

Living together

The challenges of growing smarter
in Greater Boston

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The challenges of growing smarter in Greater Boston

by Stephanie Pollack

The perspective of an advocate or “change maker” is a useful perspective when mulling the subject now almost universally referred to as “smart growth.” While that phrase may soon be as useless a descriptor as “sustainability,” for the moment it is usually used as a short-hand for a model of growth and economic development which concentrates jobs, homes, and other development in cities and town centers rather than allowing low-density, automobile-centric development to sprawl across the countryside.

When you think about it, smart growth is fundamentally about how we get people to change where—and therefore how—they live, work and play. What kind of change can be more fundamental than a change that affects so many aspects of your life every day—where you live, where your children go to school, where you work, where you shop, where you go for recreation and entertainment? Given the way that Greater Boston and the rest of the United States have developed over the last half century, “smart growth” is really about radically changing growth patterns.

Growth patterns over the last half century have reshaped Greater Boston—and not for the better. You have probably heard statements and statistics like these:

- We are losing open space. Massachusetts lost over 260,000 acres of open space since 1950 as sprawl development has consumed 40 acres of previously undeveloped land in the Commonwealth every day.

- We are making wholesale changes in land use. Between 1950 and 2000, Massachusetts lost half its farmland. During the same period the amount of land used for subdivisions, office parks and malls doubled.

- We are moving away from cities and into lower-density suburbs. Residential growth in Boston and other cities has been modest, fueled almost entirely by immigration. Meanwhile, suburbs, especially those in the Interstate 495 area, are adding population in droves.

- We are driving much more and under more congested conditions. The total number of miles traveled soared by 75 percent between 1970 and 2000, even though population grew only 10 percent during that time. Upwards of 80 percent of all rush-hour driving on highways can be characterized as congested.

From an environmental perspective, these growth patterns are unhealthy, unwise, and unsustainable. They generate air pollution and exacerbate global climate change; threaten both the quantity and quality of our water both underground and in lakes and rivers; wipe out wetlands, farmland and open space; and consume unnecessarily large quantities of all different kinds of resources. In short, many of the most pressing important environmental issues facing Greater Boston are directly or indirectly linked to the problem of low-density, automobile-centric growth patterns.

What is to be done? We need regional government, or at least better regional planning. We need to redirect public expenditures on infrastructure—roads, transit, and water and sewer systems—to stop subsidizing sprawl and instead encourage concentrated development. We need to help farmers make a living from selling crops rather than selling off subdivisions. We need to change the zoning rules and financing restrictions that foster the development of strip malls, office parks, and swaths of large, detached single family homes in the suburbs. And, of course, we need to redirect growth to cities and town centers where it can be accommodated using existing infrastructure and without further loss of open space.

Density and its discontents

The bottom line for all of these changes can be captured in a single word—density. Density means having a higher concentration of homes or businesses or stores in a given area. More people living in a neighborhood means more merchants and more jobs. Density is about living together—instead of sprawling apart.

For decades now we have become less and less likely to live together. Buildings are spread farther apart in Boston's suburbs. Fewer homes or offices are located in new housing and office complexes. And fewer people live in each dwelling unit. Over the past half-century, the City of Boston's density has declined by one-third; there are now only 12,000 people per square mile. The picture outside the city is even worse. While many of us think of Los Angeles as the ultimate in sprawl, the truth is that the Los Angeles metropolitan area is not only bigger but also denser than Greater Boston—twice as dense, in fact, at 5,400 people per square mile. And even though the population of Boston has stabilized and begun to increase modestly, the city is thinning out because the larger population is taking up more space. A Jamaica Plain three-decker that once housed three families with three to five people in each may now be divided into three condos, each with only one or two residents. Charlie Euchner has dubbed this phenomenon “household sprawl” and calculated that the declining residential density of metropolitan Boston means that 1,000 dwelling units built today will provide homes for 730 fewer residents than they did only 20 years earlier.

