

SMART GROWTH IN NORTH AMERICA— A SURVEY OF LESSONS LEARNED

By Hannah Twaddell, MAT

Hannah Twaddell is a Senior Planner with Renaissance Planning Group, a planning and policy analysis firm specializing in the integration of land use, transportation and design. She can be reached at htwaddell@ciesthatwork.com, 434-296-3025.

What’s the status of smart growth in North America, and where does it need to go? A cross-section of professional and citizen planners spanning the US and Canada responded to this question during the summer of 2002 by participating in a survey based on the 100 policies for smart growth implementation outlined in “Getting To Smart Growth,” published by the Smart Growth Network this spring. The survey was sponsored by the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council in Stuart, Florida with funds from the FHWA Transportation and Community and System Preservation Program. Its purpose was to help the council identify policies and tools that could support a planned network of walkable, transit-oriented activity centers.

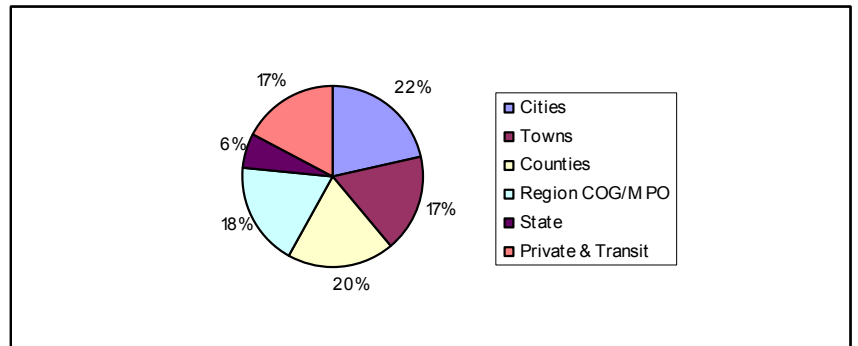
Forty eight people responded to the survey, which was conducted online through a website and advertised through planning-related listserves and online newsletters. Respondents hailed from 21 states, including a Canadian province, and represented a variety of local, regional, state agencies as well as a private non-profit group, a citizen activist and two consultants, one of whom staffed a transit authority.

Fig 1: Respondent Characteristics

States & Provinces

California	1
Colorado	1
Connecticut	4
Florida	1
Georgia	6
Louisiana	2
Massachusetts	1
Maryland	1
Maine	5
Montana	1
North Carolina	5
New Brunswick, Canada	1
New Hampshire	1
New Mexico	1
New York	1
Pennsylvania	1
Texas	3
Virginia	6
Vermont	3
Wisconsin	1
Not reported	2

Types of Governments & Organizations



Population and Land Area

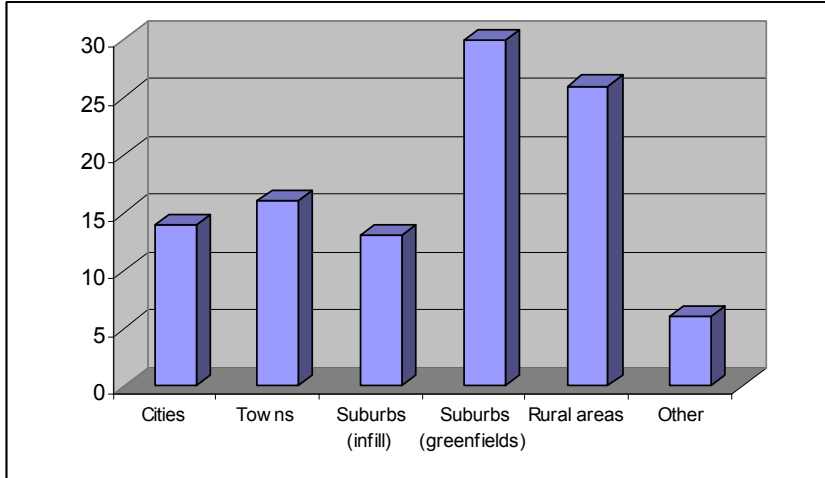
	2000 Population	1990 Population	Percent Change
Smallest	4,200	3,700	14%
Largest*	9,500,000	8,600,000	7%
Median	77,000	72,000	7%

	Land Area (Sq Mi)	Density (Persons/Sq Mi)
Smallest	3.2	15
Largest	54,310	66,667
Median	106	425

Respondents were also asked about the primary industries in their regions, and what types of places were growing the fastest.

