

Smart Growth Dream Will Give You Nightmares

Smart Growth advocates' vision of the future of urban development is more like a nightmare for the average citizen.

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The Greenbelt Alliance, a left leaning, San Francisco area land conservation group, recently offered their version of a development dream for Contra Costa County. Contra Costa is the quintessential suburban county, and like many of its brethren across the nation, is urbanizing and struggling to find its way to balancing growth with concerns for open space, traffic, and environmental quality.

But the Greenbelt Alliance's dream proposal is more like a nightmare for the average citizen. Their draconian anti-sprawl approach is "smart growth" gone dumb. Its basis is making us all feel guilty for living in a detached home in the suburbs, driving our cars, and not using public transit enough. But this is precisely the American Dream.

The Greenbelt Alliance claims sprawl is responsible for traffic congestion, racial segregation, unaffordable housing, disappearing open space and agricultural lands, and rising infrastructure costs. But like many smart growth advocates, they do not, or more accurately, cannot explain how sprawl is responsible. Their proposed "solutions" are heavy-handed government interventions that ignore what people really want, and not only do little to solve actual problems, but actually make a lot of them worse.

Housing costs are about supply and demand and since anti-growth initiatives have blocked much new housing development, supply is limited and costs have risen. Suburban development has made us the best-housed nation in the world opening affordable homeownership opportunities for millions of Americans. Meanwhile, smart growth policies have consistently been shown to make housing less affordable, creating regressive housing markets and leading to ridiculous backfill policies like subsidized rental housing on expensive land near transit stations.

The Greenbelt Alliance focuses on open space, but most suburban counties have plenty of open space. Only 6% of the nation's land is developed, and even in typical suburban counties the majority of available land is still undeveloped. At the same time, suburban development offers open space mixed in where we live as opposed to dense smart growth urban jungles where you have to ride transit to open space beyond some arbitrary urban growth boundary. Urban growth boundaries have a miserable history of increasing housing costs and causing leapfrog development like that seen in California's Central Valley.

The Greenbelt Alliance points an accusing finger at rising infrastructure costs, but maybe they should do a cost study of rail transit. Most transit systems' revenue covers about 30% of what they spend for their operations and this doesn't even include the monumental capital costs. The rest of the

costs are subsidized through the gas tax and local sales taxes, diverting money from the road and highway systems that actually carry most travelers. And for that tremendous expenditure transit accounts for about 4% of all trips in the United States. Hardly a recipe for congestion relief.

As for racial integration, the Greenbelt Alliance seems to offer no solution. Short of telling people exactly where to live, how exactly would they accomplish this?

All this is not to say that there are no pains and issues associated with growth, but the standard litany of harsh interventions and trampling of people's choices that the Greenbelt Alliance offers are futile and burdensome to all. There are a number of effective, market-oriented measures to accommodate growth while retaining consumer choice and private property rights. Smart growth advocates tend to ignore these because they don't involve subsidizing high-density housing, light rail construction, and heavily urbanizing suburban areas.

The market forces at work in the decentralization of our nation's population are simply too strong to reverse without restrictive government intervention. This probably means more sprawl. But don't knock sprawl just because we are made to feel guilty for it. Gregg Easterbrook of the New Republic once wrote "sprawl is caused by affluence and population growth, which of these, exactly, do we propose to prohibit?" My guess is that we would not care to give up either. In the end, the smart growth flame will likely burn out much like other great planning experiments such as urban renewal and public housing projects. Then we'll think back and remember this smart growth vision was just another bad dream.