

# Shared Destinies: A Smart Growth Agenda for Massachusetts

**HOW UNPLANNED GROWTH IS CHANGING  
MASSACHUSETTS—AND WHAT WE CAN DO  
TO PRESERVE THE PLACES WE VALUE**

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# Immediate Action

## AN AGENDA FOR STATE LAWMAKERS, 2006-2008

We need to manage growth in a way that preserves what's best about the places we love in our state. The Alliance recommends a set of big and small steps that the state can take over the next three years to assure thoughtful planning for our future.

- 1** Create a **statewide participation process** for setting land use goals for development and preservation.
- 2** Provide **adequate funding to ensure enough variety in housing construction** to meet all the different needs in a community, making sure that families of modest incomes can live closer to their jobs.
- 3** Provide **greater incentives to cities and towns that zone for compact and efficient housing development near downtowns, near public transit or in other designated growth areas, strengthening MGL Chapter 40R.**
- 4** Analyze and eliminate barriers that prevent families with children, persons with disabilities, and persons of color from finding and securing quality homes.
- 5** Restore state investment in land protection, using the statewide conservation plan as a guide for prioritizing investments in land protection.
- 6** Implement the elements of the Commonwealth's new 20-year state transportation plan that make sure land uses around new transportation investments support compact, high-density growth, that prioritize fixing our roads and transit systems first, and that ensure adequate, balanced investment in public transportation. Ensure that the transit commitments required to mitigate the Central Artery Project are funded so that residents receive the benefits of increased mobility, air quality, and reduced traffic congestion.
- 7** Give funding priority for repairing, maintaining and improving infrastructure to developed areas throughout the state.
- 8** Support economic development and job creation in rural areas to enable residents that live in rural areas to stay there if they so choose.
- 9** Help cities develop programs to attract new businesses by pre-permitting sites for commercial development in appropriate locations while reforming zoning laws to discourage development on municipal peripheries. To do this, we need to eliminate a provision called "Approval Not Required" that lets land be subdivided along an existing road with no review and no requirements for infrastructure to be built to accommodate this new development. The state zoning law contains other provisions that limit the ability of communities to plan successfully for future growth.
- 10** Provide incentives to cities and towns that work together to plan for growth. Incentives could include giving the cooperating municipalities more flexibility over land use planning, priority access to economic development funding, or the ability to raise and share tax revenues.
- 11** Convene a task force to study how regional planning agencies could be more effective in promoting development that crosses municipal borders without imposing additional mandates or bureaucratic requirements.
- 12** Convene a task force to study the effects that Proposition 2½ and municipal dependence on property taxes have on housing production and unplanned, haphazard development.

# Executive Summary

## SHARED DESTINIES: A SMART GROWTH AGENDA FOR MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts is a wonderful place to live. We have quaint seashore villages, vibrant neighborhoods, and a rich history which draws visitors from around the world. We have stunning scenery, wild places and beautiful beaches. We are also a center of learning and cutting-edge industry.

As residents, we have a sense of pride and respect for our region. At the same time, we must address challenges that are driving away young families, new employers, and new workers. We need to make the region stronger and better for all who live here.

To preserve and improve our quality of life, we must think ahead about how and where we want to grow. Planning successfully for the future means involving residents in decision-making and putting all the options on the table. When everybody has a voice and understands the alternatives, communities will make fair decisions that benefit the community as a whole.

If we don't act now, we will squander the human and natural resources we value. For several decades, haphazard development of houses, stores, and workplaces has been consuming land for development at a much higher rate than our population has grown. This spread-out pattern means longer commutes and wasted resources. Soaring home prices are forcing first-time home buyers to buy further and further from where jobs are located. The rural character of our landscapes is disappearing. Our drinking-water supply is strained.

Massachusetts needs to get started right away to preserve the places we love and enjoy and that make our state the special place it is.

The Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance believes there are many ways we can maintain and improve our economic prosperity and social well-being through planning for future growth. The Alliance is made up of seven leading organizations that are working to promote solutions that will enable working families to buy homes they can afford, make it easier to travel around the region, support new parks and protected natural areas, and provide better economic opportunities for all our residents.

