

BERKSHIRE PLANNING TOOLS



One in a series of “toolbox” items to accompany the Regional Plan for the Berkshires

June 2001

Gr o w i n g s m a r t I n t h e B e r k s h i r e s

Portions adapted from EPA New England’s “How You Can Help Your Community Grow Smart: A Guide for Community Officials”

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) is dedicated to addressing the issue of “sprawl”— the all-too-familiar pattern of strip development and spread-out low-density development in the countryside that leads to a gradual decline in community life and values and the erosion of the economic base in cities and villages.

BRPC believes in finding new ways to “grow smart”, ways that are consistent with Berkshire values of environmental quality, rural working landscapes and community values of sharing and equity, and is dedicated to helping Berkshire communities make this happen.

What is Smart Growth?

Smart Growth recognizes the connections between development and quality of life. In general, smart growth invests time, attention and resources in restoring vitality to city/town centers and older suburbs. It ensures that growth in newly developing areas has minimum impact on the environment and local taxes.

Compared to prevailing development patterns since World War II, smart growth is more town-centered, transit and pedestrian oriented, and has a better mix of housing, commercial and retail use. It preserves open space and other natural resources. Most importantly, it recognizes that

there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution: each Berkshire community is unique and special.

Growth, Sprawl, and Your Community

Growth and Smart Growth are not to be confused. Smart Growth means healthy and safe neighborhoods in urban, suburban, and rural areas; protected natural resources and open space; clean air and water; and equity and diversity in all communities.

Sprawl, or inefficient growth, is the opposite of Smart Growth. Sprawling land use patterns can pollute streams, rivers, lakes, and ponds; encourage traffic congestion and pollution from vehicles; devour open space, farmland and habitat for wildlife; spoil town and city centers; and lower community quality of life.

To help your community grow smart, set community goals that guide growth and:

- ❖ Protect Natural Resources
- ❖ Encourage Compact Development
- ❖ Preserve Community Character
- ❖ Provide Housing and Transportation Choices
- ❖ Engage the Public in Planning and Decision Making

Your community can look to the principles of Smart Growth as it plans for the future. Here are some ways:

Protect Natural Resources

- ❖ Protect drinking water with local regulations such as aquifer and wellhead protection, flood plain regulation, limits on impervious surfaces, enhanced wetland protection, and best management practices (BMP's) for handling stormwater runoff.
- ❖ Protect plants and animals through shoreline and streamside buffers, vernal pool and surrounding upland protection, and prioritize open space protection with wildlife corridors in mind.
- ❖ Restore damaged ecosystems when new development comes in. For example, replant with native species, require zero runoff, limit asphalt, and require state of the art septic systems.
- ❖ Dedicate a portion of the community's annual budget for open space acquisition.
- ❖ Protect working farms with agricultural preservation zoning and tax incentives.
- ❖ Think beyond town boundaries on a regional and watershed basis.

Encourage Compact Development

- ❖ Promote development that mixes more than one use per building.
- ❖ Reuse abandoned buildings and sites, and where appropriate place higher density housing near commercial centers and transit routes, parks, job centers, sewer and utility lines.
- ❖ Protect open space by making conservation subdivisions easier to permit, or establish a purchase of development or transfer of development rights program.
- ❖ Create neighborhoods, not just subdivisions, with well-defined centers and edges.
- ❖ Rehabilitate older schools by eliminating environmental and health hazards before building new schools in undeveloped areas.

- ❖ Channel development to areas with adequate existing infrastructure (e.g., roads, sewer, water).
- ❖ Plan and build infrastructure in places where growth should occur (i.e., in existing town and village centers) and do not build infrastructure in areas that warrant protection.

Following are the 10 principles for "growing smart" adopted by the National Governor's Association adopted at their annual summer meeting in 1999:

1. Mix land uses
2. Take advantage of existing community assets
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
4. Foster "walkable" close-knit neighborhoods
5. Promote distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place, including the rehabilitation and use of historic buildings
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas
7. Strengthen and encourage growth in existing communities
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost effective
10. Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions

Preserve Community Character

- ❖ Craft a Master Plan and ordinances that promote the goals of your community with measurable time lines and results.
- ❖ Adopt downtown and main street design guidelines.
- ❖ Locate town hall, library, schools, transit stations and post offices in town centers.
- ❖ Institute an architectural review process.

