

Background Paper #7: Smart Growth

Smart Growth has evolved as a land use concept over the past 15 years, first in the United States and taking root in British Columbia (the first region in Canada to embrace Smart Growth) in 2001¹. Smart Growth offers an important framework for forward looking land use planning and associated issues related to growth management, quality of life, environmentally sensitive development and role of synergistic partnerships between local government, development community and citizens in promoting progressive planning outcomes. Smart Growth has been described as, “land use and development practices that limit costly urban sprawl, use tax dollars more efficiently and create more livable communities” (CMHC, Research Highlight, “Smart Growth in Canada: a Report Card”, December 2005, p.1).

1. Background

Smart Growth developed as a concept for better growth management in the northeastern United States (particularly, Maryland and New Jersey). Because the concept of Smart Growth resonated with a cross-section of local government politicians and officials, developers (both large and small) and citizens, it has become a very effective ‘movement’. As Smart Growth Online (the USA based organisation) notes:

In communities across the nation, there is a growing concern that current development patterns –dominated by what some call ‘sprawl’ – are no longer in the long-term interest of our cities, existing suburbs, small towns, rural communities, or wilderness areas. Though supportive of growth, communities are questioning the economic costs of abandoning infrastructure in the city, only to rebuild it further out (www.smartgrowth.org/about/default.asp).

Smart Growth here and in the USA has been centred upon urban issues. For instance, as noted in the previously cited website, “in general, smart growth invests time, attention, and resources in restoring community and vitality to center cities and older suburbs” (*ibid*). The Ontario Smart Growth Network confirms that, “Smart growth is a return to **urban villages**” (<http://www.smartgrowth.on.ca/whatis.htm>). Further, “the members of the Ontario Smart Growth Network are helping to change the dominant form of urban development in Ontario from urban sprawl to urban villages” (*ibid*).

Smart Growth BC has identified a number of Smart Growth Principles (Smart Growth BC Tool Kit, 2001). They are:

1. Mix land uses: each neighbourhood has a mixture of homes, retail, business, and recreational opportunities.
2. Build well-designed compact neighbourhoods. Residents can choose to live, work, shop and play in close proximity. People can easily access daily activities, transit is viable, and local businesses are supported.
3. Provide a variety of transportation choices. Neighbourhoods are attractive and have safe infrastructure for walking, cycling and transit, in addition to driving.

¹ The author was a Founding Director of Smart Growth BC.

4. Create diverse housing opportunities. People in different family types, life stages and income levels can afford a home in the neighbourhood of their choice.
5. Encourage growth in existing communities, Investments in infrastructure (such as roads and schools) are used efficiently, and developments do not take up new land.
6. Preserve open spaces, natural beauty, and environmentally sensitive areas. Development respects natural landscape features and has higher aesthetic, environmental, and financial value.
7. Protect and enhance agricultural lands. A secure and productive land base, such as BC's Agricultural Land Reserve, provides food security, employment, and habitat, and is maintained as an urban containment boundary.
8. Utilize smarter, and cheaper infrastructure and green buildings. Green buildings and other systems can save both money and the environment in the long run.
9. Foster a unique neighbourhood identity. Each community is unique, vibrant, diverse, inclusive.
10. Nurture engaged citizens. Places belong to those who live, work, and play there. Engaged citizens participate in community life and decision-making.

While many of the preceding Smart Growth BC Principles reflect an urban orientation, there is potential to learn from Smart Growth BC and examine those Principles with rural application.

Further, Smart Growth BC notes, "smart growth enhances and completes communities, by placing priority on infill, redevelopment, and densification strategies." But, Smart Growth BC also confirms that, "smart growth principles ensure that growth is fiscally, environmentally and socially responsible and recognizes the connection between development and quality of life." In addition, through sound infrastructure investment, smart growth can "save money over time." The latter has significant appeal to the development community.

It is interesting to note that Smart Growth BC (<http://www.smartgrowthbc.ca>) discusses 'greenfield development'² by concluding that:

development of a greenfield site may or may not be consistent with smart growth, depending upon its location and adherence to all other smart growth principles. A greenfield development may be consistent with smart growth if the location of the development is contiguous to an existing developed community, and its development extends, augments, enhances and completes the community. A Greenfield development would not be consistent with smart growth if it provides smart growth elements, such as transit and mixed uses, but is discontinuous from existing

² Greenfield development refers to the development of lands that have not been previously developed (e.g., forested lands, agricultural lands, large parcels of rural land) (c.f., brownfield sites which have been previously developed [e.g., abandoned industrial land]).

development and servicing (even if it is located within an urban containment boundary) (ibid, p.2)

Smart Growth has application at the regional scale and offers guidance for regional growth management initiatives and planning (Witty: 2008). That application suggests that rural areas may be able to apply some smart growth principles, but such application should recognise that smart growth was developed principally for urban situations.

