

What's in a Name...Sustainability, Smart Growth, New Urbanism

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Planning commissioners frequently hear abstract terms bantered about at meetings. Three terms currently used in abundance are sustainability, smart growth, and new urbanism. This article focuses on the applicability of each to planning, land use, design, and development decisions at the local level.

Planning takes a broad view in the preparation of a municipality's comprehensive plan, other specialized plans, or in the review of a specific development proposal. This is an important aspect of good planning. However, there are so many different scales and functions of planning that the applicability of these three terms to local planning decisions can be obscured.

Sustainability is a *concept* broadly defined. It can apply to plans, programs, and designs and should be a goal at all scales of planning. It is a concept that relates to the social, economic, natural and man-made environments. The United Nations' Bruntland Commission defined sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The concept of sustainability is an important goal that can be applied at all scales of planning from global through municipal and down to corridors and individual sites.

At each scale, the issues affecting sustainability will vary. For instance, on a global scale issues of climate change and destruction of the rain forests may dominate. Sustainability at the regional scale may focus on protection of water resources and control of urban sprawl. At the local level, one community may focus on reducing energy consumption. Another may adjust maintenance and operational plans to increase recycling, reduce embodied energy, and use more environmentally friendly products and services. At all scales, both the issues and resources will change, but the principles remain: reduce energy consumption and green house gas emissions (especially as related to building operations and transportation); reduce the amount of solid waste through reuse and recycling of material resources; ensure that communities provide for all members; eliminate pollution; increase "green" areas and open space; and protect bio-diversity. Each community must set its own pathway to greater sustainability depending on the local conditions. There is no one prescription for sustainability planning, although there are many good examples. Further, there are no perfect nor permanent solutions.

Some communities will adopt an entire sustainability plan, such as “The Baltimore Sustainability Plan.” In other cases, a department, such as the Oregon Department of Transportation may adopt the plan that could affect local communities. Planning commissioners should find out if a sustainability plan is underway in their community and explore ways to connect the plan to planning and the work of the planning commission. For example, the planning commission could organize a public education and citizen participation program related to the sustainability plan.

Another term, sometimes used interchangeably with sustainability is “green.” However, green programs and plans focus not on the three-pronged approach of environment, economy, and society but more narrowly on environmental concerns. Green plans and programs are likely to focus on such things as green infrastructure, urban agriculture, and recycling.

For more information see the American Planning Association Policy Guide on Planning for Sustainability at: <http://www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/sustainability.htm> and the training program *Sustainability Planning for Officials*.

Smart growth is a more clearly defined term with specific practices recommended for application at the local level. Many of the strategies focus on the location, density, and inter-relationships of uses, such as transit and housing. As sustainability has grown more popular in common currency, smart growth is mentioned less often. Smart growth strategies provide useful guidelines for preparing municipal plans, establishing incentives for desirable development, establishing policy, or reviewing development projects. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), “Smart growth development practices support national environmental goals by preserving open spaces and parkland and protecting critical habitat; improving transportation choices, including walking, bicycling, and transit, which reduces emissions from automobiles; promoting brown field redevelopment; and reducing impervious cover, which improves water quality and reduces stormwater runoff. Wikipedia offers another, related definition, “Smart growth is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in compact walkable urban centers to avoid sprawl and advocates compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including neighborhood schools, complete streets, and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices.”

All of these actions can directly or indirectly contribute to sustainability at the local level. The U.S. EPA has ten guidelines for smart growth; I have added my remarks on the objectives of each action in the parentheses.

1. Mix land uses

(Put related uses in walking distance proximity, particularly housing, jobs and recreational uses)

2. Take advantage of compact building design

(Cluster buildings and reduce the amount impervious surfaces, such as paved roads and avoid inefficient land use patterns)

3. Create housing opportunities and choices for a range of household types, family size and incomes

(Create more stable, equitable, and diverse neighborhoods)

4. Create walkable neighborhoods

(Encourage social interaction, healthy lifestyles, and offer alternatives to the total reliance on the automobile for transportation)

5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place

(Enhance identity, increase property values, generate local pride and responsibility)

