

# BOOSTING SMART GROWTH

Karen Campblin // Sierra Club Virginia Chapter // karen@kctcPLAN.com  
Chris Leyen // Virginia League of Conservation Voters // cleyen@valcv.org  
Stewart Schwartz // Coalition for Smarter Growth // stewart@smartergrowth.net

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Where and how we build our communities is critical to maintaining our quality of life, boosting equity, and protecting the environment. Smart growth promotes development in and near our cities; towns; and walkable, mixed-use, transit-accessible communities. By encouraging housing – including affordable housing – close to jobs, retail, and services, with streets designed for safe walking and biking with frequent, reliable transit, we reduce driving and pollution, protect natural and historic resources from sprawl, and expand opportunities for those who cannot afford a car or are unable to drive. Current state policies too often fuel car-centric development, but reforming those policies to promote smart growth will bring environmental, health, and economic benefits to all Virginians.

## CHALLENGE

The past 80 years of sprawling development have proven costly, generating longer commutes, record levels of carbon pollution, socio-economic segregation, and the irrevocable loss of historic, natural, and scenic resources. By underfunding transit while subsidizing the development of car-dependent communities, Virginia's land use and transportation policies have forced families to live ever farther from jobs, schools, and other essential destinations. It has contributed to racial and economic segregation by moving jobs farther from people of color, people with disabilities, low-wealth, and other vulnerable populations while prioritizing single family homes with prices out of reach for most people.<sup>1</sup>

Long, expensive commutes reduce productivity, drain household budgets, and disproportionately impact people with disabilities, preventing Virginians from being able to invest in better housing, their children's education, and other

daily needs. A 2019 study from the American Automobile Association (AAA)<sup>2</sup> estimated the cost of annual car ownership at over \$9,000. With the average Virginia family owning a minimum of two cars and accruing between \$18,230-\$36,460 per year in related expenses according to AAA, there is far less income to be put towards putting food on the table, starting a small business, or investing in education. And for individuals and families that cannot afford a car, do not drive, or choose greener transportation, essential services and job opportunities are increasingly out of reach. Sprawling, car-centric development also costs localities and the state far more in terms of infrastructure and destroys countless acres of farmland and forest.<sup>3</sup>

## SOLUTION

Smart growth represents the Commonwealth's greatest opportunity to reduce vehicle miles traveled, lower state and localities' cost burdens from infrastructure, and build a prosperous future in which people at all levels of the income ladder have a fair chance to get ahead. Compact, walkable, mixed-use, transit-oriented communities (TOCs) with a mix of housing options reduce the amount we have to drive, reduce air and climate pollution, and save families money in combined housing and transportation costs. In-fill development in our existing cities, towns, and inner suburbs allows us to use and modernize existing infrastructure and convert parking lots to livable communities, while installing modern stormwater management. But we need the state to prioritize these places for infrastructure investment.

Diversifying the type and size of our housing stock will provide more affordable options for our modern households. It will allow more people to step on the ladder of homeownership.

Allowing for missing middle housing (accessory dwelling units, duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes and multifamily) near existing public facilities, removing legal code sections and zoning policies that result in racial exclusion and segregation, and expanding inclusionary zoning will expand opportunities for all Virginians.

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Matching these measures with state and local funding for affordable housing close to jobs and transit will have numerous benefits – reducing driving, providing security and stability for families and children, reducing stress, and improving health. Investments in affordable housing in accessible locations will provide far greater transportation benefits and co-benefits than never-ending spending on road expansion to support ever-longer commutes.

**The Virginia Rail Express (VRE) connects Northern Virginia communities to Washington, D.C.**  
Image credit: Virginia League of Conservation Voters



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Calculate maintenance and replacement needs for existing and aging roads, bridges, water, sewer, schools, and other public buildings, and fully fund the replacement of all facilities in poor condition before funding infrastructure for greenfield development, eliminating poor conditions within the next 10 years.

Incorporate a points system in relevant state agency application processes to prioritize allocation of state road, transit, water, sewer, housing, economic development, and public facilities funds to cities, towns, and to compact, walkable, transit-oriented places in the suburbs, provided these jurisdictions also demonstrate they are accommodating housing affordable for all levels of their workforce.

Increase the state affordable housing trust fund to \$200 million within three years and establish funding prioritization for projects close to jobs and high-quality public transit.

End bans on multi-family housing, and lower minimum lot sizes in Virginia's cities, towns, and suburbs to allow for more affordable housing options. Authorize inclusionary zoning in all localities and make it more flexible for localities.

Conduct a statewide study to identify racial inequities and barriers in Virginia Codes relating to planning, zoning, subdivision, and covenants, and recommend change.