Fig 2: Growth Trends and Major Employers

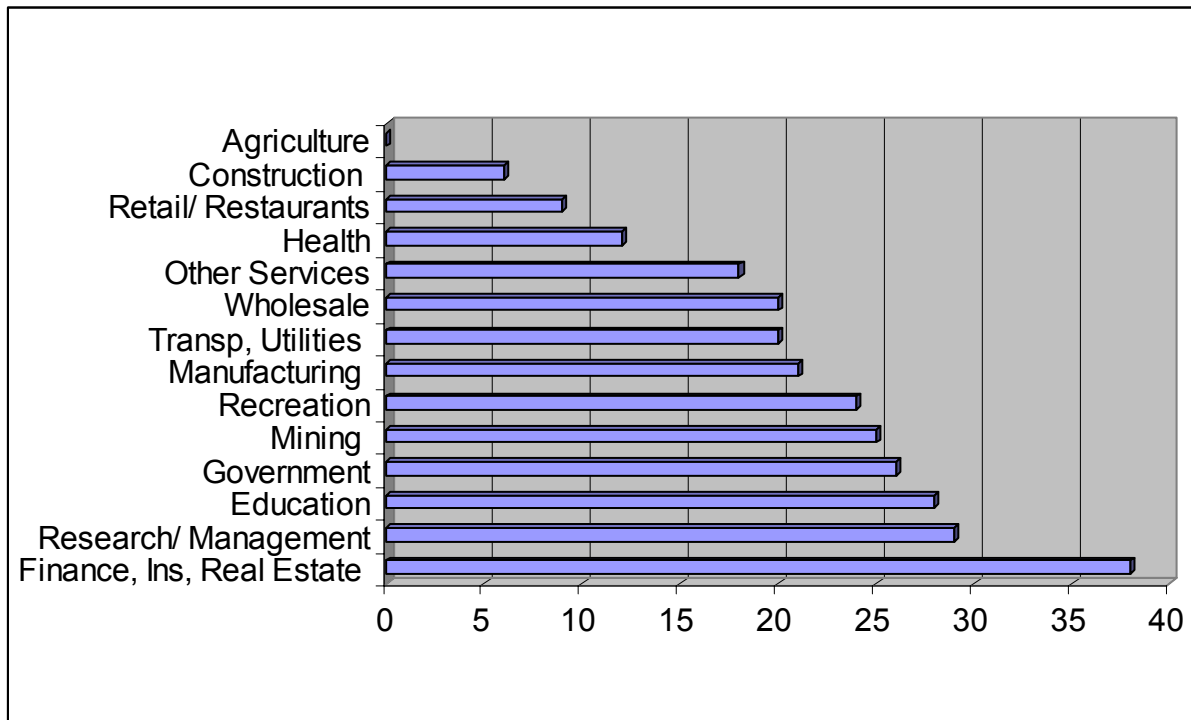
Primary Growth Areas (percentage of responses)



Sprawl Still Ahead of Infill: Growth, as estimated by respondents for their regions, is occurring primarily in suburban greenfields and rural areas (a combined 53%) compared to existing cities, towns, and suburban infill (a combined 41%).

The Information Age: Major industries in respondents' regions include finance, insurance & real estate, followed by research and management (including engineering and accounting), education, and government.

