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AMERICANS WANT GROWTH AND GREEN:

A Smart Growth Policy Agenda

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The Environmental and Energy Study Institute co-hosted a Congressional briefing entitled "Americans Want Growth and Green: A Smart Growth Policy Agenda" with the Senate Smart Growth Task Force and the House Livable Communities Task Force. The briefing was held to showcase the results of a national poll and report recently released by Smart Growth America, a new national coalition of more than sixty public interest groups concerned about sprawl. The results of the poll, which was conducted by Beldon, Russonello and Stewart in September 2000, shows that Americans strongly support policies encouraging smart growth strategies. According to Don Chen, director of Smart Growth America, 78 percent of those surveyed said they favored smart growth. In the report, Smart Growth America states that the coalition's goal is to help develop smarter growth strategies that protect open spaces, revitalize neighborhoods, keep housing affordable and make communities more livable.

The report cites a variety of evidence that Americans' attitudes toward sprawl are changing: rapid growth in the use of public transportation, strong voter support for smart growth ballot measures, and increased demand for housing in

The term smart growth refers to giving priority to improving services, such as schools, roads, affordable housing, and public transportation in existing communities, rather than encouraging new housing and commercial development, and new highways, in the countryside. With this in mind, would you favor or oppose smart growth policies in your state?

Favor smart growth ... 78%
Oppose smart growth ... 16%
Don't know / Refuse ... 5 %

- Smart Growth America Poll

cities and close-in suburbs. The poll results show that Americans support smart growth policies that curb sprawl: 66 percent of respondents said they support requiring all new residential developments to include at least 15 housing units for moderate to low-income families. Sixty percent of respondents favor investing more in public transit even if it reduces funding available for highway construction. Seventy-seven percent support making neighborhoods more pedestrian-friendly rather than building new highways.

A variety of issues concerning the cause and effect of sprawl are outlined in the report. The report cites the doubling of land development over the past decade, unprecedented increases in traffic congestion, and new housing shortages and escalating housing prices taking place in metropolitan areas as consequences of sprawl. According to Smart Growth America, to keep up with rising incomes and historically low unemployment rates, communities are expanding at alarming rates.

PANELISTS

Don Chen
Director, Smart Growth America

Ralph Grossi
President, American Farmland Trust

Meg Maguire
President, Scenic America

Jacky Grimshaw
*Transportation & Air Quality
Coordinator, Center for Neighborhood
Technology*

Kristin Siglin
*Vice President, The Enterprise
Foundation*

Rapid developments on the outskirts of metropolitan areas have led to less green space, overcrowded classrooms, traffic congestion and a loss of opportunities and critical funds in inner cities and older towns and suburbs. According to the panelists, this poorly planned sprawl is leading to a loss, not only of the communities themselves, but of farmland, flood plains, forests, scenic landscapes and affordable housing.

WHAT IS SMART GROWTH?

Smart Growth America defines smart growth by its outcomes, which they believe mirror the basic values of most Americans. According to Smart Growth America, there are six goals to achieving smart growth:

- neighborhood livability;
- better access to transportation options;
- less traffic;
- thriving cities, suburbs and towns;
- shared benefits;
- lower costs of living, lower taxes; and
- keeping open space open.

These goals require careful planning, and many communities are faced with tough choices when it comes to dealing with growth.

According to Ralph Grossi, president of American Farmland Trust, we are losing 3 million acres of farmland, forests, and open space to wasteful sprawl development every year. When sprawl destroys farmland, it is also destroying our only access to locally grown food, wildlife habitat, areas of scenic beauty and the environmental benefits that result from a well-managed farm. American Farmland Trust believes that communities need to identify their best farmland and protect it from development. Protecting farmland that surrounds our cities is important because it encourages redevelopment and revitalization of existing cities and removes the pressure from nearby farmers to sell their land to developers.

