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## ***The Smart Growth Fraud***

By Michael S. Coffman

For decades urban planners have adhered to the mantra that urban sprawl increases pollution and housing costs, more driving time to work and shopping, stress, and the escalating consumption of scarce farmland and open space. Urban planning to implement what Al Gore calls "smart growth" supposedly corrects these problems and creates more livable, inexpensive homes for all. Irrefutable evidence, however, shows that urban planning creates the very nightmares it is supposed to eliminate. In the process, it strips urbanites of one of their most fundamental civil liberties — property rights.

Land-use control has been a goal of socialists for many decades. Laurence Rockefeller's 1972 publication of The Use of Land: A Citizen's Policy Guide to Urban Growth was instrumental in attempting to enact land-use regulation in Congress several times in the early 1970s. Edited by William K. Reilly, who later served as EPA Administrator under George Bush senior, the report claimed that planning the wise use of land is the best tool to guide growth toward achieving economic equality and protecting environmental quality.

Following the failed attempt to employ the anti-property rights features of *The Use of Land*, the United Nations set the same agenda in the 1976 Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat I) held in Vancouver. For instance, the Preamble of Agenda Item 10 of the Conference Report states: "The provision of decent dwellings and healthy conditions for the people *can only be achieved* if land is used in the interests of society as a whole. *Public control of land use is therefore indispensable....*" (Italics added)

Smart growth advocates seek to preserve land in a natural or agricultural state by encouraging individuals to live in denser communities that take up smaller tracts of land per housing unit. Such communities also encourage residents to rely more on walking or public transit than on cars for mobility, and they more closely mix retail and other commercial facilities with residential units to foster easy access to jobs and shopping.

Land-use control can often become an obsession to planners for obvious reasons. In order to plan and control growth in their enlightened way, government bureaucrats and planning advocates *must* control property rights. Private property rights and smart growth are therefore mutually exclusive.

Such policies do not permit Americans the freedom to live where they choose. They must live inside urban growth boundaries. Developers must provide open space around new development. Americans may not live in green-belt areas around urban centers. They may not live in designated viewsheds of scenic highways, or in the buffer zone of a Heritage River or a designated stream.

Those advocating smart growth can become so obsessive they become irrational. For instance, on June 18, 2001, the Sierra Club defined "efficient urban density" as a city containing 500 housing units to the acre. Put another way, 500 families would have to live on an acre of land which is 209 x 209 feet! This would require a 14-story apartment building if 36 very small 1,000 square foot units (with hallways) occupied each floor! Increasing the apartment size to 1500 square feet would require a 21-story building!

After being criticized that such densities were more than three times greater than the highest density tracts in Manhattan and more than double the most dense and squalid ward of Bombay, India, the Sierra Club quickly revised its definition of urban efficiency to 100 units per acre. Reaching even that goal, however, would require living arrangements that are 2.4 times as dense as all Manhattan, twice as dense as central Paris and ten

times that of San Francisco according to the Heritage Foundation. The density of the average suburban area is 1-3 units per acre.

At least nineteen states have state growth-management laws or task forces to protect farmland and open space. Dozens of cities and counties have adopted urban growth boundaries to contain development and prevent the spread of urbanization to outlying and rural areas. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) partially funded a 2002 report called "Growing Smart Legislative Guidebook: Model Statutes for Planning and the Management of Change." Congress is considering passing "The Community Character Act," which proposes to fund state and local efforts to reform their land use planning process to conform more closely to smart growth policies.

The Legislative Guidebook calls for using federal funding as a carrot to mandate a more restrictive "integrated state-regional-local planning system that is both vertically and horizontally consistent." Vertically and horizontally consistent, in turn, means total government control from the federal government to the local community across America. One size fits all. This dovetails with Section 4(c)(1)(D) of the Community Character Act which calls for funding and "coordination of Federal, State, regional, tribal, and local land use plans."

The paranoia about the need to control growth is a constant drumbeat of those promoting urban planning. They claim America is rapidly losing its farmland and open space. Yet, the U.S. Bureau of Census classifies less than 5 percent of the U.S. as being developed and less than 2.5 percent as urban using the 2002 corrected data. Even in the densely populated east, both New York and Pennsylvania are only 10 percent developed. New Jersey, the most developed state, has only 30 percent of its land developed. To top it all off, less than one-quarter of the loss in farmland since 1945 is due to urbanization, and the rate of loss has been dropping since the 1960s. <sup>1</sup>

The presumption that low-density residential development means more pollution, more congestion and fewer preserved natural resources is equally false. Likewise, the belief that higher-density compact development mitigates those impacts is false. Increasing population density does little to alleviate auto-caused smog. Urban and suburban areas with the lowest population densities have the fewest air pollution problems.

