

# BOOSTING SMART GROWTH

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## 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. This includes housing close to jobs, retail, and services, with streets designed for safe walking and biking with frequent, reliable transit. By doing so, we reduce driving and pollution, improve health,<sup>1</sup> protect natural and historic resources from sprawl, and expand opportunities for those who cannot afford a car, unable to drive or choose not to drive. State policies too often fuel car-centric development, but reforms 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>2</sup>

Long, expensive commutes reduce productivity, drain household budgets, and disproportionately impact people with disabilities, impacting the ability to invest in better housing, children's education, and other daily needs. A 2019 study by AAA 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 per AAA (before the 2022 gas price spike),<sup>3</sup> this means far less income to put towards food on the table, a small business, or one's education. For people 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 costs localities and the state far more in terms of infrastructure and destroys countless acres of farms, forest, and cultural, historic, and scenic resources.<sup>4</sup> With the boom in massive distribution and data centers, the loss of farmland and forests is only accelerating.

## SOLUTION

Smart growth represents the Commonwealth's best opportunity to reduce vehicle miles traveled, lower state and local infrastructure costs, and build a prosperous future in which people of all incomes have a fair chance to get ahead. Compact, walkable, mixed-use, transit-oriented communities with a mix of housing options reduce the amount we have to drive, reduce air and carbon pollution, and save families money via lower combined housing

and transportation costs. Infill development in our existing cities, towns, and inner suburbs allows us to use and modernize existing infrastructure and convert parking lots to livable communities. We need the state to prioritize these places for infrastructure investment and update tax incentives and policies for distribution and data centers to favor brownfields and redevelopment sites, including transit-accessible sites, rather than greenfields.

Diversifying the type and size of our housing stock will provide more affordable options for our modern households. It offers a step on the ladder of home ownership. Allowing for missing middle housing (accessory dwelling units, duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes and multifamily) near existing public facilities, removing legal and zoning codes that result in racial exclusion and segregation, and expanding inclusionary zoning will expand opportunities for all Virginians.

Matching these measures with state and local funding for affordable housing close to jobs and transit will reduce driving, provide security and stability for families and children, reduce stress, and improve health. Investments in affordable housing in accessible locations will provide far greater transportation and quality of life benefits than never-ending spending on road expansion to support ever-longer commutes.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopt fix-it-first requirements in Virginia Code. Calculate replacement needs for existing and aging roads, bridges, water, sewer, schools, and other public buildings, and budget to fully fund replacement of all facilities in poor condition before subsidizing greenfield development, eliminating poor conditions within 10 years.

\$200 million per year for the state affordable housing trust fund within three years and prioritize infill projects close to jobs and high-quality public transit.

Increase housing options by permitting multi-family housing by-right (duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, etc.), in single-family zones which have close access to jobs, services, and frequent transit, lowering minimum lot sizes, and adopting incentives like reduced parking requirements.

Remove any discriminatory or Jim Crow era laws that are still listed in VA Codes relating to planning, land use, zoning, and subdivision covenants.

Require megasite incentive programs and siting to include review of the scale, location, impact of new and proposed distribution and data centers on our transportation networks, electric grid, farmland, forests, water, and historic and cultural resources, creating a scoring system like SmartScale and a preference for brownfield and redevelopment sites.