This paper presents the issues Massachusetts faces and proposes an agenda of reforms for leadership and action. We have an immediate opportunity to make decisions for our communities so that we all enjoy safe homes, parks and wild spaces, convenient travel, and economic prosperity. Below are the bold actions we need our leaders—and ourselves—to take.

- > **Look at the big picture and choose the best places to develop jobs and housing, and designate special natural areas as places to conserve.** The state should establish these land use goals through an open and participatory process that includes residents from urban, suburban, and rural areas. Once the process has identified priority areas for development and other areas for conservation, the state should encourage cities and towns to make these goals a reality through state actions and funding.

- > **Build a balanced transportation system that helps everyone get where they need to be when they need to be there. Locate new development near transportation and new transportation near development.**

The transportation system that moves our residents and our goods from place to place is failing and clogged. We need to look at the entire transportation system and fix the problem by providing a balanced mix of choices, including public transportation, sidewalks, bikeways, and better roads. We also need to encourage new development to locate near transportation corridors and ensure that transportation investments are made in places where people already live and work, reducing travel between homes, jobs, and other destinations.

- > **Ensure that everyone has a safe, decent, and affordable place to live.** The security and stability of our communities is improved when everyone can find an affordable house or apartment to live in. Unfortunately, progress has been hampered on this front by racial, class, and other inequities. Those barriers block too many people from living in areas that offer good access, opportunity, and vital community services.
- > **Encourage and invest in projects that improve urban cores and other already developed areas outside of Boston.** By developing in cities and other areas planning for growth, we can create compact, well-designed places that provide privacy, amenities and close proximity to stores, schools, and parks. We can keep what we have, reinvesting in roads, schools, and neighborhoods in the cities around the

state, rather than spending tax dollars on building new infrastructure in places with little or no development.

- > **Limit the loss of farmlands and open areas by protecting our land.** We need to support both the natural and the built environment. Lively cities and towns should be balanced with parks, open spaces, and wild places that help us conserve our natural resources while providing places to play, hike, and relax. To best protect our natural legacies, we need to change statewide zoning laws, preserve land through creative deal-making, and buy land to protect it from harmful development. Currently, outdated state zoning laws limit communities' choices about development and land use. These state laws need to be reformed.

- > **Help cities and towns cooperate with each other to solve regional problems.** In Massachusetts, municipalities are the foundation of our government system. Rather than forcing each community to go it alone, we need to find ways to encourage cities and towns to work together to address issues like traffic, the housing crunch, and natural resource conservation.

We are all striving to create safe and secure communities for ourselves and our children. When we have full information about our options and genuinely include citizens in decision-making, we can make good choices. We can create a future with affordable places to live, convenient transportation options that meet our needs, healthy natural and built environments, prosperity, and equal access to opportunities for everyone in Massachusetts.

# Shared Destinies: A Smart Growth Agenda for Massachusetts

*Communities can be shaped by choice, or they can be shaped by chance. We can keep on accepting the kind of communities we get, or we can start creating the kind of communities we want.*

RICHARD MOE  
NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

## HOW UNPLANNED, HAPHAZARD DEVELOPMENT IS CHANGING MASSACHUSETTS

Over the course of the last few years, these regional and local stories appeared in *The Boston Globe*:

- A family moved to a house in Charlton after a fruitless search for an affordable home in Newton, where they had been renting. They now have an hour-long commute to work in Boston.
- Black ice froze the morning commute in gridlock for hours on all Boston-area highways.
- Thirty-seven percent of Massachusetts households making the median state income paid more than 30% of their income for housing at the time of the census in 2000.
- In the Town of Westford, Town Meeting looked for solutions to the traffic congestion created by a decision years ago to locate commercial and office development along the Route 110 corridor parallel to I-495.
- A Massachusetts Audubon Society report documented how the increasing size of new single-family homes is fragmenting important environmental resources and habitats.
- In Medfield, town officials negotiated with the state to reduce the amount of housing to be permitted on the former site of a state hospital, citing school costs, traffic and environmental impacts.
- A report from the Harvard Civil Rights Project documented the persistence of racial segregation in metropolitan Boston, regardless of income.
- State officials stopped granting new permits for water withdrawals in the Charles River basin because of dangerously low water levels in the upper and middle Charles.

