Implementing SMART Growth Approaches in Southwest Atlanta Neighborhoods

By Garry A Harris

Smart growth is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in compact walkable urban centers to prevent sprawl. It also promotes compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including neighborhood schools, complete streets, and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices. Smart growth values long-range, regional considerations of sustainability over a short-term focus. Its goals are to achieve a unique sense of community and place; expand the range of transportation, employment, and housing choices; equitably distribute the costs and benefits of development; preserve and enhance natural and cultural resources; and promote public health.

There are a range of "best practices" associated with "Smart Growth" — these include: supporting existing communities, placing a value on communities and neighborhoods, redeveloping underutilized sites, enhancing economic competitiveness, providing more transportation choices, developing livability measures and tools, promoting equitable and affordable housing, providing a vision for sustainable growth, enhancing integrated planning and investment, aligning, coordinating, and leveraging government policies, redefining housing affordability and making it transparent.

What would be some of the goals of SMART Growth in Southwest Atlanta?

There are many Goals of Smart Growth in Southwest Atlanta and they include: (1) making the community more competitive for new businesses, (2) providing alternative places to shop, work, and play, (3) creating a better "Sense of Place," providing jobs for residents, (4) increasing property values, (5) improving quality of life, (6) expanding the tax base, (7) preserving open space, (8) controlling growth, and (9) improving safety.

Smart Growth principles are directed at developing sustainable communities that are good places to live, to do business, to work, and to raise families.

What would be some of the benefits for the residents for Southwest Atlanta? Why residents should encourage, participant and promote these activities?

The benefits for residents and communities of Southwest Atlanta include (1) increases in family income and wealth, (2) improving access to quality education, (3) fostering livable, safe and healthy places, (4) stimulating economic activity (both locally and regionally), and (5) developing, preserving and investing in physical resources.
What are some of the Basic Principles of SMART Growth that could be implemented in Southwest Atlanta?

**Mix land uses.** Mixing housing, shops, offices, schools, and other compatible land uses in the same neighborhood makes it easy for residents to walk, bicycle, take public transportation, and reach different destinations conveniently and affordably.

**Take advantage of compact building design.** Compact building design preserves open space and uses land and resources more efficiently. It creates neighborhoods that can easily be served by public transit, puts destinations close enough for people to walk between, and protects water quality by reducing the amount of paved surfaces and polluted runoff.

**Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.** Providing an array of quality housing options in new developments and existing neighborhoods allows people of all income levels, household sizes, and stages of life to live near jobs, public transit, and services.

**Create walkable neighborhoods.** Creating safe and inviting pedestrian spaces, mixing land uses, and building compactly make walking a viable transportation option, reducing transportation costs, encouraging physical activity, and helping to reduce obesity, diabetes, and other diseases.

**Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.** Development should represent the values and the unique history, culture, economy, and geography of a community. Preserving and building on community assets are key to long-term quality of life and economic vitality.

**Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.** Farmland, pastures, forests, and other natural and working lands support land-based economic activities that are critical for healthy regional and national economies. They also protect the environment and public health by filtering pollutants from the air and drinking water.

**Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities.** Investing in existing communities helps to address environmental and health hazards like contaminated properties, brings new jobs and services for residents, and saves localities money by utilizing the infrastructure already in place.
Smart growth is an alternative to urban sprawl, traffic congestion, disconnected neighborhoods, and urban decay. Its principles challenge old assumptions in urban planning, such as the value of detached houses and automobile use.

**What policy tools can residents of Southwest Atlanta advocate?**

**Local Zoning Law**

The most widely used tool for achieving Smart Growth is the local zoning law. Through zoning, new development can be restricted to specific areas, and additional density incentives can be offered for brownfield and greyfield land. Zoning can also reduce the minimum amount of parking required to be built with new development, and can be used to require set-asides for parks and other community amenities.

An Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) is a tool that several U.S. cities now use to contain high density development to certain areas. Some believe that UGBs contributed to the escalation of housing prices from 2000 to 2006, as they limited the supply of developable land. However, this is not completely substantiated because prices continued to rise even after municipalities expanded their growth boundaries.

**Environmental impact Assessments**

One popular approach to assist in smart growth is for law-makers to require prospective developers to prepare environmental impact assessments of their plans as a condition for state and/or local governments to give them permission to build their buildings. These reports often indicate how significant impacts generated by the development will be mitigated, the cost of which is usually paid by the developer. These assessments are frequently controversial. Conservationists, neighborhood advocacy groups and NIMBYs are often skeptical about such impact reports, even when they are prepared by independent agencies and subsequently approved by the decision makers rather than the promoters. Conversely, developers will sometimes strongly resist being required to implement the mitigation measures required by the local government as they may be quite costly.

In communities practicing these smart growth policies, developers comply with local codes and requirements. Consequently, developer compliance builds communal trust because it demonstrates a genuine interest in the environmental quality of the community.

SMART Growth can be categorized in many ways including New Urbanism, New Community Design, Sustainable Development, Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND), and Preventing Urban Sprawl, Creating a Sense of Place, Development Best Practices and Triple Bottom Line
What are the affected areas in Southwest Atlanta that may involve SMART Growth?