The opposite of such sprawl would be density. If you build more homes or offices or shops on a smaller parcel of land, more land can remain as open space or wetlands or farmland. Communities that have a denser mixture of homes, shops, and commercial development can be livelier places with activity morning, noon and night, weekdays and weekends alike. With density comes the ability to walk from home or job to shop or restaurant or health club, making cars unnecessary or at least less necessary. And by concentrating homes or jobs into a more manageable area, density makes it possible to provide cost-effective infrastructure like public transportation.

So it is an article of faith among planners and smart-growth advocates that density is good. To stop or slow down sprawl, we need to recreate density. And the place to start is obvious: in the city neighborhoods and town centers that are already denser than their sprawling neighbors.

There is only one problem. Planners and developers may be confident that such communities want, need, and can handle more density, but many of the proposed “density dumps” are skeptical and sometimes downright opposed. Neighborhoods in Cambridge and Boston regularly battle against tall buildings and dense projects, whether proposed as housing, hotels or mixed-use. Anthony Flint of *The Boston Globe* has characterized recent development battles in Boston as “a resistance to more density, in any form.” And the battle against density is not just an urban phenomenon. Towns along Commuter Rail lines want stations located out on the highway, not in the center of town where they can serve as the centerpiece of denser, transit-oriented development. Other suburbanites are fighting zoning changes that would promote density, whether so-called cluster zoning or zoning to create “urban villages” near transit stops. Planners may love density, but many communities seem to hate it.

Why is this happening? Perhaps all these oppositional folk simply fail to understand that density is good for them. They must be ignorant—after all, the logical opposite of “smart growth” is “stupid growth” and what intelligent citizen would want that? Or perhaps those down on density are just selfish and don’t want anything in their community to change, a response characterized as the “pull up the drawbridge” response in which people fight to keep their community exactly as it was when they moved in and work to exclude others from enjoying the same opportunities they have had.

There can be no question but that some battles over density in some communities amount to little more than Not In My Back Yard, or NIMBY, syndrome. But it is an oversimplification to say that every individual or community or elected official who rejects density is ignorant or selfish or even wrong. I certainly am not saying that those who battle density and ostensibly “smart growth” projects in town centers and city neighborhoods are always right. I refuse, however, to accept the widely-held belief that they are usually wrong.

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Skepticism about density

I n deed, based on my long and often painful experience with development proposals in Boston and other communities, I must agree with those who argue that some kinds of development are dense but not really so “smart.” I believe that community opposition to density grows out of a complicated set of reasons, some of which are petty or inappropriate but some of which are valid and legitimate. And I am certain that planners and developers and smart-growth advocates need to understand the legitimate opposition to density if they are ever to figure out how to reshape growth in Greater Boston.

So what are some of the legitimate reasons for rejecting dense development in town centers or city neighborhoods? The first one can be summed up in one word: cars.

Boston in the year 2050 will be nothing like Boston in the year 1950, even if we somehow restore the same residential or employment density. Quite simply, there were far fewer cars in 1950. Boston is being overrun by cars—and the cars do not belong only to suburban commuters headed for office jobs in the financial district. Car ownership in the city soared 36 percent from 1990 to 2001. Over 350,000 automobiles are registered in Boston. In some neighborhoods with resident parking stickers, there are four times as many cars as sticker spaces.

And yet we are still inviting people to move into Boston and bring their cars with them. Neighborhood development projects under construction or approved in Boston as of June 2001 will provide more than 10,000 new off-street parking spaces for their residents, employees, and visitors; an equal number of parking spaces have been proposed for non-downtown projects still on the drawing boards. Whether by providing resident parking stickers for non-existent spaces or the providing one or two dedicated off-street parking spaces per unit in new condo projects, we are sending prospective Bostonians the message that cars and urban neighborhoods go together. Which, of course, is the wrong message.

Perhaps planners and developers assume that the type of people who are going to live and work in these newly “densified” neighborhoods will gladly leave their cars behind. That may happen—if the developments are designed with pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users in mind and if parking is both scarce and unreasonably expensive. But often that is not the case. Density may make walking and transit possible, but it does not make them inevitable. If the infill development includes parking spaces, they will fill up with cars.

