



Smart Growth: The Basics

Smart Growth Recommendations from New Jersey Future

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Why New Jersey Needs Smart Growth

In communities around the country, “smart growth” is on the lips of citizens and politicians alike as concern grows about traffic, taxes, housing choice, the environment, urban sprawl, and the future of our towns and cities. But what exactly *is* smart growth? What does smart growth look like? How do we get to smart growth in our own communities? And why is smart growth important to New Jersey’s future?

Where and *how* we develop our land not only matters to our personal quality of life, but also to society as a whole. With more than one million new residents expected in New Jersey over the next 20 years – and only an estimated 30 years left of buildable land at today’s rate of land consumption – smart growth is

essential to New Jersey’s economic, environmental, and social prosperity.

Smart growth is growth that addresses connections between development and environmental protection, social equity, public health, and economic vitality by reforming existing regulations that no longer meet the needs of the way we live. These outmoded zoning regulations and other government policies prevent the market from meeting people’s needs and limit choices about where to live and how to get around. If we can increase the number of choices offered to people with respect to housing and transportation, we can build smart growth communities.

Smart growth is also growth that is economically efficient. When taxpayers subsidize sprawl instead of investing in existing infrastructure, we lose more than we gain. Often what looks like growth is really unfair and expensive disinvestment in existing areas. Smart growth makes it possible to preserve and enhance existing communities, preserve remaining farmland and open space, and save taxpayers the unnecessary expense of unneeded infrastructure.

Smart growth means...

...**rebuilding** today’s older towns, suburbs and cities - rather than building on our remaining open lands.

...**saving taxpayers money** by maximizing the investments we’ve already made in our homes and communities.

...**protecting our farmlands and open spaces** from further development, and preserving our historic and culturally significant places.

...**increasing housing choices** by offering alternatives to single-use sprawling developments.

...**reducing traffic and increasing choices for getting around** by promoting mixed-use development that places housing, shopping, and jobs in close proximity; pedestrian and bicycle-friendly development; and public transit.

Smart Growth Recommendations in Brief

New Jersey Future calls on the Legislature and Governor to make smart growth possible in these ways:

1. Implement the State Plan
2. Reduce dependence on property taxes
3. Create a cabinet-level post for smart growth
4. Create an equitable and efficient housing policy
5. Coordinate transportation & land use planning to relieve traffic
6. Introduce smart conservation

For details, see pages 3 & 4.

Getting to Smart Growth...

Getting to smart growth addresses both the **planning and design** and **public policy** sides of land use. The planning and design side of the equation refers to what specific development projects look like, where they are located, what features they include. The policy side of the equation involves the evaluation of laws and regulations that enable communities and regions to easily grow in “smart” ways.

...Through Planning & Design

Local Planning

Places that are well planned and designed are “smart” in that they make more money, handle traffic better, pollute less, are more people-friendly, are better for business, and adapt better to change.

When evaluating whether or not a project is “smart,” one can ask the following questions:

1. Is the project near existing development?
2. Does it increase housing options in the area?
3. Does it protect open space and farmland?
4. Does the project create or enhance a mix of uses (residential, retail, and office)?
5. Does it enhance choices for getting around?
6. Is the project walkable and designed to encourage personal interaction?
7. Does the project respect community character?

State Planning

New Jersey has a smart growth plan – the State Development and Redevelopment Plan and its corresponding map, the State Plan Policy Map. The Plan evolves through a statewide planning process, ensuring all levels of government and the public can participate in its evolution. It provides goals and recommendations on how to manage growth by focusing development where we have existing infrastructure and investment – cities, suburbs, and towns – and away from open lands. The State Plan Map, which includes data systematically gathered from state agencies, counties, and towns through the public process mentioned above, offers a valuable geographic representation of New Jersey’s development and conservation vision. The State Plan Map is the only place where narrow departmental goals can

be brought together and reconciled in the State’s best interests.

Competing policies governing taxes and land use make the State Plan exceedingly difficult for towns and state agencies to implement in their plans and practices. This is unfortunate, because according to studies, full implementation of the Plan would have a multitude of benefits, including: saving New Jersey’s remaining natural spaces and farms; preventing traffic from worsening; revitalizing urban communities; saving billions of dollars over the next 20 years in new infrastructure costs; increasing the availability of housing that is affordable; and saving millions of dollars each year for towns and school districts.

...Through Public Policy

Even when we know what smart growth looks like, each town’s ability to make smart growth possible is dependent on state-level policies that encourage and allow communities to grow smart.

Existing laws and regulations often damage smart growth efforts, actually offering incentives for moving New Jersey in the wrong direction. Our property tax system is a prime example. New Jersey relies more heavily than most states on local property taxes to fund key services, from public schools to local roads and sewers. This unbalanced and fragmented tax system has taken a permanent toll on the places where we live – municipalities are so dependent on property taxes to finance local services that they often chase and compete for new development – even when it doesn’t fit the community’s vision, adds to traffic woes and eliminates farmland and open land.

