

The State Can Make Smart Growth Smarter

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During its 2002 session, the Connecticut State Legislature established a Blue Ribbon Commission on Property Tax Burdens and Smart Growth. The Commission was charged with evaluating residential and business property tax burdens in Connecticut, and exploring incentives and disincentives to smart growth. As you may know, smart growth is a land-use planning philosophy which advocates focusing new development around existing infrastructures, such as road networks, rail lines, and schools—ideally at densities that make public transportation a viable alternative to the automobile. In so doing, smart growth seeks to prevent both suburban sprawl and the high public cost of building and maintaining redundant infrastructures, a situation that occurs when rural communities are transformed into suburbs while existing urban infrastructures go underutilized relative to their capacity and cost. Perhaps of greatest interest to Litchfield County residents, smart growth aims to preserve the open spaces, natural resources, and rural character of the countryside.

The State's Blue Ribbon Commission recently issued its report on smart growth, which sets many laudable goals, including better documenting and preserving natural resources, protecting farms and forests, revitalizing urban centers, encouraging the creation of more diverse housing opportunities, and ensuring that Connecticut retains its distinctive New England identity. Unfortunately, the report also proposes some rather controversial measures for achieving those goals, notably, uniformly increasing State and regional control of local land-use policies, and establishing a system for "sharing" tax revenue among Connecticut's municipalities.

The State's track record of involving itself in the land-use affairs of small towns has not generally been a happy one. The affordable housing land-use appeals process, for example, has been widely abused by large corporate developers, who use Hartford's rules to bypass local zoning regulations and build gigantic complexes of luxury apartments in towns that don't want them. The Department of Transportation routinely spends millions of taxpayer dollars widening, straightening, and reconfiguring roads against the wishes of rural communities, erasing the charming scale and character of rural landscapes in the process. Increased State direction of local land-use policy will likely yield similarly unfortunate outcomes, only on a much larger scale.

Understandably, many residents and government officials in the small towns of Litchfield County are wary of giving up home rule with respect to zoning and subdivision regulations--and perhaps warier still of diverting local (ostensibly increased) tax revenues to Waterbury, Bridgeport, and other urban centers which have a less-than-exemplary record of managing resources responsibly. Its worthy goals notwithstanding, the Blue Ribbon Commission essentially proposes to penalize rural towns that have worked diligently to maintain their rural character and fiscal health (with, incidentally, little help from Hartford), for the benefit of municipalities that have recklessly managed their land-use planning and financial affairs. In other words, towns like Washington, Roxbury, Bridgewater, Kent, Cornwall, Sharon, Salisbury, and Norfolk would be punished for their sound management, and municipalities that have let development and tax burdens spiral out of control would be rewarded.

Convincing people in rural towns to send their tax dollars to another part of the state and give up control of local land-use matters will be a profoundly tough sell. By linking the good principals of smart growth to a complex scheme of revenue diversion and erosion of towns' self-determination, the State Legislature and the Blue Ribbon Commission may inadvertently delay or discourage constructive land-use reforms across Connecticut. This would be unfortunate, because, as the Commission's report notes, much of the state is in imminent danger of becoming a wall-to-wall patchwork of sprawling, traffic-choked suburbs.

Although the size of Connecticut's population has remained virtually unchanged in recent decades, the amount of developed land area has increased dramatically due to the suburban configuration of most new development. If current land-use patterns continue, Connecticut will likely run out of developable land within the lifetimes of today's school-age children. Because Litchfield County is home to a significant portion of the state's open land, it will undoubtedly be the target of intense regional development pressure in coming years. Suburban sprawl is already well out of control in New Milford, and the widening of Route 7 currently underway in that town will only make rural communities to the north more accessible and attractive candidates for suburbanization.

Fortunately, the central tenets of smart growth are not inextricably linked to the redistribution of local tax revenues or increased State intrusion on matters of local governance. Working within the framework of existing land-use enabling legislation, the communities of Northwestern Connecticut can—and should—voluntarily adopt smart growth principles. Towns can, for example, amend their subdivision and zoning regulations to guide new development to existing village centers, link new development to the protection of open space, encourage greater diversity in local housing stocks, and discourage suburban-style commercial and residential construction. Moreover, since the primary land-use planning goal in much of Litchfield County is the same—maintaining the rural character of our communities—local planning, zoning, inland wetlands, and conservation commissions can work more collaboratively to share local expertise, cultivate stronger working relationships with land trusts, and achieve greater regional consistency in land-use policy.

Individual landowners can also help permanently protect the County's countryside from suburbanization by taking advantage of current federal income tax deductions, which make land conservation an eminently attractive financial proposition. With well-conceived open space preservation plans, private landowners can retain full ownership and private use of their entire properties while realizing income tax savings that often meet or exceed the net profits that can be realized from development—all without help from Hartford.

If Connecticut's capitol wishes to become more involved in the fiscal and land-use policies of Litchfield County's rural towns, perhaps it should expend its energy studying how so many of them have successfully kept their property taxes low, protected their natural resources, and kept their rural landscapes substantially free of suburban sprawl. Although the communities of Northwestern Connecticut still have much work to do to maintain their rural character, the success of the strategies and policies employed to date can surely offer valuable lessons to other towns. By learning more about what has worked in Litchfield County, Hartford could develop model policies and share them with Connecticut municipalities wishing to gain better control over their development, spending, and tax bases. If the mood in the capitol is regulatory, let the State focus its attention on those cities and towns that truly need help managing their affairs, or which are creating regional problems as a consequence of their poor land-use planning practices.

If helping Connecticut's distressed communities out of their development and revenue problems requires new resources—and surely it will—the effort should not be funded by penalizing towns whose policy records largely support the State's smart growth objectives. Rather, Hartford should set its fiscal eye on the very activities which threaten to transform Connecticut into a continuous swath of suburbia. By assessing impact fees on suburban-style subdivisions, giving towns the option of enacting local real estate conveyance taxes, offering more tax abatements for development in cities, and ending public subsidies for the creation and maintenance superfluous new infrastructures, Hartford could steer large-scale development away from the countryside and into existing urban centers, which would affect positive changes to development patterns across Connecticut. Now that would be smart growth.

If you're concerned about maintaining local control of your town's land-use policies and tax revenues, contact your State representatives today and tell them that you support the principles of smart growth but are opposed to the methods for achieving them proposed by the Blue Ribbon Commission.

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