

Building a Balance:

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, AND SMART LAND USE DECISIONS



The Issues Surrounding Development

Rates of population growth and housing development across the United States are creating pressures on communities to provide adequate infrastructure services for a growing population. Although the United States experienced a population increase of almost nine percent between 1990 and 1998, in New York State that figure was one percent. While population density in some areas of the state remains stable and in some areas is actually decreasing, other areas are facing increases in population density that result in rapid community changes with negative impacts associated with sprawl. These changes are forcing communities to think about planning issues in different ways. Increasingly, town boards must approach growth decisions with information about loss of open spaces and farmland, impacts on the quality of life, and the range of economic issues associated with development.

In New York State **Home Rule** or **Home Rule Authority** gives local governments the power to adopt laws that relate to their local property, affairs and government, such as laws that apply to land protection and development. Home Rule Authority is in addition to the powers that are specifically delegated to local governments by the legislature. Land use regulations like zoning ordinances are an example of Home Rule authority. The Municipal Home Rule Law authorizes local governments to adopt these kinds of land use regulations.

Typically, local officials review and approve a variety of isolated development proposals. The specific proposals come in all sizes and focus on housing units, commercial properties and industrial facilities. Generally these proposals must be reviewed without detailed knowledge of the public service cost and revenue benefits associated with them. This raises questions about actual service impacts of various kinds of development, typical revenue impacts of development, related multiplier effects on the local economy, and the associated tax impacts of these multiplier effects.

Moreover, local officials are regularly asked to help make development happen. Help may involve regulatory exceptions, loan guarantees, provision of infrastructure costs, and reduced tax payments. Local governments, particularly small and rural ones, often don't have the numbers or a way of totaling up the quantitative and qualitative impacts to make a solid decision that they feel comfortable with. For most local governments the big projects are the exception. A particular board member may see only one or two big projects during his or her tenure on the board of a smaller community, but that project may provide long-term impacts on the community. Having good, timely information and a framework to evaluate the impacts and to access need professional expertise is essential and crucial, especially for small communities to make good decisions.

Smart Growth and similar, if loosely defined concepts, are beginning to capture the public's imagination. Although there is no single consensus definition, a core concept of Smart Growth is that public policies should channel growth and development toward areas that are already under development as much as possible. Policies should aim to encourage high-density, mixed-use designs instead of low-density development, while reducing growth pressures on agricultural lands and open or undeveloped spaces. These policies avoid factors that characterize sprawl: a low-density floor-to-area ratio; unlimited outward extension; "leapfrog" development; single-use and single-story buildings; and car-dependent design. Sprawl typically occurs on the outskirts of cities or in rural areas between urban centers.

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of a research project funded by the Community and Rural Development Institute at Cornell University. The goal of this project was to examine policies that focus on land use patterns and associated fiscal implications for local governments, as well as mechanisms for preserving open space and achieving goals related to environmental protection and housing affordability. This goal was achieved by conducting a series of focus groups in communities throughout New York State in which development-related concerns were expressed by town supervisors, county planning commissioners, mayors, school district officials, developers, farmers, environmental advocates, housing affordability advocates, and others. The focus groups demonstrated that common ground exists among groups that are often perceived to be in conflict with each other. The project has identified processes and tools to guide communities through development decisions in ways that facilitate open discussion without polarizing disputes among various interest groups.

Communities can grow and avoid sprawl without new legislation at the state level. Zoning and subdivision regulations, for example, can reflect a community's decisions about land resources, types of buildings, infill development, mixed-use and high-density development, and other issues. New developments that locate homes, stores, schools, offices, and public facilities within walking distance of each other will avoid congested roads and streets. Existing land use tools, such as the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR), can keep designated lands for agricultural purposes without denying farmers the economic gain they would realize from selling their property for development.

Issues surrounding development involve complex decisions by town boards; and local governments are assuming prominent roles in the formulation of growth policies for their communities. Town Board members and the general public can facilitate sound development decisions by approaching them in an informed manner that is sensitive to the needs of all parties in the development process. The fact sheets in this series were written with this objective in mind.

This fact sheet was prepared as part of the Cornell University project,

Building a Balance: Housing Affordability, Environmental Protection, and Smart Land Use Decisions.

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