For this reason, state laws and regulations must be changed to encourage compliance with the State Plan’s smart growth goals. Rules and incentives must be created to make this compliance attractive to towns which currently do not have the tools to achieve the State Plan’s goals. Realizing these goals requires leadership by a Governor and Legislators who believe New Jersey deserves smarter growth, and who are ready to offer the incentives and consequences for making it happen.

Sprawl to Smart Growth in Three Steps



Step 1 – Poorly planned development can leave a legacy of unsustainable growth, like this decaying strip mall.



Step 2 - Smart growth can transform this legacy from a liability to an advantage by using the site for a more diverse mix of stores, offices and apartments.



Step 3 - Re-using this site can create a vibrant commercial and residential center without expanding into existing open space, forests and farms.

Images: Courtesy of NJ Office of Smart Growth

Recommendations for Achieving Smart Growth

In order to advance smart growth, legislation and policies must make the redevelopment of suburbs, towns, and cities easier than greenfield development. The success of any legislation to advance smart growth depends on the ability of each new administrative and legislative initiative to pass three basic smart growth tests:

- ✓ Does the initiative promote development in the right places, and impede development in the wrong places as defined by the State Plan?
- ✓ Does the initiative tighten coordination between and among state agencies and local governments?
- ✓ Does the initiative increase predictability, thus lowering the costs of both development and conservation?

New Jersey Future offers the following recommendations to achieve smart growth in New Jersey:

1. Implement the State Development and Redevelopment Plan. Use the State Plan and the State Plan Map as the starting point for municipal and regional decisions about land use. Provide positive incentives for municipalities and developers to be guided by the State Plan – and, by so doing, speed New Jersey’s progress toward smarter growth.

2. Reduce Municipal Dependence on the Property Tax. New Jersey’s property tax system increases the cost of shelter by placing an inordinate tax burden on housing. It also inhibits smart growth by driving municipalities to chase and compete for development to finance schools and other municipal services, even when the development increases traffic, erases open land, distorts the housing mix in favor of upper income housing, favors commercial development, and spills over into adjoining towns.

3. Create a Cabinet-level Post for Smart Growth. No other policy area cries out as loudly for inter-agency coordination as smart growth. Cabinet-level coordination is essential for sustaining consistent progress, ending subsidization of sprawl, overcoming policy and administrative roadblocks, and

Recommendations for Achieving Smart Growth

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cost and spending efficiencies. The Smart Growth Policy Council created in 2001 was potentially a good first step, but it has not been used effectively and has been allowed to become moribund.

4. Create an Equitable and Efficient Housing Policy. Fully half of New Jersey's municipalities did not build a single unit of multi-family housing in the 1990s. Another 246 municipalities offer no affordable housing at all. The growing distance between jobs and housing that is affordable is a major cause of traffic congestion and the inability of people to walk or bike to work. An effective affordable housing policy will: level the playing field by treating all municipalities the same; link housing to places where jobs are being created; build a variety of sizes and types of housing for all family configurations; result in more units with less litigation and delay without spurring sprawl; and increase predictability for all involved, along with the certainty that affordable housing will be built.

5. Coordinate Transportation & Land Use Planning to Relieve Traffic. New Jersey's roads are traffic-ridden and the situation is getting worse – it is predicted that congestion will greatly exceed current levels if our development trends continue. This is largely due to the fact that land use policy and transportation policy are badly coordinated – spend-

ing money on transportation improvements is meaningless if it's out of sync with local land-use decisions. The efficiency of our transit system could be greatly improved if we also make sure to develop housing, shopping, and other businesses within walking distance of our rail and bus stations. Giving people more transportation choices – by building more sidewalks and bicycle paths – is another way to assure that New Jersey has a transportation that serves the needs of the state's residents and communities.

6. Introduce Smart Conservation. Despite the fact that New Jersey voters approved 10 successive statewide bond proposals to fund open space preservation, sprawl continues to threaten our water supplies, fragment our wooded areas, and checker-board our farms. Increasing land prices make it likely that we cannot buy our way out of the problem – research shows that the existing available dollars will fall far short of meeting the expectations New Jerseyans have for preserving the state's natural and farming heritage. To stretch acquisition dollars, new initiatives are required, including: integrating statewide land conservation plans with each other, state agencies, and the State Plan; requiring conservation planning to be a part of municipal master plans; and providing towns with tools (such as transfer of development rights and legal defense for conservation zoning) to give them more power to preserve land.

Learn More About Smart Growth

Smart Growth Scorecards

Two Smart Growth Scorecards, developed by New Jersey Future, can help determine if a project or plan is "smart." The *Proposed Developments Scorecard* identifies strengths and weaknesses in a development and helps evaluate development proposals and municipal plans in terms of basic smart growth criteria. The *Municipal Review Scorecard* looks at a municipality more comprehensively to try to determine whether or not the right tools are in place to grow smart. The Scorecards are available at www.njfuture.org.

Smart Growth Gateway

The Smart Growth Gateway, a project of New Jersey Future, is a one-stop portal for smart growth strategies that can be applied locally, information on technical and financial assistance for smart growth projects, and the latest smart growth information and resources from New Jersey and around the country. It can be found at www.smartgrowthgateway.org.

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