In the Smart Growth America poll, 83 percent of Americans surveyed are shown to view farmland and open space as important enough to favor establishing no-development zones in order to protect these areas. Grossi argued that by protecting farmland and making sure development occurs in the right place, we can stop wasteful uses of land. According to the American Housing Survey, the United States is losing 2.3 million acres of farmland and open space a year to single family homes. The problem is not the number of houses being built, but the way they are being built. Between 1993 and 1997, more than one-third of new homes constructed were built on lots of one acre or larger. As a result, we are consuming land at twice the rate of our population. By updating current land-use plans, American Farmland Trust believes we can help support community initiatives to stop this type of wasteful growth.

Kristin Siglin, vice president for the Enterprise Foundation, sees balancing the need for economic development and the desire to protect a community's way of life as one of the greatest challenges facing cities and counties across the country. Too often, she maintains, the desire for economic growth comes at the expense of urban neighborhoods by way of suburban sprawl. One of the great dangers of economic growth is that divisions by income and race have allowed many areas to prosper while others have been left behind. Recognizing that sprawl can destroy central cities, Siglin stressed the importance of embracing a strategy for urban revitalization and the transformation of low-income communities. The Enterprise Foundation claims sprawl has a

Sixty-six percent of those surveyed support proposals to require all new housing developments in their state include at least 15 percent of housing for moderate and low-income families.

- Smart Growth America Poll

tendency to leave urban neighborhoods to languish without such basic needs as jobs, education, and health care.

According to the Enterprise Foundation, Wheeler Creek, a new residential community in the District of Columbia, is one of the best examples of smart growth planning. As a result of the lack of affordable housing in the area, many low-income families have been left behind in deteriorating communities or pushed out of their communities. The Enterprise Foundation's goal at Wheeler Creek is to provide opportunities and shared benefits for moderate to low-income families to move up and out of poverty and into the mainstream of American life. Wheeler Creek replaced deteriorated public housing units in Anacostia with 314 new houses, apartments, and townhouses. It is a community of mixed income housing opportunities that also provides child care, social services, job training and safer streets.

One of the most noticeable impacts of sprawl is traffic congestion. Sprawl positions jobs, homes, and shopping destinations far apart, requiring an automobile for every small trip. As Jacky Grimshaw, transportation and air quality coordinator for the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), points out, the quality of life is marred by too many hours stuck in traffic, too many hours chauffeuring kids, and too many trips to access the needs of everyday life. Smart Growth America places an important

emphasis on creating mixed land-use communities. These communities cluster developments and provide a variety of transportation opportunities that help manage congestion, pollute less and save energy. CNT believes that a large part of the problem is the lack of effort by many cities and counties to connect people and jobs. They argue that giving people transportation options that allows them to get to jobs effectively and efficiently is essential to improving quality of life. CNT also promotes the need for more attention and funding for intercity and high speed rail that would mitigate the need for consumption of farmland and open space that is often induced by sprawl.

Scenic America believes that an important component of the smart growth agenda is the need to protect the natural beauty and distinctive character of our communities. Not only should smart growth be affordable, accessible and equitable, it should also be attractive. Meg Maguire, president of Scenic America, points out that people take pride in the places in which they live and work when they are attractive and well-designed. As the Smart Growth America poll suggests, people are tired of the car-clogged asphalt, faceless cookie cutter architecture and treeless housing developments. According to Maguire, "Sprawl is creating communities that make everywhere look like nowhere."

In addition, the negative visual impact of wireless communication towers, the proliferation of billboards and the lack of context-sensitive highway designs can all be attributed to haphazard sprawl. Billboard blight has become a major eye sore throughout many communities. Maguire calls this visual pollution "litter on a stick." Thousands of publicly owned trees are destroyed each year to improve the visibility of these billboards, and motorists now can expect to see an average of 47 billboards an hour while traveling on federally funded highways. In an effort to combat the impact of this sprawl related pollution, Scenic America is producing site-specific projects for various states, grassroots organizations and publications on preserving scenic beauty.

HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE SMART GROWTH?