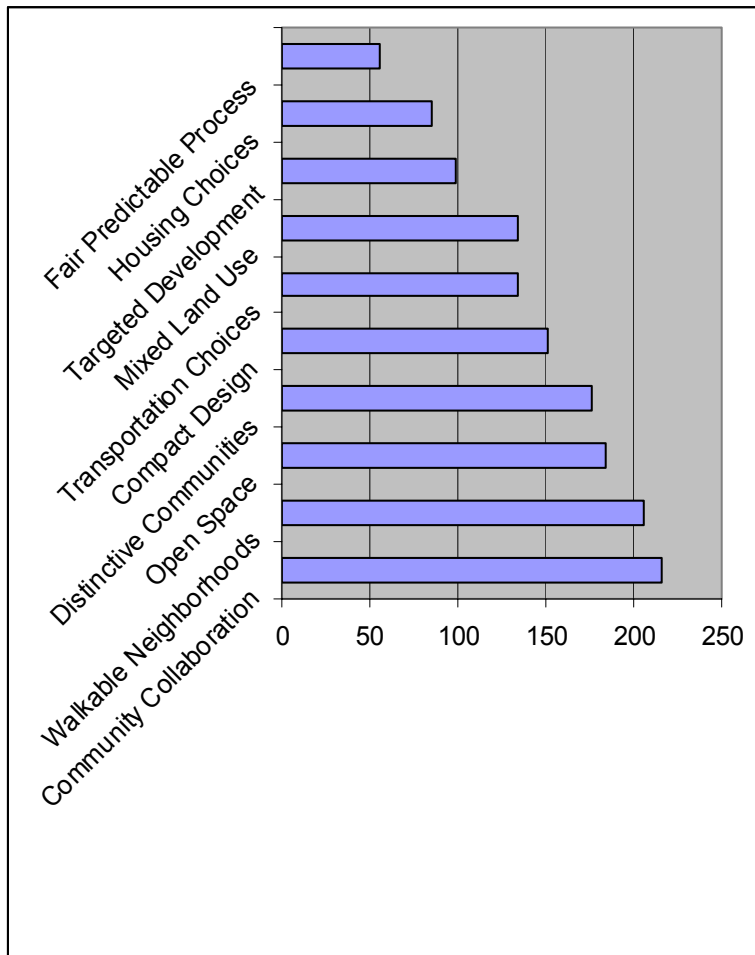
Primary Industries (percentage of responses)



Application of Smart Growth Policies: The survey included a checklist of ten smart growth principles and ten policies that support each principle, a total of 100 policies in all. The list was based on the Smart Growth Network (SGN) publication “Getting to Smart Growth: 100 Policies for Implementation.” Respondents checked off the policies used in their region.

The Need For Collaboration Affects Implementation: Principles most frequently applied involved actions that local governments and regional councils can directly influence through planning, regulation, and local public investments, such as communication, neighborhood infrastructure, and preservation of rural areas. Principles that depend more upon collaboration among localities and transportation agencies or private developers were applied in more moderate numbers; these included the development of more transportation choices and mixed use communities. Principles that required close communication - and potential struggles - with developers were the least frequently applied; these included affordable housing regulations, financial incentives for neighborhood redevelopment, and more predictable decision-making.

Fig 3: Number of Policies Checked For Each Smart Growth Principle



Respondents reported the most activity around the areas of (1) community collaboration and (2) creating walkable neighborhoods.

The next most frequently applied policies focused on (3) preserving open space and (4) fostering distinctive communities. This was closely followed by policies supporting (5) compact design.

Policies that supported (6) transportation choices and (7) mixed land use were applied in equal numbers.

The three areas in which respondents were the least active included (8) targeting development toward existing communities, (9) creating housing choices, and (10) making the development process fair and predictable.

Policies Applied Within Each Principle: Figure 4 provides highlights of the frequency with which specific policies were checked. As noted above, policies that can be implemented directly by a locality are more frequently applied than ones which require more complex communication, collaboration, and/or funding strategies that involve outside agencies and the private sector.

Fig 4: Policies By Frequency Of Use

Principle (& number of policies checked)	Most Frequently Cited Policy (& percent of policies checked within category)	Least Frequently Cited Policy (& percent of policies checked within category)
1. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions (216)	Community visioning exercises (16%)	Public access to tax and lien information (1%).
2. Create walkable neighborhoods (206)	Access for people with disabilities & sidewalk design standards (14%)	Economic activities to stimulate pedestrian activity (5%).
3. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas (184)	Greenways networks (18%);	Green infrastructure plans (4%).
4. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place (176).	Plant trees (18%);	Funding and standards for neighborhood schools & permitting sidewalk vendors (3%)
5. Take advantage of compact building design (151)	Regional plans for compact communities (15%)	State-level model design standards and codes (3%)
6. Provide a variety of transportation choices (134)	Require sidewalks in new development (18%)	Modify roadway LOS in areas served by transit (1%).
7 (tied with 6): Mix land uses (134)	Innovative zoning (25%)	Zone by building type & create incentives to encourage people to live near work (2%)
8. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities (99)	Support community-based organizations to revitalize neighborhoods (22%)	Split-rate property taxes (1%)
9. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices (85)	Zoning & building codes allowing a variety of housing (29%)	Education on resource-efficient mortgages (4%);
10. Make development decisions fair, predictable and cost-effective (56)	Displaying zoning regulations in pictorial fashion (29%)	Consumer incentives for smart growth (4%)

