

# The State of Smart Growth

Anthony Flint

Adapted from *This Land: The Battle Over Sprawl and the Future of America*  
(Johns Hopkins University Press, Spring 2006)

## REPORT

### RESEARCH

As a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, and as a research fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, I researched *This Land: The Battle Over Sprawl and the Future of America* with a focus on the political, cultural and economic forces that influence development in the United States. I conducted interviews with principals nationally and in states that were experimenting with smart growth, researched newspaper and magazine articles, and obtained further background through scholarly research and reports by professional organizations, detailed in addenda.

### KEY FINDINGS

Three states that pioneered anti-sprawl initiatives and elevated public awareness about planning and development – Oregon, Maryland and New Jersey – experienced major setbacks after the turn of the 21st century:

- Oregon, where Governor Tom McCall signed Senate Bill 100 in 1973, establishing urban growth boundaries and regional governance, was roiled by the November 2004 passage of Measure 37 by a margin of 61 percent. The measure allowed landowners to file for compensation if their property dropped in value as a result of land use regulations, or be free of those regulations. In October 2005 a Marion County circuit court judge ruled that the measure violated the state constitution but that decision is on appeal. Measure 37 was a clear victory for those opposed to the Oregon growth management regime, and had clear symbolic weight as a big setback for smart growth in the very place that invented it.
- Republican Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. replaced Democrat Paris Glendening as governor of Maryland in 2002, and dismantled the smart growth office that Glendening had established, returned the focus from transit to roadbuilding, and prepared to sell off large tracts of state-owned land for development. The Glendening era -- marked by coordinated agencies covering transportation, the environment, housing; farmland preservation; streamlined permitting and reduced fees for urban developers – was failed to make a dent in sprawl patterns in Maryland, according to an August 2004 Washington Post series.
- New Jersey made headlines when Governor James McGreevey declared “war on sprawl” in his inaugural speech in 2003. McGreevey identified government funding programs that subsidized sprawl, bolstered a Brownfields loan program, and established the controversial “Big Map” — the Blueprint for Intelligent Growth— which declared large swaths of the state off limits to developers. But builders quickly rose up in opposition, and in 2004, McGreevey resigned from the governorship in an unrelated controversy. In the aftermath, an urban development fast-track bill faltered. The acting governor appointed a smart growth ombudsman, and the new governor, Jon Corzine, has said he supports redevelopment and open space preservation. But New Jersey is essentially starting over on smart growth, and leaders are preoccupied with a \$6 billion state budget deficit.

However, some three dozen governors have talked about growth management in state of the state or inaugural addresses in the past 10 years, and ten states have formed task forces or passed executive orders or legislation dealing with growth. A thousand state and local ballot measures on growth have come before voters, and \$30 billion in spending, on public transportation such as light rail or on land conservation, has gone in one way or another to aid the cause of better planning for future development.

The notable smart growth states today include:

- Massachusetts, where Governor Mitt Romney appointed leading environmentalist Douglas Foy to be secretary of the Office for Commonwealth Development, coordinating growth policy through the state agencies responsible for housing, transportation, the environment and energy. Under a "Fix it First" policy, Romney put a halt to most new roadway construction until urban infrastructure could be repaired; offered cities and towns financial incentives to change their zoning to allow more dense development in town centers, downtowns, and sites near train stations; and changed the way state capital funding is distributed so it goes to places that have planned or instituted smart growth initiatives.
- Pennsylvania, where Governor Ed Rendell moved to revitalize hollowed-out cities like Scranton, Reading, and Erie, changed building codes that made it cheaper to build new rather than renovate older properties, and revisited tax laws that left cities saddled with tax-exempt properties and the responsibility of maintaining older infrastructure. Pennsylvania also established a "Fix it First" policy, a Brownfields initiative, more coordination among development-related state agencies and experimented with regional tax revenue sharing systems.
- Michigan, where Governor Jennifer Granholm also blocked new highway construction in favor of repairing existing roads in urban areas, and established financial incentives to spur development in cities. The "cool cities" initiative sent millions of dollars to Detroit and Kalamazoo for arts and culture investments like performing arts centers. Granholm promised tough enforcement of environmental regulations for developers working in open areas, woodlands, and fields, and she tried to keep farmers profitable with promotions for locally produced food. She has enjoyed the support of a major faith-based organization called MOSES (Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength).

Other states that have become active in smart growth include Delaware, Rhode Island, Vermont, Maine and Washington. Residents in the Denver area approved a ballot measure in 2004 that authorized a \$4.7 billion light rail expansion, and the Salt Lake City area is similarly studying expansions in light rail and regional planning.