The smart growth movement is not just about fighting sprawl, it is also about proposing alternatives. Smart Growth America has devised ten goals that can be used to form the basis for a sensible and effective smart growth plan. These goals are:

- mixing land uses;
- taking advantage of existing community assets;
- creating a range of housing opportunities;
- fostering walkable, close-knit neighborhoods;
- promoting distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place;
- preserving open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas;
- strengthening and encouraging growth in existing communities;
- providing a variety of transportation choices;
- making development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective; and
- encouraging citizen and stakeholder participation.

The Smart Growth America report acknowledges that dozens of other options to achieving smart growth exist. However, just as the problems of sprawl are not simple neither are the solutions. Smart Growth America believes that each solution requires federal, state, local and private interests to come together and work as a team.

ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The briefing panelists all agreed that there are a variety of smart growth alternatives to sprawl. Smart Growth America is represented by a wide array of public interest groups that all have hopes of sparking a national debate on sprawl and smart growth policies. Although local governments and communities play a vital role in the future of smart growth initiatives, many on the briefing panel believe Congress must play a vital leadership role.

According to Grossi of American Farmland Trust, tax reform and the next farm bill will play an essential role in the future of land conservation. Tax incentives would help private landowners and communities afford to place their land under conservation easements. American Farmland Trust is calling for a reinstatement and expansion of the Farmland Protection Program to help communities purchase conservation easements on the state and local level. During the three years the Farmland Protection Program was funded, almost a thousand farmers wanted to sell easements. However, funding was available to only 459 of those who applied, and the program has not been funded since Fiscal Year 1999. Scenic America believes a rewrite of the Highway Beautification Act is an essential step in helping to

"Sprawl is a short word for a long list of afflictions: rapid consumption of open space, prime farmland, forest, historic sites, and scenic landscapes; traffic clogged highways; urban disinvestment; and loss of community and quality of life."

*Meg Maguire, President,
Scenic America*

"We've definitely touched a nerve. People believe that sprawl and traffic are out of control, and the vast majority wants more open space, reliable public transit and neighborhood reinvestment. All the evidence shows that Americans support smarter growth, and our elected officials better start paying attention."
 - Don Chen, Director, Smart Growth America

remove the worst offenders of the runaway billboard blight that plagues our nation's highways. Although it was revised in 1991, Scenic America stresses that it contains far too many loopholes and remains ineffective in preserving rural scenery and public trees. Many states have passed their own laws on billboard regulation but, in addition, Scenic America believes that by rewriting the Highway Beautification Act the federal government could freeze the total number of billboards nationwide, prohibiting future billboards in unzoned areas which would curb tree-cutting, and require the removal of illegal billboards at the cost of the billboard industry.

The Enterprise Foundation sees community redevelopment and affordable housing as having a central role in the sprawl debate. According to the Enterprise Foundation, the federal government plays a vital role in providing affordable housing for low-income families. The buying power of key federal programs has eroded over time and their ability to assure adequate housing, even in booming economic times, has diminished. In order to ensure that urban revitalization is successful, the Enterprise Foundation sees federal programs, such as U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in need of increased funding. According to Siglin, HUD has not seen an increase in funding for inflation since 1986.

Smart Growth America believes that federal policies could go a long way in providing greater coordination between land use and infrastructure planning, increasing federal funding and technical assistance in these areas, providing greater flexibility in the use of federal funds, and increasing federal incentives for communities to pursue regional solutions to managing growth. Land use planning and decision making are primarily the responsibility of local and state governments, however, the smart growth agenda dictates that they should be coordinated with planning for transportation, water, sewer construction, housing, schools and many other areas – areas in which the federal government operates extensive programs. As the Smart Growth America poll shows, more people are demanding coordination and cooperation between all levels of government. Grossi noted that there is a disconnection between the federal programs and the goals of states. Smart Growth America believes everyone has a role to play; local, state, and federal governments; businesses; and citizens, but that no single policy or program can guarantee fulfillment of all the goals they have laid out in their report. Smart Growth America argues that there are dozens of options but everyone must play a role because success requires a team effort.

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