planning effort. City will present its "preferred direction" for the project. Jacob Javits Center.

**Feb. 10** – 6:30-8:00 pm. Launch party for The Next American City, a new magazine on the future of American cities and suburbs. Panel discussion on "The Future Of The City: Envisioning The Next New York." Panelists include Alex Garvin, Paul Goldberger, Hugh Hardy, and Joseph Rose. New York University Law School, Vanderbilt Hall, Greenberg Lounge, 40 Washington Square South. <http://www.americancity.org>

**Feb. 13** – 6pm – 8 pm. THE MEDIA & THE MAYOR: Does Spin Make The Man? Panelists include Wayne Barrett, Joyce Purnick, and Michael Wolff. New School University, 66 West 12th Street, Room 510.

**April 25** – Regional Plan Association's Regional Assembly at Marriott Marquis in Midtown Manhattan.



## Regional Plan Association

### Spotlight on The Region

A publication of  
Regional Plan Association  
Robert Yaro, President  
Alex Marshall, Senior Editor  
212-253-2727, x360  
[alex@rpa.org](mailto:alex@rpa.org)  
[www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org)

#### **New York Office**

4 Irving Place, 7<sup>th</sup> Floor. • New York, NY 10003  
Tel. 212-253-2727

#### **Connecticut Office:**

Two Landmark Square, Suite 108 • Stamford, CT 06901  
tel: 203-356-0390

#### **New Jersey Office:**

94 Church Street, Suite 401 • New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
tel: 732-828-9945