## CONCLUSION

Instead of sweeping legislation, radical overhauls of zoning and restrictive policies, smart growth has become more surgically targeted. Government is playing the role of facilitator as the marketplace continues to change and buyers seek shorter commutes and a sense of community. Changing local zoning and the distribution of state funding for infrastructure are the areas of the greatest activity. For some architectural firms, innovative practices are ways to brand their design work and to increase their visibility and marketability. For most firms, adopting a particular expertise or changing methods of document production is a matter of professional survival. In architectural practice, the distinction between 'design' and 'research' is becoming less defined, and thereby, less important. Design research combines the desire to produce new knowledge through the creative making of architecture. Embracing an ethos of design research implies that a firm has a commitment to address architectural and cultural issues beyond conventional practice. Design research in practice

is conceived as not only satisfying the requirements of a particular project, but also producing work that can enhance the discipline of architecture and its role in society.

One group that naturally fuses design practice with scholarly research is the practicing academic like myself. Often, young practitioners will take a teaching position to subsidize the costs of starting a new business. Academia's mandate for new ideas encourages design innovation along with entrepreneurial business practices. Research on a particular subject can become the basis for professional activities. For instance, housing has emerged as a critical economic, political, and architectural issue for the Metro-Boston region. The Commonwealth Housing Task Force has developed one of the most progressive policies to address the housing issue. My design research translates the policy recommendations into urban and architectural form. This didactically and visually describes the new Smart Growth Overlay District legislation to architects, municipal officials, and community members. By focusing on two separate sites with different physical characteristics and demographic constituencies, this research serves as an educational tool to both



FIGURE 1. Ranchland being developed in Texas (Credit: Anthony Flint)

Ranchland north of Dallas is readied for development. Since the 1990s, even as smart growth gained greater acceptance, conventional suburban development consisting of far-flung single-family subdivisions, big-box strip malls and office parks continued to spread across the land, particularly in the South and the West.



FIGURE 2. Downtown Portland scene with light rail (Credit: Portland Oregon Visitors Association)

Downtown Portland, served by light rail and streetcars, is thriving, and Oregon has been the pioneer of smart growth. But the ballot initiative known as Measure 37 has thrown the growth management system into doubt, as landowners whose property value declines as a result of regulation line up to be compensated or build what they wish on their land.



FIGURE 3. Woodlands at Abington Station. (Credit: Anthony Flint)

Responding to new demands in the marketplace, developers are rushing to build residential and mixed-use centers near transit and commuter rail stations, such as the Woodlands at Abington Station on the Massachusetts South Shore. State and local governments are playing the role of facilitator for transit-oriented development.

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## ADDENDUM

My working paper on density for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy explores the popularity and problems associated with compact and transit-oriented development in Massachusetts, Maryland, Texas, California and Oregon. It can be found at: [www.lincolninst.edu/pubs/pub-detail.asp?id=1053](http://www.lincolninst.edu/pubs/pub-detail.asp?id=1053).

*This Land: The Battle Over Sprawl and the Future of America*, is described on the Johns Hopkins University press website (spring catalogue), at [www.press.jhu.edu/books/title\\_pages/8961.html](http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/title_pages/8961.html).

My author's website is [www.anthonyflint.net](http://www.anthonyflint.net), and includes a link to Developing Stories, a weblog about trends and events in the built environment.

Organizations that provide information on sprawl and smart growth include SmartGrowth America at [www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org); the American Planning Association at [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org); the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, at [www.brookings.edu/metro/overview.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/overview.htm); the Congress for the New Urbanism at [www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org); the Smart Growth Leadership Institute at [www.sgli.org/](http://www.sgli.org/); the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education at [www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/](http://www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/); the Urban Land Institute at [www.uli.org](http://www.uli.org); the Governors Institute for Community Design at [www.govinstitute.org/](http://www.govinstitute.org/) and the Smart Growth Network at [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org).

Robert Burchell, David Listokin and Catherine Galley from Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey authored a useful survey of smart growth trends in 2002 titled "Smart Growth: More than a Ghost of Urban Policy Past, Less than a Bold New Horizon," sponsored by the Fannie Mae Foundation and available at: [www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd\\_1104\\_burchell.pdf](http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_1104_burchell.pdf).

Patricia Salkin, associate dean and director of the Government Law Center at Albany Law School, has amassed foundational research on policy trends in smart growth and sustainable development up to 2002. [www.als.edu/centers/editor.cfm?ID=139](http://www.als.edu/centers/editor.cfm?ID=139).

The American Planning Association and the Smart Growth Network published "Planning for Smart Growth: 2002 State of the States" available at [www.planning.org/growingsmart/pdf/states2002.pdf](http://www.planning.org/growingsmart/pdf/states2002.pdf). The Smart growth Network also published "Getting to Smart growth: 100 Policies for Implementation" available at [www.smartgrowth.org/pdf/gettosg.pdf](http://www.smartgrowth.org/pdf/gettosg.pdf) and a follow-up report, available at [www.smartgrowth.org/pdf/gettosg2.pdf](http://www.smartgrowth.org/pdf/gettosg2.pdf).

I would like to thank the Boston Society of Architects for its support of my writing and research.