

Making Smart Growth Work in Berkshire County

Recently, the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), on behalf of the Office of Commonwealth Development, sent a Smart Growth Tool Kit to officials in every municipality. These tool kits consist of a CD and related materials detailing Smart Growth techniques to help towns and cities put these ideas into practice. Since each town and city has particular needs and limited resources, the EOEA is available to assist in determining which planning tools are most relevant. Also, Smart Growth grants are available.

This issue of *Common Ground* features some basics about Smart Growth, and, highlights current projects and resources.

What is Smart Growth?

Smart Growth, also known as New Urbanism, caught on among planners in the early 1990s. The focus is on development that preserves open space/agricultural land, encourages concentrated density, mixed-use zoning, affordable housing, transit-oriented development and environmentally-sensitive building practices. In many ways, Smart Growth is a return to traditional development patterns. When subways, streetcars, carriages, walking and bicycles were the dominant modes of transportation, it made sense for commercial and residential areas to be relatively close. However, the growing popularity of cars in the 1950s, along with miles of new federally-subsidized highways, dramatically changed the physical and cultural landscape. Development patterns began to necessitate using one's car to drive from a suburban home to an urban job, as well as to far flung shopping centers.

The scale of building today continues to reflect this auto dependency- large, single story strip malls on the outskirts of town and "big box" retail with enormous parking lots replace department stores and clustered services in the downtown core. Also, the link between auto-dependent, sprawl style development and health concerns such as obesity and air pollution have been firmly established among many public health officials, planners and community activists. Add to this the dwindling supply and rising cost of oil, and the value of compact, walkable neighborhoods becomes clear.

Smart Growth in Practice

Towns and cities in Berkshire County have largely retained their historic designs, known in Smart Growth terms as, "Traditional Neighborhood Development." This allows people to live, work, shop and play in a central location. In Pittsfield and Great Barrington, one can still go to the hardware store and pharmacy, see a show and eat dinner all on the same street. You can walk to lunch, the post office and bank, and get a hair cut on the same street in Dalton. In New Marlborough, a family can step out of their front door to walk to the library and pick up a few supplies at the nearby store.

However, current zoning may be a hindrance to maintaining traditional designs. For example, Lenox's Community Development Plan promotes the re-use of the commercial corridor and the historic village in a manner that celebrates its rich heritage of compact, mixed-use development. Also, the Town is pursuing affordable housing. The problem is that the zoning does not allow for a strong mix of housing and commercial activity in these critical areas of town.

Recently, the town was awarded a Priority Development Fund grant to research and adopt *Incentive and Inclusionary Zoning. These will allow Lenox to pursue mixed-income housing in conjunction with new commercial activities.

Growing Smarter

Growth seems inevitable, which is why it's crucial for residents to consider what they want their town or city to be like for themselves, their children and grand children. If residents don't decide, developers will do it for them. By planning now, Berkshire County can retain and enhance development which incorporates Smart Growth principles such as preserving open space and encouraging small scale retail outlets near housing.

While the majority of the studies about Smart Growth are favorable, the primary criticism is that limiting development drives up land prices. While this is debatable, the reality of rising home prices is evidenced all over the county. In response, tools such as Inclusionary Zoning are designed to create housing opportunities for a variety of income levels.

***Incentive Zoning:** Allows a developer to exceed a zoning ordinance's limitations in exchange for environmental protection, affordable housing or higher building standards.

Inclusionary Zoning: A system that requires a minimum percentage of lower and moderate income housing to be provided in new developments. In exchange for development incentives, such as density bonuses.

Future issues of *Common Ground* may feature Smart Growth topics, and recognize other towns and cities that are pursuing these concepts. So don't be shy about touting your good work- let us know! *Contact: Jennifer Kenny.*

CALENDAR

January 4	Executive Committee	3:30 p.m.	BRPC
January 19	Full Commission Meeting	7:30 p.m.	BRPC
February 1	Executive Committee	3:30 p.m.	BRPC
March 18	Citizen Planner Training Collaborative Annual Conference	TBA	Holy Cross College, Worcester

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For More Smart Growth Information:

The Smart Growth Tool Kit is available at:
www.horsleywitten.com/smart-growth/

Related Resources:

- www.smallisbeautiful.org
- www.cetonline.org
- "The End of Suburbia" -DVD
- "Edens Lost and Found"- on PBS
- "The Geography of Nowhere" by James Howard Kunstler
- www.newurbanism.org
- www.cnu.org
- www.smartgrowth.org
- www.activelivingbydesign.org

Slum and Blight

BRPC staff recently completed Slum and Blight surveys in portions of Pittsfield and Housatonic. These consisted of visual surveys of buildings, rating them as "excellent, good, fair, or poor" based on such things as the condition of the windows, siding, roof, foundation and ADA accessibility. In both study areas, the combined number of fair or poor buildings exceeded the acceptable level of 25 percent, set by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development Commercial and Housing Rehabilitation guidelines. This data may be used for rehabilitation grants for commercial and residential properties, among other programs.
Contact: Jennifer Kenny, Duane Nealon

South Street Study Update

The second South Street Alternatives public meeting on November 29th at Pittsfield City Hall attracted more than 60 participants, including Mayor Ruberto and several City Councilors, MassHighway engineers, bike/pedestrian advocates, South Street business owners and neighborhood residents. BRPC staff discussed the Study and related work before presenting the alternatives and the evaluation project criteria. The public also had the chance to voice comments, questions, and concerns. The four alternatives presented were:

1. Transportation System Management (Signal upgrades and related enhancements)
2. Addition of lanes to South Street between Dan Fox Drive and Buel Street
3. Tamarack Road and Barker Road upgrades
4. Dan Fox Drive Extension (includes three alignments)

A final public meeting is planned for sometime in late winter. *Contact: Andrew Lenton or Anuja Koirala*

Clearinghouse Reviews

ENF for New Marlborough Hill, LLC (New Marlborough)
DEIR for Donnybrook Country Club (Lanesborough)

Restructuring the Berkshire MPO

In August, the agreement that governs the Berkshire Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) was changed for the first time in 30 years, with the addition of four town representatives and the two mayors to the MPO.

The MPO approves regional transportation plans and studies, makes regional federal transportation funding decisions, and directs BRPC's transportation planning work. The changes were presented to the Berkshire County Selectmen's Association at its October meeting. Subsequently, at the first sub-regional caucus for the south-central towns (all towns between the Mass-Pike and Pittsfield) concerns were raised about the sub-regions as established. Discussions are now going on to determine if a southeast-southwest split would be more appropriate.

A caucus of the six north Berkshire towns was held on December 15th. Williamstown Select Board member Philip Guy was selected as the representative and Adams Select Board member Joe Dean as the alternate. A meeting with seven north-central Berkshire towns is scheduled for Thursday, January 5th. It is hoped that all remaining issues and selections of representatives and alternates will occur by early February. *Contact: Nat Karns*