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- ❖ Insist on pedestrian scaled buildings.
- ❖ Integrate housing into town centers (e.g., encourage full use of vacant upper stories including housing or services).
- ❖ Ensure that growth does not stretch the community budget.
- ❖ Use your town center or main street for civic celebrations.
- ❖ Rehabilitate abandoned buildings for town use.
- ❖ Protect scenic roads.
- ❖ Adopt historic district zoning.
- ❖ Adopt sign control ordinances to enhance the aesthetic appeal of your community.
- ❖ Prepare an Open Space and Recreation Plan; work to implement the plan with local, regional and statewide land conservation partners.

Provide Housing and Transportation Choices

- ❖ Encourage pedestrian and bike use by adding street trees, benches, and on street parking; consolidating curb cuts; adding cross walks; and enforcing speed limits.
- ❖ Use “Traffic Calming” techniques in neighborhoods.
- ❖ Keep local roads narrow to reduce speeds, reduce speed limits, and enforce those limits. Add street trees to slow traffic.
- ❖ Reduce incentives for single occupancy vehicles.
- ❖ Review your community’s parking requirements; consider shared parking.
- ❖ Design street patterns with multiple connections and direct routes to spread traffic.
- ❖ Encourage a wide range of affordable housing choices so that seniors, singles, and young people are not priced out of their hometowns.
- ❖ Mix housing types to encourage diversity within neighborhoods.
- ❖ Achieve, where appropriate, an average density of 6 to 7 housing units per acre to make transit possible.

- ❖ Eliminate or reduce environmental and health hazards in new housing and in building maintenance practices.
- ❖ Enforce environmental and public health codes such as trash disposal, recycling, and lead paint and asbestos removal.
- ❖ Promote home ownership.

Engage the Public

- ❖ Use a consensus process with a wide range of community interests to update your master/comprehensive plan and open space plan. Have on your board a conservation commission agent, a planner, a board of health agent, an environmental enforcement officer, and a certified building inspector.
- ❖ Develop an easily understood, coordinated development process, including preliminary site plan review meetings.
- ❖ Adopt growth bylaws such as:
 - Designated growth areas
 - Limits on building permits per year
 - Performance-based development standards and impact fees
 - Service boundaries for sewer and water that supports the community’s vision and regulations
- ❖ Use local regulations to support rather than detract from local planning goals.
- ❖ Educate the public about septic system maintenance, water conservation, recycling, air quality, lead paint and asbestos removal, radon detection and healthy ecosystems.
- ❖ Seek funding mechanisms to implement town goals.

Suggested Smart Growth Resources

Web Sites

American Farmland Trust
www.farmland.org

Brookings Institution
ww.brook.edu

EPA New England Library
www.epa.gov/region01

Lincoln Institute of Land Policy
www.lincolnst.edu

Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials
www.nemo.uconn.edu

Smart Growth Network Homepage
www.smartgrowth.org

Sprawl Resource Guide
www.plannersweb.com/sprawl/sprawl5.html

Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse
www.sprawlwatch.org

The Sustainable Development Institute
www.susdev.org

Transportation Action network
www.tlcnet.org

Publications

Changing Places: Rebuilding Community in the Age of Sprawl (1997), Richard Moe and Carter Wilkie: Henry Holt and Co., New York

Cost of Sprawl: Executive Summary
Cost of Sprawl: Detailed Cost Analysis
Cost of Sprawl: Literature Review and Bibliography, Council on Environmental Quality, Washington, DC

The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape (1993), James Howard Kunstler: Simon & Schuster, New York

Land Use in America (1996), Henry I. Diamond and Patrick F. Noonan, Lincoln Institute on Land Policy, Cambridge MA: Island Press, Washington DC

Regional Plan for the Berkshires (1999), Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, Pittsfield, MA

This publication is one in a series of "toolbox" items to support the Regional Plan for the Berkshires. If you would like to receive additional copies of this or other toolbox items, please contact the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 33 Dunham Mall, Pittsfield, MA 01201 or call (413) 442-1521. Copies of the toolbox items are also available on the web. Visit www.berkshireplanning.org

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