Developers have long argued that parking is necessary to secure project financing and tenants for both residential and office projects. Now they are also arguing that parking is necessary to enable density. Describing the situation in the emerging South Boston Waterfront, David Begelfer of the Massachusetts chapter of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties was quoted as saying: “As you start to restrict parking where you are encouraging high-density growth, you are running head-on into an impossible situation.” Whoa. That’s backwards. If you *do not* restrict parking in high-density growth areas, you are running head-on into an impossible situation.

Planners and developers may think about density in terms of how many dwelling units or hotel rooms or square feet of commercial space are being proposed. But the neighbors are usually most interested in how much traffic will be generated.

The most common zoning or regulatory measure of density is called Floor Area Ratio, or FAR, which is calculated as the ratio of the project’s size to its footprint. Amazingly, in many cases that portion of the project devoted to parking is excluded from the FAR calculation. Thus, a proposed development with 500 dwelling units and 500 parking spaces has the same “density” as a proposed development with the same number of dwellings but twice as many parking spaces. But the two developments certainly are not equally “smart” if the point of dense, smart growth is to foster walkable, transit-centered development.

Jamming lots of homes, offices, and shops into an already-dense town center or neighborhood may be smart. Jamming lots of parking spaces into such areas, and then filling them

up with cars, is not. Communities understand this. Projects that are dense but not parking-heavy have a better chance getting through the community review process—witness the Millennium hotel, condo, and entertainment complex on lower Washington Street and the recent approval of a 16-story retail and residential development across from the Landmark Center with 500 rental apartments but only 400 parking spaces.

Town centers, urban villages near transit stops, and city neighborhoods can probably absorb more homes, shops, and offices than their current residents believe possible. And since these neighborhoods already feel overwhelmed by traffic, truly “smart” growth that brings real and measurable improvements to transit, bicycle paths, and sidewalks should prove attractive. But many communities that can make room for development cannot—and will not—make room for more cars. Planners and developers who want to promote density in such places are going to have to tell their tenants that they are welcome only if they leave their vehicles behind.

Yearning to breathe free

To achieve acceptable density, then, we need to have fewer cars. Now I would like to turn to something that these dense communities need more—elbow room, otherwise know as open space.

Smart-growth advocates seem to be schizoid about open space. They decry the loss of thousands of acres of open space to sprawl and fight to preserve suburban and rural land as open space. But if a greenspace advocate or neighborhood resident dares to suggest the inclusion of more open space in an urban, infill development, they are rebuffed. How is it that a person who fights for suburban open space is a conservationist while a person who fights for urban open space is a NIMBY?

Once again, part of the problem is the imprecise way in which we measure density. When we calculate the density of Greater Boston, all we are doing is math: dividing population by land area. How does that inform the debate over smart growth? Using this formula, residential density is the same whether or not buildings are clustered onto one area of a development site with the remainder left as open space. But wait. Isn't cluster zoning one kind of smart growth?

Let's revisit that statistic I cited before, that Greater Boston has “only” 2,700 people per square mile, which is only half as dense as metropolitan Los Angeles. Does that tell us anything? Not much. We do not know how many of those square miles are developed, how many are devoted to roads, and how many have appropriately been set aside as open space. Maybe Greater Boston is less dense because we still have some functional farms and greater Los Angeles does not. Farms lower residential density but that hardly makes them smart-growth villains.

Let us focus on open space in the City of Boston, as opposed to the whole metropolitan area. A report done a couple of years ago for the Trust for Public Land looked at open space in the twenty-five largest cities in the United States. The City of Boston has just over eight acres of open space per 1,000 residents—more than cities like Atlanta and Tucson. Does all that open space make Boston less dense than Atlanta and Tucson? No, measured in persons

per acre, Boston is almost four times as dense as Atlanta and almost five times as dense as Tucson. So the city's open space doesn't turn Boston into a low-density mess like Tucson or Atlanta, but it does make Boston more green and livable. Let us do one more calculation. According to the same report, 16 percent of Boston's land area is set aside for parks and open space. Does that seem like a lot? What if I told you that the report also calculated that just over one quarter of the land area of New York City is parks and open space? Yet New York City is more than twice as dense as Boston. So it turns out that sprawling places may not have much open space and dense places may have lots of it.

