

# 'Smart Growth' Ignores Many Harsh Truths

*Pretty fixes won't solve problems of growth*

by B. Meredith Burke

Recently the President's Council on Sustainable Development sponsored a National Town Meeting for a Sustainable America. Organizers expected 3,000 people — business leaders, environmentalists, concerned citizens — to show up in Detroit. Thousands more participated through satellite links, the internet, and local community events.

The event was designed to publicize the best resource-conserving practices of businesses nationwide. Implied is the message that using "best practice" design and technology the United States can support a growing economy and a growing population indefinitely at a non-deteriorating quality of life.

This echoes the recent well-orchestrated "smart growth" campaign. From Vice President Al Gore's endorsement, to a Sierra Club "Challenge to Sprawl" campaign, to Time magazine's featured story last month, "smart growth" is hailed as the panacea for our urban land use ills.

Smart (aka "managed") growth will preserve open space and reduce commutes by recycling abandoned industrial sites and inner-city buildings, intermingling housing and small businesses, and increasing housing densities.

I am terrified by smart growth apologists. They slickly but falsely reassure the polity that their piecemeal solutions represent a coherent, comprehensive policy that

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*B. Meredith Burke, Ph.D., a demographer who has worked here and abroad, is Population Policy Advisor to the Ecology Center of Southern California.*

will deliver our land endowment unscathed to generations to come.

Thirty brief years ago M.I.T. professor Jay Forrester imparted an essential lesson in his books, *System Dynamics* and *Urban Dynamics*. Approaching a complex systemic problem piecemeal guarantees (a) confusing a symptom with the cause, and therefore, (b) prescribing futile — or worse, counterproductive — solutions.

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Consider that the Los Angeles of 1950 had about two million residents; today Los Angeles (all five counties of it) exceeds 15 million. Phoenix's population grew ten-fold between 1950 and 1990.

How could smart growth have arrested sprawl while retaining the density, housing options, and

recreational and wilderness access local residents desired? How could "sustained development" have prevented increased energy demands, waste production, accretions to global warming, and preserved natural habitats from human encroachment?

In a finite world, the smart use of resources and insistence upon recycling are admirable. But these sidestep ecologist Garrett Hardin's question, "and then what?" Strictly enforced, greenbelt boundaries in the face of incessant population growth will result in mini-Manhattans inside and a new wave of out-migration (and loss of farmland and wilderness) by persons who want to see blue sky, not high-rises. Smart growth avoids tabulating the overall eco-system demands created by human beings regardless of where they are housed.

We first Earth Day activists of the 1970's accepted that long-term sustainability would exact psychological as

well as physical costs of Americans. Clearly, mankind's wresting control of epidemiological forces had irrevocably altered demographic and technological reality.

This changed reality obligated us to reevaluate cherished ideals, jettisoning some now ill-adapted to healthy survival while elevating others.

We never doubted that we had the power to craft this future.

The 1972 President's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future understood that managing growth was secondary to the more fundamental question, what should be the country's optimum population? By 1970 the U.S. population had soared to 200 million from 1940's 130 million. The commission urgently recommended stabilization — not on ecological grounds but on ideological: it could identify no American value furthered by population growth. The study noted that reproductive health and immigration policies had to respect this reality.

Congress rejected both a national population policy and demographic accountability. Now Congress straightfacedly maintains that the ensuing 70 million population gain “just happened.” More culpably, it ignores population as a factor affecting our future options.

I cautioned my circa-1970 college students about the understandable but craven preference for “pretty solutions.” Pretty solutions are socially and politically cost-free. They enable us to do business (pretty much) as usual, avoid making drastic and permanent lifestyle changes, and steer clear of the costs of crafting policy in an arena unaccepting of political compromises.

Smart growth is the ultimate pretty solution. Indeed, its adherents blindly protest there are NO solutions where they merely cannot see a pretty one.

Ecologists David and Marcia Pimentel of Cornell University and Paul and Anne Ehrlich of Stanford are among the many who assert that the U.S.'s sustainable population is below 150 million.

From a resource consumption and global warming view the entire world would arguably be better off with a smaller American population.

Yet neither smart growth advocates nor Congress will confront those interest groups reflecting either the frontiersman's mentality that more is better, or the unrealistic belief we best benefit the world by remaining a demographic pressure valve. Until they accept the existence of limits, “sustainable development” adherents

do not merely dwell in a Never-Never Land. They imperil both our country's and the globe's survival.