

GREEN COMMUNITIES

Better Places to Live and Work

SMART GROWTH

Statement of the Issue

Despite the recent economic downturn, Virginia continues to grapple with the cost of sprawling development which spread far from existing communities in recent decades. This type of development is costly to taxpayers and has led to rapid loss of rural lands, loss of natural, historic, and cultural resources, harmful pollution, increased traffic, and a deteriorating quality of life for many Virginians. The impact on family budgets from long, costly commutes has also been significant and apparently contributed to the real estate collapse in the outer suburbs.¹ When considering very tight federal, state and local budgets, family finances, our oil dependency, and the contribution of transportation emissions to health problems and climate change, smart growth—with its focus on location efficient development—becomes a public policy imperative. Virginia made strong strides to better link land use and transportation in recent years, including legislation in 2007 that can reduce the cost of infrastructure. Unfortunately, during 2011 these state initiatives were weakened, and additional rollbacks are likely to be proposed in the upcoming 2012 General Assembly session.

Background

We don't have to choose between courting growth and curbing sprawl. The market wants more alternatives to sprawl as changing demographics— young professionals, empty nesters, retirees, and more and more families—are leading to greater demand for vibrant and walkable cities, towns, and suburbs built more like traditional towns and

neighborhoods. A higher quality of life enhances economic competitiveness by helping to attract and retain businesses and workers. Further, a summary of 40 years of fiscal impact studies showed that smart growth—compact and traditional cities, towns and neighborhoods—typically consumes less land, and costs much less for roads, utilities, and housing than does sprawling development.² Moreover, where there are incentives and a focus on redevelopment, the public and private sector can collaborate on the repair and replacement of aging infrastructure in existing communities. Legislators of both parties have recognized this, and have passed a number of measures promoting more sensible growth in recent years—including requirements for Urban Development Areas (UDAs) to focus growth in more compact, walkable communities and for more connected street networks. These approaches will save taxpayers money, strengthen our communities, save energy, reduce traffic congestion, and protect our farmland, health, and environment. They also offer the potential for a new partnership between state and local governments to guide growth more efficiently and effectively.

1. See, for example, Joe Cortright, CEOs for Cities, "Driven to the Brink." http://www.ceosforcities.org/work/driven_to_the_brink

2. See Transportation Cooperative Research Report 39, "Costs of Sprawl," http://www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/Costs_of_Sprawl_2000_160966.aspx and TCRP Report 74, Costs of Sprawl—Revisited, <http://pubsindex.trb.org/view.aspx?id=540975>

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SMART GROWTH RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen the partnership between state and local efforts to plan for the future and guide growth. Good planning is as important to our local communities as it is to successful businesses.

- Maintain and continue to implement Urban Development Area (UDA) planning and stop any further efforts to weaken the secondary street connectivity standards. These measures will help reduce statewide infrastructure costs and traffic congestion.
- Strengthen county implementation of UDAs through cooperation with nearby towns and cities, supporting interconnected streets and walkable community designs.
- Ensure property rights while saving tax dollars on infrastructure costs through Transferrable Development Rights (TDRs), Purchase of Development Rights, conservation easements and other tools.

Improve data collection on land development and infrastructure costs.

- Require local governments to estimate and report to the Commonwealth their projected population and employment growth as well as the buildout potential for residential units and commercial square footage under their existing comprehensive plan and zoning.
- Provide state funding and technical assistance to localities, including in measuring residential and commercial growth capacity of vacant and underutilized land in existing communities if (re)developed as compact, mixed-use, walkable development, as well as in estimating long-term infrastructure costs under current buildout projections and under alternative growth scenarios.
- The state and localities should work together to compile estimates of the total maintenance and replacement needs of bridges, roads, water/sewer, schools, libraries, and other facilities.

Target scarce public tax dollars. Prioritize state infrastructure funds to existing communities and UDAs, including economic development, transit/bike/pedestrian/local street investment, schools and water/sewer. Support the revitalization of cities, towns and older suburban communities.

Ensure new development pays a fair share of the costs of infrastructure. During the 2008 General Assembly session, homebuilders sought to significantly reduce contributions to the cost of infrastructure through proffers. The Virginia Association of Counties and the American Planning Association, Virginia Chapter, have argued for conversion to an impact fee approach. The General Assembly should undertake careful development before repealing the proffer system. While not without its problems, the proffer system has been successful in encouraging investment in a range of community benefits and was the product of intense negotiations between developers and local governments. A fair balance must be struck between what the public taxpayer and the private developer each pay toward the cost of infrastructure necessitated by new development. Impact fees must not be limited to education, roads, and public safety but should also cover a range of other community service such as parks and open space, water quality and water supply protections, libraries and other civic institutions. Finally, any system should be constructed so that it creates the incentive to develop within urban development areas.

Oppose actions that would weaken local community planning. Some groups want to weaken or eliminate the role of communities in planning together for the future. The General Assembly should reject efforts to diminish local planning efforts, including comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances that reduce infrastructure costs, protect open space, and encourage compact, walkable communities. Localities must be able to comprehensively adopt reasonable provisions to promote smarter growth, as well as to mitigate any undesirable impacts of facilities such as telecommunications and energy facilities. Existing local land use authority should not be eroded further and for major facilities the state should require comprehensive environmental assessments; studies of need, alternatives and location; consultation with local governments and residents, and context sensitive design.