Additional comments and advice provided at the end of survey fell into three general categories, as noted below:

Simplifying and Strengthening Regulations:

- Creating additional layers of zoning that "restricts" activities may not work. Increasing flexibility of existing regulations or eliminating unnecessary regulations may be a better strategy.
- Eliminate jargon and complexity in codes; use drawings or images to illustrate intent.
- Local municipalities need clear statutory support.

Developing Infrastructure and Financing:

- Financing public infrastructure is a key to promoting Smart Growth.
- Innovative use of transportation funds can be a catalyst for sustainable development projects.
- Pedestrian systems need a lot of help, most are poorly designed and maintained.
- Tax base sharing or regional forms of revenue raising and spending, such as special tax districts or functional authorities, are key.

Nurturing Leadership and Collaborative Planning:

- Sponsor leadership trips to comparable cities to obtain case studies of successes and failures.
- Seek improvements that benefit landowners and community alike.
- Build an ethical framework for decision-making, and staff/board relations.
- It has to come from the top down - heads of the localities need to adopt policies which [staff] can implement. The state could start with making it a law/regulation that all localities would have to follow.
- Identify future development patterns under the status quo and see if people find them acceptable.

Followup Interviews: Interviews were conducted with a sampling of respondents, including regional planners from Maine, Texas and Los Angeles; city planners from New Brunswick, Canada, and Manchester, Vermont; a planner for a Houston transit agency who had also worked in Seattle; a state DOT planner in Virginia and a citizen activist in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Highlights include the following.

1. Please describe a little more about the strategies that have been used in your region.

- Limiting highway access (DOT practice), the Statewide Great American Neighborhoods program, local comprehensive plans, and the Scenic byways program have all supported smart growth in Maine.
- A citywide subdivision and zoning bylaw that prevents unserved development is effective in New Brunswick. The city focuses on attracting quality multiple family development by helping people understand the financial trade-offs of buying a home in the city.
- Seattle's growth management law and urban growth boundary made the zoning enforceable and provided incentives.

"One problem in our region is that the term "smart growth" is viewed by most as synonymous with communism. Part of this is due to a lack of understanding. We rush headlong into selling "Smart Growth" like it is Listerine - one size or one type fits all."

- Houston has accomplished a lot through the creation of small tax increment financing districts. Parking is expensive, so many of the new places have little. In Fort Worth, their preoccupation was to get more parking downtown to entice people to go there. But in Houston, people come downtown with less parking because the amenities are all there.
- The Third Street Promenade in downtown Santa Monica is a successful pedestrian mall with a nearby transit hub and housing above the retail spaces.
- Pasadena recently took down a 20-year old indoor mall and replaced it with an open air mall of boutique-type businesses that has a village feel and includes rental units above the stores.
- Transit oriented development around Metro stations and transit/ ridesharing subsidies and incentives (Metrocheck, Guaranteed Ride Home, etc) are making a difference in northern Virginia.
- We have a long-term outlook in Manchester. We believe regulations are not just about forestalling bad things from happening, but about shaping the future. One interesting project – we “undeveloped” a former tannery in the center of town that had converted to a car dealership. After the car dealer died, the town bought the parcel and turned it into a town green. Some 800 people donated money, time or materials to the project.
- The North Central Texas COG/ MPO Land Use / Transportation Joint Venture Program awarded over \$40 million in federal transportation funds to sustainable development projects.
- Albuquerque’s Planned Growth Strategy focuses on models for infill & redevelopment in walkable neighborhood design as well as policies for implementation.