2. Application in rural settings

Existing Smart Growth organizations have continued to focus on Smart Growth applications in urban settings and/or on urban/rural fringe areas. There is an absence of Smart Growth literature applying to rural areas such as Bowen Island. Nevertheless, many of the principles articulated in Smart Growth organizations, such as Smart Growth BC and the Ontario Smart Growth Network, pertain to rural locations, such as Bowen Island, positioned within the influence of large metropolitan areas. That positioning creates issues that have Smart Growth characteristics (e.g., influence upon land use form and character, housing type and affordability, economic health, environmental quality, and associated quality of life, minimising development on new land).

While Smart Growth BC has focused much of its effort upon Lower Mainland urban areas and the urban/rural fringe interface, it has also explored Smart Growth issues and design in smaller communities such as Squamish and on Vancouver Island. But, in those communities as well, the application of Smart Growth has been directed toward the principles identified in Section 1 (i.e., walkable neighbourhoods, mixed land use, preserving open space and farmland). Several of those principles can be applied to a rural community like Bowen Island.

But, care needs to be taken in using the term 'Smart Growth', especially in rural settings. For instance, its application may not be appropriate in all situations. While its broader notion of 'smart' growth has basic appeal, the methods used to achieve appropriate 'smart' growth in a rural setting may differ from that ascribed to an urban setting.

An alternative term for planning and development of rural settings, such as Bowen, is 'rural design'. Rural design promotes land use planning and development that is sensitive to the context of the rural community under consideration. Rural design recognizes that rural communities vary greatly by their natural setting, economic situation, regional character and cultural milieu. The Center for Rural Design at the University of Minnesota has spent 12 years exploring the notions of rural design. The Center describes rural design as, "an interdisciplinary process for managing rural change, defining rural issues, and creating solutions to resolve them".

As the Center for Rural Design notes:

Rural design brings a unique approach to rural issues by analyzing and integrating information through the lens of spatial awareness and organization. . . . Rural design provides a foundation by which to holistically connect all rural issues to nurture new thinking and collaborative problem solving from a regional perspective. It recognizes that human and natural systems are inextricably coupled and engaged in continuous cycles of mutual influence and response. Thus, to heal or restore function to any subsystem requires engaging the larger

system encompassing it. Natural and human systems are dynamic. The issues confronting rural regions today will change. If all concerned with rural issues are able to engage in collaborative creation, we will all become rural designers to help define and meet the needs of rural regions (“Rural Design White Paper”, Center for Rural Design, College of Design, University of Minnesota, 2009).

In the highly regarded book, “Rural by Design” (Randall Arendt: 1994), Arendt explores traditional town planning and small rural towns. His findings suggest some lessons for Snug Cove in particular and Bowen Island in general. His work complements smart growth considerations and points to several key design issues: the problem of traditional zoning and its inflexibility to adapt to emerging issues and needs; the role of scale in design; developing a common building vocabulary; creating a sense of community; promoting opportunities for casual socializing; integrating development into and within open space; and promoting compact forms of development and supporting incremental growth. His work is centred upon the movement away from conventional forms of rural sprawl to more compact development forms that contribute to open space and conservation goals. Connectivity, setting aside open space and conservation areas, and directing large development away from rural areas to traditional small towns is central to his work.

