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True Smart Growth

By Samuel R. Staley and Matthew Hisrich

Sprawl is a buzzword used to instill fear in the hearts of Ohioans. The term "sprawl" is designed to evoke an image of endless strip malls and houses, extending as far as the eye can see. Whenever the word is uttered, one can be sure that discussions of "smart growth" will soon follow.

The term "sprawl" is designed to evoke an image of endless strip malls and houses, extending as far as the eye can see. Whenever the word is uttered, one can be sure that discussions of "smart growth" will soon follow. "Smart growth" is typically embodied by heavy-handed zoning ordinances and development boundaries. However, markets offer the widest range of options and potential for improvement and are the best alternative to these policies.

Smart growth purports to be a neatly packaged set of regulations that will redesign the future and return cities to the glory days of the past — simultaneously. Does smart growth live up to its name and, if not, is there another approach that might?

The typical smart growth plan is a massive collection of new government controls and restrictions. In the name of expanding housing choice, smart growth advocates often seek zoning mandates that only allow for specific layout designs and concepts. "New Urbanism" and "Neo-Traditionalism" are the most common double-speak phrases. These concepts can emphasize higher density development, dedicated open space and walking rather than driving, but almost always offer a generalized solution that excludes certain forms of housing choice. Slapping additional restrictions on an already needlessly complicated set of zoning regulations, however, is not likely to increase housing choices.

Farmland preservation and urban growth boundaries are additional smart growth strategies pitched to local and state governments as ways of protecting open space. An urban growth boundary is a line in the land that surrounds an urban area with a ring of open space. This sounds good, in theory. In practice, however, urban growth boundaries often create "leapfrog development" – where new development jumps just outside the boundary. In addition, an unintended consequence of urban growth boundaries is the erosion of remaining green space within the boundary.

In Portland, for instance — a city often touted as the model for smart growth efforts — the demand for land within their boundary has contributed to housing price inflation, pushing Portland from one of the most affordable places on the West Coast to one of the least affordable. In order to meet its self-imposed density requirements, the area's regional growth management authority will mandate the development of nearly all farmland inside the growth boundary, whether or not existing owners want to farm on the land.

Farmland preservation efforts have unintended consequences as well. In choosing to permanently set aside land, areas facing development pressure may actually draw increased development because of the assurance

and attractiveness of land that will never be altered. Rarely is open space seen unfavorably by homeowners, so using taxpayer dollars to permanently dedicate land ends up as a subsidy for those homeowners on its borders.

Essentially, every option proposed by those pushing smart growth involves increased government intervention. This is despite the fact that previous government policies (zoning codes, subsidies, etc.) already restrict Ohioans from building the types of homes and communities they want.

Rest assured, though, says Eric Parfrey of the Sierra Club, smart growth restrictions in the United States are relatively tame: "[I]f you're beginning to actually feel sorry for those poor developers and homebuilders who are being asked to adapt to the latest smart growth guidelines, consider this: In China, a new law went into effect that threatens the death penalty for developers who build on valuable farmland without procuring an extensive set of permits from local, regional, and state authorities." While groups like the Sierra Club might appreciate China for its "livable communities," "walkability" and "bicycle friendliness," conventional smart growth definitions and policies seem far more appropriate for Stalinist Russia than Ohio.

Clearly, smart growth could use a redefinition closer to traditional American values. Loosening the grip of stifling zoning codes would allow for more innovative development designs that accomplish conservation goals and satisfy consumer demand for housing alternatives. Ensuring that development covers its infrastructure expenses, such as roads and sewers, will allow the marketplace to operate freely and efficiently. Markets offer the widest range of options and potential for improvement and are the best alternative to heavy-handed regulations. Giving Ohioans the freedom to determine the path and type of growth is by far the smartest growth of all.

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