Population density or compactness also has little relationship to how much commuters depend on automobiles. <sup>2</sup> More than 75 percent of commuter trips are by car — even in urban areas. Thus, any planning strategy that attempts to increase population density usually leads to more traffic congestion and stalled traffic. This exacerbates air pollution levels and potentially causes more areas to fail federal clean air goals. <sup>3</sup> This, in turn requires regulations that are even more restrictive.

Portland, Oregon, the model for urban planning, has had the most stringent land-use plans in the U.S. since the 1970s. In implementing its plan, Portland has stopped building highways and instead has built two light commuter rails that failed to achieve their goals. Transit commuter use actually dropped 20 percent from 1980 to 1991. Additionally, in spite of the severe hardship imposed on those who want to use automobiles, the Portland area experienced the largest increase in automobile use per capita from 1990 to 1999 of any U.S. urban area with more than one million people. <sup>4</sup>

The same is true for alternative transit methods. San Francisco's proposed Third Street light rail line, for instance, will cost \$40.50 per ride, which is equal to \$18,225 annually per new commuter. Notes the Heritage Foundation:

For the same money, each new commuter could lease a new Pontiac Grand Am throughout the "life" of the rail system and pay for more than 100,000 miles of air travel at the average ticket rate each year. Alternatively, one could lease the

Grand Am and use the remainder of the annual subsidy for the average mortgage payment in the nation's most expensive housing market.

Urban planning has also failed miserably in providing affordable housing. As a rule, more dense areas cost more to build in, tend to have higher taxes, higher levels of pollution, and a higher cost of living. The Heritage Foundation reports that; "Data indicate that housing affordability in Portland (percentage of households that can afford the median priced home) dropped 56 percent from 1991 to 2000, the largest reduction of any major urban area in the nation! Portland's home ownership rate fell as a result." The poor, of course, suffer the most in this kind of failed policy. Families no longer able to afford single-family homes in Portland have to move into multi-family units. During 1992-97, the number of housing permits issued for multifamily units doubled from 25 percent to 49 percent.

Land-use zoning can also have a devastating impact on the cost of land. A March 2002 study published by the Harvard Institute of Economic Research showed that zoning dramatically increases the cost of land in urban areas. Where regulatory zoning is not artificially driving up the price of land, the cost of an extra quarter-acre in a single lot is very similar to a separate and independent buildable quarter-acre lot. This condition exists in urban Kansas City. However, in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Anaheim, San Diego, New York City, Seattle and others like them, the difference between the cost of an extra quarter-acre in a lot, and a separate buildable quarter-acre lot is in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. "In these areas," claims the Harvard study, "only a small percentage of the value of the lot comes from an intrinsically high land price; the rest is due to restrictions on construction." Land-use restrictions were the only variable correlated with the huge cost increases.

The aggressive promotion of smart growth policies by some in the media, politicians and a gross misrepresentation of the facts by many environmentalists threatens the freedom of ordinary Americans to choose living arrangements that best suit their needs. Although smart growth proponents advocate land-use control as a means of providing affordable housing, it punishes low-income families, keeping them from ever being able to afford a home of their own and denying them the American Dream. According to the Heritage Foundation, home ownership rates among African-American and Hispanic families are still below 50 percent, in contrast to the nearly 75 percent ownership rates among white households. The very fashionable Fauquier County, Virginia, which has imposed severe growth restrictions and limits on homebuilding, has seen its African-American population fall both relatively and absolutely over the decade of the 1990s.

No matter how it is cut, urban planning and smart growth is a bald-faced fraud that is creating a nightmare for people across America. From a few academics and environmentalists to the media, state and local officials, and high-level federal officials of all ideologies and party affiliations, this misguided vision has spread despite overwhelming evidence that it does not work. The persistence of these beliefs despite all facts to the contrary is a tribute to the power of a fashionable idea favoring federal intervention, however illogical it may seem in practice and experience.

It is time for the Bush administration to pull *all* federal funding for any program dealing with smart growth or urban planning. Imposing such altruistic ideals just does not work. They harm both the environment and the citizens whom they are supposed to help!

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