“National market trends are evident in Houston - a lot of companies are now trying to locate downtown because employees want to be near entertainment and other amenities.”

“The most important element is dense housing in and around the central core.”

2. What have been the outcomes – positive or negative – from implementing smart growth policies in your region? Have some been unexpected?

- Awareness about the cost of sprawl, attitudes toward planning, and a lot of interest in alternate modes of transportation have all improved in Maine.
- Houston shows that evolution of the city is a function of market. It’s real mixed use development, and it can be messy.
- Rural large-lot zoning to curb sprawl drives up housing prices in Virginia. Concentrating development in an attractive community like Manchester, Vermont, has resulted in prices going up.
- In north central Texas, the number of town center projects has increased dramatically in the past few years, in part due to local acceptance, and in part due to market demand shifting.
- In Albuquerque’s downtown, an old high school that sat empty for 25 years has been converted to lofts; a polluted sawmill has been cleaned up and converted to multiple family housing; and there are two new high density residential areas right downtown. Affordable housing is included in the mix

“A market preference toward the city is emerging in New Brunswick. Both young professionals and older people want to move back to the core.”

“Retail gentrification has come to Santa Monica. National chains have started displacing locally owned business.”

3. What would you say were the key factors behind the successes in your region?

- State mandated shore land zoning to protect the Maine coastline has given localities an opportunity to try zoning without having to take direct political heat for it. We've also benefited from DOT support, which - as in any state - has more money than the state Planning Department, and a vested interest in seeing its roads avoid congestion.
- Developers in New Brunswick have seen that there's money to be made from density if you recognize and capitalize on the right opportunities.
- If it encourages retail business and housing to succeed, it will work. The key factors in Los Angeles are political commitment and a sound, sustainable economic base.
- Focusing on the size and scale of development to fit the community. In Manchester, we make McDonald's or other chain stores build to our standard. When it comes to transportation, we provide for people over vehicles.
- We take little steps within a clear context of Manchester's big picture. We don't wait for the perfect package to be put together - we build it as the opportunities arise.
- Regional cooperation and vision on the part of our Regional Transportation Council have been key factors, as well as partnerships.
- In Albuquerque, it's been continued negotiation. The motivation for success is to avoid breakdowns and find consensus - no one wants to continue the conflict.

"When we take time to think through what different long range development patterns will mean, elected leaders can have an alternative to short-range, profit-driven solutions."

"Both Houston and Seattle recognized that density had a positive benefit. The result in both cases is focused development in the urban core. King County has handled suburban sprawl better because it is willing to say no to rural infrastructure."

4. What were the key factors behind the unsuccessful experiences in your region?

- The need for low and moderate income housing is putting a lot of pressure on Maine's inland areas. That kind of growth can really overwhelm a town of a hundred.
- Design. Success at encouraging compact developments in New Brunswick is going to depend largely on whether people will like the way they look and feel - enough to want to live in or next to them.
- The basic building blocks of neighborhoods just don't sell in New Brunswick's far-flung suburbs because people spend their days in the city and in the car. The front porches and sidewalks of the neo-traditional suburbs can sit empty because the residents are just not there to walk around, much less support all the civic activity it takes to form a real community.
- In Houston, there is no regional consistency, no vision for regional arterials or networks. This is creating traffic nightmares.
- If the local environment is really depressed it's very hard for anything to take off. This problem is intertwined with Los Angeles' larger issues of economics, social inequity and racism that smart growth alone really can't fix.

"If rural sprawl is to be contained, at some point rural governments have to take a position that rural areas are intended only for rural uses -- and suburban housing is not a rural use."

- Because of the appellate process in Vermont, it's easy a project to be tied up in court for years.
- Misconceptions in north central Texas about smart growth and sustainable development have had to be overcome, as well as financial constraints (e.g. cost of asbestos cleanup, etc)
- Financial interests. When people in Albuquerque feel their ability to make money is threatened they rear up.

"Zoning that doesn't serve any purposes or actively discourages the desired outcome is a critical impediment, and can impede the natural evolution of city."

5. Based on your lessons learned to date, what are the most important factors to which TCRPC should pay attention as they embark on implementing smart growth?