**Geographic Location**

The Geographic Location is southwest section of the city as defined by the NPU system. The NPU(s) include J, K, L, S, T, Q, M, and N

**Who are the key stakeholders in Southwest Atlanta that must be involved and engaged in this process?**

The key stakeholders include the following; residents, community leaders, neighborhood association leaders, developers and planners, NPU Leadership, applicable non-profit agencies, faith based organization, schools, utilities, county officials, applicable federal agencies, small business owners, transit and transportation agencies, retailers, and food distribution agencies

**What is the communities plan with Southwest Atlanta Communities to implement SMART Growth processes?**

**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN PROCESS**

Ask the Key Questions

Set Goals and Outcomes

Develop Outreach and Participation Activities

Perform Outreach and Participation Activities

Evaluate the Results

Share the Results

Tailoring the Public Involvement Plan to a Project

Other strategies and activities; meeting with NPU Leadership, Get involved with the community from the Get Go, involved all the community, not just the usual players, Success breeds Success, Create New Partnerships

**What are the potential barriers to SMART Growth in Southwest Atlanta?**

There have been many critics of SMART Growth policy in the US and Globally. According to the UN Habitat, around half of the world's population is concentrated in cities that is set to rise to 60% within a couple decades.[13] The UCLG has specifically identified 13 global challenges to establishing sustainable cities: demographic change and migration, globalization of the job market, poverty and unmet Millennium Development Goals, segregation, spatial patterns and
urban growth, metropolisation and the rise of urban regions, more political power for local authorities, new actors for developing a city and providing services, decline in public funding for development, the environment and climate change, new and accessible building technologies, preparing for uncertainty and limits of growth and global communications and partnerships.

Many ecologist state that we have already overshot the capacity of the Earth and that SMART Growth is only an illusion. Some folks criticize smart growth because it increases land value.

In 2002 the National Center for Public Policy Research, a self-described conservative think tank, published an economic study entitled "Smart Growth and Its Effects on Housing Markets: The New Segregation" which termed smart growth "restricted growth" and suggested that smart growth policies disfavor minorities and the poor by driving up housing prices.

A study released in November 2009 characterized the smart-growth policies in the U.S. state of Maryland as a failure, concluding that "[t]here is no evidence after ten years that [smart-growth laws] have had any effect on development patterns." Factors include a lack of incentives for builders to redevelop older neighborhoods and limits on the ability of state planners to force local jurisdictions to approve high-density developments in "smart-growth" areas.[29] Buyers demand low-density development and because voters tend to oppose high density developments near them]

Other local barriers include the fact the individuals are often not aware of the advantages of SMART Growth; there is no internal neighborhood awareness or leadership. Moreover neighborhoods have accepted their conditions and standards. There is a lack of advocacy due to long term acceptance and living with issues. There are typically no zoning or permitting or other legal drivers. Southwest communities are located near transit stations but many are on bus lines. Therefore transit –oriented development is not possible.

What are the drivers for Southwest Atlanta residents to accept SMART Growth?

A recent study of eighteen communities (some similar in scope and size to those in Southwest Atlanta showed start growth effect those communities in the following ways;

SMART Growth development differ from conventional suburban development in several ways including (1) they offer a greater range of housing choices; (2) they offer variable alternatives to driving by building compactly and placing commercial, office and/or recreational uses within walking distance of homes (3) they offer a greater emphasis on a sense of place through site and building designs that foster. In addition SMART Growth communities exhibit higher home prices that their suburban counterparts. SMART Growth properties are typically newer than their conventional suburban counterparts
How do we effectively implement SMART Growth strategies in the Southwest Atlanta?

**Facilitate Meaningful Community Engagement in Land Use Decisions**

**Phase I**
- Conduct Multi-Lingual Outreach
- Conduct Community Assessments
- Conduct Community Based Participatory Research
- Hold Community Planning and Visioning Workshops

**Promote Public Health and the Clean and Safe Environment**

**Phase II**
- Safely Plan and Site Facilities with Potential Environmental Concerns
- Reduce Exposure to Good Movement Activities
- Clean and Re Use Contaminated Properties
- Promote Green Building
- Build Green Streets

**Strengthen Existing Communities**

**Phase III**
- Fix Existing Infrastructure First
- Reuse Vacant and Abandon Properties
- Redevelop Commercial Corridors

**Provide Housing Choices**

**Phase IV**
- Preserve Affordable Housing
- Strengthen, Promote and Build Affordable Housing
Provide Transportation Options

Phase V

Provide Access to Public Transportation
Create Equitable Transit Oriented Development
Design Safe Streets for All Users

Improve Access for Opportunities and Amenities

Phase VI

Promote Diverse Community Centered Schools
Create Safe Routes to School
Provide Access to Healthy Food
Provide Access to Parks and Other Green Space

Preserve and Build on Features that Make a Southwest Atlanta Community Distinctive

Phase VII

Preserve Existing Cultural Features
Create New Development that Strengthens Local Culture

Project: Effectively Implement At Least One Selected Element in Phase I-VII

Plan-Do-Check-Act
Select Element
Develop Implementation Plan for Element
Assess Effectiveness of Implementation
Report Assessment Findings to Key Neighborhood Stakeholders