6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas (clean the air, provide recreational opportunities, save prime farmland and rural character, reduce natural disasters, and protect bio-diversity)

7. Reinvest in and strengthen existing communities and achieve more balanced regional development

(Control urban sprawl, invigorate older communities, and direct growth in more cost effective and efficient land patterns in terms of public facilities and services)

8. Provide a variety of transportation choices

(Relate land-use type, pattern, and density to a functional system of streets, public transit opportunities, and a network of pedestrian and bicycle pathways)

9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective

(This is critical to attracting quality developers in any economy)

10. Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions

(this helps provide political stability or ongoing commitment and makes developers and their projects responsive to the legitimate concerns of citizens)

Some communities have developed smart growth plans and others use smart growth as a set of principles that guide the community's decision making.

For more information see <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth> and <http://www.smartgrowth.org/pdf>. See also the APA *Smart Growth Codes* training package.

Sustainable development and smart growth are not just buzz words, but positive and fundamental concepts applicable to planning and land use decisions that have broad and long term benefits.

New urbanism is primarily a set of principles for urban design that suggest how to organize and design the layout of the community, as well as design of buildings and surrounding spaces and the transportation networks that serve them. Many of the principles incorporate smart growth guidelines and principles of sustainability. The principles are described and elaborated in detail on the web site [http://www.newurbanism.org/newurbanism/smart growth.html](http://www.newurbanism.org/newurbanism/smart%20growth.html).

New urbanism began as a more design-focused concept called neo-traditionalism, as much of the design called upon historic architecture and town plans. More recently much of the focus on new urbanism has been on form-based codes that codify the means of achieving new urbanism. New urbanism draws upon strong graphic images that visualize the future appearance of town plans, streets, and buildings. Many new urbanism principles are implemented through zoning ordinances, form-based codes, new development plans, and have influenced overall community plans.

Implementation

How do these three concepts get implemented? They can be used in the broad goal setting for the community, in the visioning efforts that provide graphic alternatives for how a community may development or change. Sustainability can be a shared goal and approach for multiple departments and agencies and sustainability planning can help connect and integrate programs from public health to transportation.

These concepts and approaches can influence how the community looks at its economic development programs including incentives and disincentives. Further, the examples and scales of action, as well as compelling graphic information, can help the public understand and participate in the development of goals and actions for the betterment of the community.

Zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations are another concrete implementation tool. Planning commissioners can recommend practical amendments to the zoning ordinance and subdivision ordinance that lend authority to their development recommendations.

The zoning ordinance is a key instrument for implementing the comprehensive plan and shaping more sustainable development. Here are some elements you can consider in your zoning ordinance to further sustainability and smart growth.

- * Purpose statement – identify sustainability as a goal
- * Densities – permit density bonuses for special efforts to preserve natural resources
- * Agricultural preservation – relate to county or regional plans and resources
- * Impervious surfaces – control by land use type, bonuses for impact below standards
- * Tree preservation and grading – preserve existing trees and character of the site
- * Solar panels and windmills – permit to reduce petroleum energy use
- * Green roofs – permit to reduce stormwater run-off (may be building code issue)
- * Landscaping – set minimum requirements utilizing native species appropriate to various uses, functions, and micro-environments
- * Planned Unit Developments – use this tool to grant exceptions from rigid standards to achieve larger scale environmental objectives

The subdivision ordinance governs specifications for public improvements that can also contribute to the comprehensive plan's sustainability goals. Some key elements include:

- * Park & school donations – relate to overall open space network and plan objectives
- * Street widths – consider minimum size to meet safety and operational requirements in accord with functional classification and land uses of the comprehensive plan. But also consider the principals of *complete streets* that accommodate pedestrian, cyclists, and drivers.
- * BMP's – bonuses for best management practices to reduce and filter stormwater
- * Stormwater and wetlands – standards to integrate these considerations into natural systems and also achieve habitat, esthetic and recreational objectives.

See also *Planning Connections* at www.planningconnections.com for case studies of these concepts.

[sidebar: use the covers of these three products]

- *Sustainability Planning for Officials*
APA and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy

CD-ROM Training Package

- *Smart Growth Codes*

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CD-ROM Training Package

- *Complete Streets*

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