

Smart Growth Isn't So Smart
By Robert "Jake" Bebber

From BushCountry.org Copyright © 1999 - 2003
posted 8/5/03

If "growth management" is a contradiction in terms, then "smart growth" is an outright oxymoron. The American people are beginning to learn the lessons of what Soviet planning did to the Russians. Unfortunately, the American people are being led to believe that the solution to growth issues is more bureaucracy, regulation and government intervention – not less.

Regrettably, many institutions which purport to be "guardians" of private property rights acquiesce on the issue, seeking middle roads of compromise. Business and trade associations, such as Realtors®, Chambers of Commerce, Homebuilders and others are more inclined to "go along to get along," seeking to engage in dialog to find an elusive Third Way politics of growth management rather than confront the issue head on. Republican politicians – and the Party in general – taken limited positions, or many times, are leading the charge on imposing growth controls and mandates. (Democrats already support growth controls, so there's no point in even bringing them up.)

"Smart Growth" and its advocates claim that through land use controls and planning, Americans will live happily in dense, urban areas with no traffic congestion and clean environments. Citizens will reside in massive, multi-family complexes in densely populated cities.

They will be able to walk, bicycle or take the local light rail to work, and enjoy the open spaces outside the city on the weekends.

The evidence paints a different picture. Portland, Oregon is the poster-child of the Smart Growth and environmentalist urban planner advocates. Yet the policies pursued by the Portland Metropolitan Planning Organization – the overarching regional government that does far more than transportation planning – have done little to improve the quality of life. Their growth restrictions have changed one of the most affordable markets for single-family housing in 1989 to one of the least-affordable by 1996, according to the National Association of Homebuilders. Residents never embraced the desire to move to the city, leaving apartment vacancy rates at a decade high 7 percent by 1999. The MPO's strategy of encouraging mass transit utilization by creating planned congestion on the roadways and highways has done nothing to cut per capita driving, and has actually increased smog output through the intensive stop-and-go driving residents must endure.

Evidence aside, there is something more fundamental at stake than appropriate growth restrictions. It is a question of individual liberty and private property versus rule by an elite few, and the abdication by the people of their freedoms in exchange for governmental entitlements. Paul Edward Gottfried, Professor of Humanities at Elizabethtown College, writes about this phenomena in his recent book, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State*. Modern Liberalism has embraced moral relativism, welfarism and social engineering in an attempt to remake society and culture to their liking. Controlling growth is one tool in their arsenal to reconstruct humanity. Packing people like sardines into cities will restore nature to its pristine state prior to "human infection" by expunging humans from the

countryside. Limiting space will require population control measures long advocated by the Left as its answer to the problems of world starvation. Property will be owned by the state, not the individual, since it will be the state who determines where you can live, and what you can live in. Liberals are counting on the people's willingness to accept government largesse in return to turning over their life decision making to managerial bureaucrats, and thus far, they have been largely rewarded.

The Soviet-style planning mechanisms that Liberals, smart growth advocates and environmentalists rely on are doomed to failure unless they plan on making their coercive rules at the point of a gun. At present, they are satisfied with urban growth boundaries and eminent domain condemnations as the means to control people, but ultimately, they will have to impose their views through more forceful means. Human nature is not so malleable as the Left would hope. Douglas Porter of the Urban Land Institute and smart growth advocate lamented:

"[There is] a gap between the daily mode of living desired by most Americans and the mode most city planners believe is most appropriate. [emphasis added] Americans generally want a house on a large lot and three cars in every garage ... Yet that dream translates into low-density sprawl and dependence on roads and highways."

Pause for a moment and consider Mr. Porter's implications: a home, a yard, automobiles, the very things once thought to be a part of the "American Dream" are now considered inappropriate lifestyle choices. Soon, the planners and managers will have no choice but to force Americans into more "acceptable" lifestyles if they are to realize their vision.

However, the reluctance of organizations to challenge groups like the Urban Land Institute, the American Planning Association and others who promote "smart growth" strategies cede the battle of ideas to the Left. Groups like Realtors® and Homebuilders seem to be content to argue mundane technical issues such as whether a sign can be more than two feet long or whether growth restrictions are imposed by county government rather than state government. Clearly, they are on a path of abandoning the pretense of protecting private property rights unless they re-evaluate their role. They will have to decide whether private property is a self-evident right, as our Founding Fathers thought, or if it is a privilege granted by government, subject to state control. They will have to come to grips if land use is best determined by the free market or planners in a central bureaucracy. Finally, they will have to decide just who will make the lifestyle choices of people: the elite few, or the people themselves.

Growth management is more than just traffic congestion or whether a new Wal Mart is built on a corner. Ultimately, this debate will determine just who makes our