3. The existing OCP and ‘smart’ growth

What constitutes ‘smart’ growth in a rural setting? In many ways, the existing OCP sets out ‘smart’ growth policies. For instance, the existing OCP manages growth through: setting a “no net increase in overall island lot density”; by supporting “transfer of development” from environmentally sensitive areas to more suitable areas, including the village of Snug Cove; by managing services (transportation, water supply, waste disposal, community services) so that they are “responsive and secondary to other policies” and “not used to anticipate or generate demand for land use or growth”; and through the “recognition that the rate of development should be managed to preserve the island atmosphere” (Principles, p.8). In addition, the “Broad Objectives’ (p.9), identify a number of ‘smart’ growth considerations:

- To provide environmental stewardship strategies . . . that recognize both the human responsibilities toward the environment and the rights of private landowners.
- To establish a community service and land use pattern with high priority given to environmental and social factors.
- To encourage maintaining of a population with varying income levels, lifestyles and age groups.
- To ensure that Bowen Island is a healthy community with residents working together to improve the quality of life.
- To ensure that growth management shall be conditioned by the natural environment.
- To foster the creation and maintenance of local employment on the island in island based sustainable activities.
- To promote a Snug Cove village form that caters to the pedestrian and that is appropriate to a small community.
- To recognize Snug Cove Village as the commercial and community heart of Bowen Island, and to provide for the necessary expansion of

commercial, residential and community/cultural uses that will contribute towards a pleasant village centre.

Land use and associated decisions around its assessment and approval have significant implications for 'smart' growth. The "General Land Use Policies" (p.10), contained in the existing OCP provide additional 'smart' growth land use direction:

- 1) to ensure staged, gradual development of the island.
- 2) to prevent those developments that would have a major negative effect on the existing lifestyle and environment of the island.
- 3) to ensure that various land uses are suitably located, aesthetically attractive, in harmony and carefully integrated with the natural environment.
- 5) to create areas where land is set aside as green space in perpetuity.
- 6) to discourage further commercial and residential strip or ribbon development.

Subsequent amendments to the OCP, such as the Snug Cove Village Plan (2005), provide further 'smart' growth direction. For instance, the Snug Cove Village Plan promotes a number of 'smart' growth like ideas, such as mixed use residential/commercial development, a pedestrian environment, compact commercial development, public transportation, and appropriate building design.

But, a review of actual implementation of 'smart' growth policies on Bowen Island indicates that much more could be done. For instance, while the existing OCP permits density transfer, tools have not been developed to facilitate achievement of that principle. Likewise, affordable housing is supported in the OCP, but little has been accomplished. Similarly, lack of sewer expansion in Snug Cove has limited the ability to densify the Cove and facilitate increased mixed use and a range of housing types.

The experience of Bowen appears to have been the experience of many communities. For instance, CMHC in "Smart Growth in Canada: A Report Card" notes that, "many of the indicators surveyed suggest that (smart growth) progress is absent" (p.6). CMHC continues:

These results reflect not only a historical lack of political will at all levels of government, but also other constraints such as the many regulations that have been put in place over the decades that mitigate against innovation in planning and development, the lack of widespread interest in the development community in non-conventional development designs, the financial impacts of municipal taxation and development charges policies, and consumer preference for lower density urban development. . . . (But) none of these constraints are insurmountable (p.6).

4. Implications for the OCP Update

Smart growth has garnered significant appeal and support from a cross section of interests, including citizens, politicians and developers. But, it is an urban-centred concept whose tenets may not always have application in rural settings. For instance, the promotion of mixed use in all neighbourhoods will be difficult to achieve (and may be undesirable) in smaller rural neighbourhoods. Other smart growth concepts, such as

directing new development to areas of existing development (thereby avoiding greenfield sites) suggests, in the case of Bowen Island, applying the existing density transfer policy and directing some of the OCP density to Snug Cove away from sensitive environmental areas and agricultural areas.

For purposes of the OCP Update, it appears wise to avoid reference to smart growth and consider, instead, a focus upon Principles, Objectives and Policies that support ideas that have a smart growth characterization. For instance, Smart Growth BC provides some useful concepts for the OCP Update, especially in reference to:

- Directing further development to Snug Cove where a mix of uses could stimulate a more pedestrian and vibrant 'village' environment.
- Providing a variety of transportation choices that include increased transit service and use, safe cycling and walking between neighbourhoods and to Snug Cove.
- Creating diverse housing opportunities across the island and especially in Snug Cove.
- Encouraging growth in existing communities where investments in infrastructure (such as roads and water systems) are used efficiently.
- Preserving open spaces, natural beauty, and environmentally sensitive areas.
- Protecting and enhancing agricultural lands for local food consumption.
- Utilizing 'smarter' infrastructure and green buildings.
- Fostering neighbourhood identity.
- Nurturing engaged citizens.

In addition, the practice of progressive rural design offers some significant opportunities to respect the objectives and land use policies contained in the existing OCP.

Bibliography:

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DRW, February 2010