If you only do the math, setting aside open space as part of new development in city neighborhoods dilutes density. But if you stop and think, instead, it becomes clear that there are circumstances under which a modest investment in open space actually enables density in nearby neighborhoods. Central Park is the reason that such high density can work in the surrounding New York City neighborhoods. And the Charles River Esplanade, the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, and the Public Garden and Boston Common make it possible for Back Bay to be both dense and livable.

It is precisely when we ask people to live together in close quarters that we need to be careful to give them sufficient elbow room. If you have a large backyard with a swing set, you do not need a nearby playground. If you have ample space to grow flowers and vegetables, you do not need a plot in a community garden. If you have a hoop in your driveway, you do not need public courts. But it is not reasonable to create dense enclaves of housing and expect the residents to "do without" places for active and passive recreation. Well-proportioned, well-used parks and open spaces make dense neighborhoods livable.

Over the past couple of years, planners and landscapers have reminded me that the success of parks and open spaces depends in large part on the vitality of the surrounding neighborhood. I agree. It takes a great neighborhood to enliven a great park. But it also takes a great park or community garden or playground or urban wild to enliven a great neighborhood. Even if it means that the resulting neighborhood will be modestly less dense.

So, it seems, density works better if you add open space and subtract cars. Is that all it will take to get more neighborhoods to host new and dense development? I don't think so. So far I've been talking about the physical elements of growing smarter—restoring density, reducing automobile use, creating great open spaces. But there are important human pieces of the smart-growth puzzle that also need to be addressed.

Talking it over

It is impossible to understand sprawl without thinking about the people who choose to live—who are happy to live—in a low-density, automobile-centric world. Sprawl may trash the environment, but it is far from all bad from the perspective of the "sprawlee." If density means living together, then sprawl means having your own space—sometimes, lots of it. Everyone can have his or her own bedroom—and sometimes a playroom and study and bathroom. No one has to share the television or stereo or Internet hookup. Your space is your own, your home is your castle, and your hometown is your refuge. Even your car is your own personal space—in his bestseller *Bowling Alone*, Harvard University Professor

Robert Putnam reports that nearly half of all drivers agreed in a 1997 survey that “driving is my time to think and enjoy being alone.”

Clearly, many people prefer more elbow room to more living together. In a recent survey of new homeowners, roughly half said they wished they lived in a bigger house. Only one quarter would have liked to live in a home where they could walk to more places.

It is easy to imagine that there are two kinds of Americans—the suburbanites who like big houses and cars and elbow room and the urbanites who like pocket parks and cafes and tag sales. But the world is more complicated than that. Granted, residents of town centers and city neighborhoods have a higher tolerance for density and noise and traffic and smaller homes than their suburban neighbors. But that does not mean that they have an unlimited appetite for such things.

How can planners and developers and advocates ensure that their smart-growth proposals strike an appropriate balance between achieving density and addressing the legitimate concerns of existing communities? Talk to the community, of course. I know, I know. Community process is slow and painful. Officials at the Boston Redevelopment Authority have been known to complain that their number one product is “process.” Well, I can tell you that many community residents feel like their number one time sink is “process.”

It is truly amazing that the BRA and developers can complain bitterly that there is too much process around development issues in the City of Boston, while residents and community organizations can complain just as loudly and sincerely that no one ever listens to anything they say. Clearly the system for soliciting and acting on community input in Boston—and many other communities—is dysfunctional.

Fixing community review processes is a necessary prerequisite to successfully moving forward with urban infill development. Process is always important in the development arena, of course, but I believe it becomes more important when we are talking about dense development in well-established urban neighborhoods.