- Regional councils have to be adept at working between the state and local agendas as mediators and educators.
- Look for related programs that can leverage smart growth plans - scenic byways, land trusts, public health. Programs that enable people to spend less time driving are very popular.
- It's to a city's benefit to support the rural environment. Cities should fund and participate in rural preservation planning and investments.
- Package the message in such a way that people actually do understand the consequences of investing in "dumb growth" and are encouraged to make different decisions
- Understand your culture. In Seattle, success depends on citizen-driven political support. In Texas regulations are much less stringent, so strategies that support market-driven development play an important role.
- It's not genius stuff – it's just good planning: Preserve open space. Increase densities. Increase multi-modal transportation choices. Pay attention to design. Be aware of the political and social, and economic context. Think about the landscape. Include neighbors, stakeholders, and decision-makers.
- Nurture a cooperative relationship with between the board and the staff. Then the staff can be confident that the board will support them in upholding standards against pressure.
- Account for outside policies that affect your community's goals. For example, tax codes in the US make it more favorable for landowners in depressed neighborhoods to abandon buildings as a write-off than to redevelop them.
- Educate residents about how their own purchasing decisions are related to survival of local businesses.
- Bring all the people to the table to talk. Start by finding what you can agree upon, and what you want to have happen. This gives you a reference point to reiterate when you begin to argue.

"Many school districts do not allow children to walk or ride bikes to school, but many children are obese. Healthy community programs create an acceptable way to address this through smart growth."

"The placement and investment in roads is a critical key to success or failure. If the city is really committed to smart growth, they will invest in the transportation system that will get them there."

"Analyze every regulation to see if it's necessary and does the right thing. Be willing to throw out the rules that don't make sense."

Key Themes and Conclusions: Based on this survey, a few key themes seem common to planners and citizens in towns and regions of nearly every size and culture:

Cities: Many of the success stories from the survey were about city revitalization. Cities that have invested in planning, infrastructure and incentives over the past five to ten years are benefiting from changing demographics and market forces that are sparking a renewed interest in pedestrian-friendly, mixed use downtown development.

Suburbs: Respondents showed an intensifying interest in redeveloping and redesigning existing and newly developing suburbs, but expressed concerns about the feasibility of turning the tide in a new direction after 50 years of development patterns based on automobile accessibility. In existing suburbs, public-private cooperation and infrastructure investments will be needed to redesign them for mixed uses and/or walkability. In new suburbs, in addition to these issues, location and accessibility is a concern; developments located in far-flung places without good access to central activity centers are likely to add to regional congestion and travel times even if they are well designed and include mixed uses.

Rural Areas: Preserving rural areas is perhaps the hardest task of all, because ultimately it requires saying “no” to development. Some cities and towns are partnering with private land trusts to simply buy up vulnerable land and/or development rights, while others are taking a hard line on land regulation and refusing to invest in water or transportation for rural areas. But these actions take money and political will, which are assets that require a lot of time for a region to develop. Forces working against many rural regions in developing these assets include either very rapid growth that is overwhelming them, or desperate financial straits that make them unwilling to risk limiting any type of development. Some respondents observed that cities should be doing more to reach out and help rural areas curb sprawl, noting this is in their own best interest.

Collaboration: Every success story involves some form of collaboration, whether it’s between a city and local developers or based on grass-roots coalitions involving hundreds of local residents. The most successful efforts have invested time, effort, and money to develop consensus among politicians, staff, citizens, and business leaders. Education is necessary at every level: for example, planners need to understand how developers make money in order to create incentives that will work, and citizens need to understand the political process in order to affect it. Skilled facilitators, mediators, and leaders - both recognized and unofficial - are all critical players in keeping everyone at the table focused on developing and implementing a clear, shared vision.

What’s the status of smart growth in North America, and where does it need to go? Success stories show that investments, planning and collaboration can pay off in win-win projects that contribute to a community’s quality of life and are profitable for developers. Geographically, we need to continue focusing on high quality cities while stepping up efforts on suburban infill and rural preservation. Politically, the make-or-break factor in any effort to create a sustainable community is the commitment of its people. The act of bringing together elected officials, citizen groups, agency staff, and business leaders to shape and support a clear vision, one community at a time, is the key to long-term, nationwide smart growth.