“Greenfields”—developments on previously undeveloped land—may be an anathema to smart-growth advocates. But the development process can often be relatively straightforward because such projects have few or no neighbors and do not need to fit into an established planning context. Infill projects in existing neighborhoods are always going to be far more complicated because of the need to ensure that there is a fit between the new development and its host neighborhood. Neighbors and context and history are a messy but inevitable part of smart growth in the city.

I am not going to tell you now how to fix the problems of community process in Boston or anywhere else. But I would like to make one suggestion. One of the most frustrating aspects of development process from the perspective of the municipality and the developer and the community is its repetitiveness. We do master plans and impact reports and special zoning maneuvers; there are meetings of committees and meeting of community boards and public meetings. All because we in Boston refuse to lock in land-use plans through

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zoning. Yes, I said the “z” word. How hard would it be to figure out what kind of development makes sense for a given location—how much parking, height and density—then put zoning in place and then insist that developers conform to zoning? Very hard, I guess, in a city where one prominent land-use attorney can, with a straight face, tell a reporter: “I don’t see zoning as law, but as a starting point for discussion.”

Now, you may think that I’ve raised more than enough challenges to growing smarter in Greater Boston: too many cars, not enough parks, dysfunctional community review processes. Perhaps I have already made my point, which is that containing sprawl and re-creating density are not just a matter of plopping big, dense developments into willing city neighborhoods. But to make sure that I leave you with an overwhelming sense of the complexity and sensitivity of the challenges that we face, I’d like to talk about one last issue.

The ‘American dilemma’ in Greater Boston

In talking about sprawl vs. smart growth, we talk as if the only difference between “dense” places like Boston or Cambridge and “low density” places in the suburbs have to do with how many dwelling units or residents or jobs or cars they have per square mile. But we all know that there are many, many differences between the cities in the urban core and their suburban neighbors. One of the most striking differences is in the diversity of their residents. I’m talking, of course, about the seemingly taboo topic of how race—along with ethnicity and immigrant status and class—affects growth patterns in Greater Boston.

As most of you already know, the 2000 census officially certified Boston as a “majority minority” city in which only 49.5 percent of the residents are white and the rest are African-American, Asian, Hispanic, or multiracial. Which makes Boston a very different place from its lower-density neighbors, which remain overwhelmingly white. Development patterns in Greater Boston remain highly segregated. A Harvard University study found that almost half of all home purchases by non-whites in the communities around Boston took place in only seven of the 126 surrounding communities: Chelsea, Everett, Randolph, Lynn, Somerville, Milton, and Malden.

So far I have spoken, as most planners do, as if patterns of development are primarily if not exclusively a function of factors like highway routes and housing costs and zoning rules. Those things obviously have shaped growth patterns in Greater Boston. But so have things like racism and housing discrimination and redlining.

It is not always comfortable to talk about whether there is a racial element to development patterns. Are suburbs fighting density—or diversity? Are city neighborhoods trying to keep out cars—or people whose race or class or ethnicity is different from their own? When people in cities and suburbs alike balk at dense “affordable” housing projects, is the problem that there are too many dwelling units or too many different kinds of people who will move into them? These are not easy subjects to discuss. But I think it is naïve and even disingenuous to talk about issues of growth and economic development as if Greater Boston were color-blind. We need a robust civic conversation about the relationship between Boston’s growing diversity and the issues of sprawl and smart growth.

Talking about race is hard—but, as I pointed out at the beginning of this lecture, so is changing a half-century of sprawling land-use patterns. Change is difficult and messy and takes a long time. And change is not something you can impose. You cannot just tell a neighborhood: “Sorry, we’re doing to dump some density on you to save farmland 50 miles from here.” To make change happen, we need to enlist partners. And what better partners than the residents of neighborhoods that are already denser, less auto-centric, and more diverse than their sprawling suburban counterparts? When such neighborhoods balk at nominally “smart” developments, they are telling smart-growth advocates something. Indeed, they have much to teach each us—if only we will listen.

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