These stories about the facts of our lives in Massachusetts today—increasingly long commutes to work, soaring housing prices, vanishing rural character and natural areas, strains on water supply and quality—are all connected. They illustrate how our current policies and decisions do not support managing development and redevelopment of land in ways that preserve what is best about the places we love, and that make life better as we grow.

The term *sprawl* is often used as a shorthand to describe patterns of development that are spread out over the landscape, gobbling up natural areas and contributing to long commutes to work. The pattern of low-density sprawl development that we see today may seem to be the result of consumer choices, but it is actually the product of more than half a century of federal, state and local policies. Because we created the framework that made sprawl possible, we can also change regulations, incentives and disincentives to promote different growth and development patterns.

## HOW AND WHY POORLY MANAGED DEVELOPMENT IS HURTING OUR STATE

Population growth in Massachusetts has been slow over the last half century compared to states in the South and West. Despite our slow population growth, Massachusetts in the 1980s and 1990s consumed land for development seven times faster than our population was growing. Every day, we develop another 40 acres or so of farms and natural areas. And this is not happening just in the Boston area. According to the National Resources Inventory, prepared by the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, from 1982 to 1997, developed land in the metropolitan Springfield area grew nine times faster than the population.

And what did we build? While our tourism economy trades internationally on the charm of our walkable, traditional towns and pastoral countryside, the development of the last three decades

### WHO PRODUCED THIS PAPER?



*This white paper was prepared by the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, a coalition of seven organizations working for more affordable housing, environmental preservation, social equity, transportation choice, and well-planned development.*



*Shopping centers and malls next to highways encourage dependence on cars.*



*Industrial properties in cities, like the one above, need cleaning up and redevelopment. The former factory shown above and to the right has been transformed into attractive residential lofts.*

has abandoned that legacy. Our strip malls and subdivisions could be “Anywhere, USA.” The state and local policies that subsidize development on farms and forests have helped contribute to the decline of older cities and suburbs and led to residential segregation by class and race. Our smaller historic cities—Lawrence, Brockton, New Bedford, Springfield, Holyoke, Pittsfield and others—have been struggling with disinvestment. Most of the humming mills that made these cities the industrial engine of Massachusetts for more than a century are quiet, but these cities preserve their sense of place, their walkable neighborhoods, their exceptional urban parks and all the other infrastructure of once prosperous, compact urban centers.

Now our workplaces are almost as likely to be scattered along highways as they are to be in downtowns or major regional centers. Many communities are reluctant to accept more housing for a variety of reasons, and they zone accordingly, so unmet demand has made our cost of housing among the highest in the nation. Much of the housing affordable to middle-class households that does get built is located at the fringe of metropolitan areas where land costs are lower. Country roads are increasingly lined with suburban-style houses and isolated subdivisions spring up in old farm fields. Town centers languish as shops move to commercial strips. Air and water pollution persist and wildlife is threatened as natural areas become smaller and more isolated. With continuing residential segregation, the distance between job opportunities and housing is increasing for populations of color concentrated in urban areas remote from centers of job growth.

What does all this mean for ordinary Massachusetts citizens and families?

**Unfair, inefficient use of tax dollars.** Sprawling development is wasteful on many levels. First, it costs a great deal of money to extend roads, sewer lines, new schools and services ever farther into the countryside. Residents of existing areas, who help pay for this expansion, lose twice, as these new areas lure away people and

resources. To make matters worse, the spread-out, haphazard form of most new development makes inefficient use of these investments, making them more expensive in the long run. Researchers—led by Robert Burchell at Rutgers University, who studied the costs of sprawl for the Federal Transit Administration—have estimated that more compact growth and development directed to places that already have sunk investments into infrastructure can save us 25 to 30% compared to doing business as usual.



*Sprawling development expands the reach of pollution from stormwater that passes over lawns, driveways, and roads. This “nonpoint source pollution” is now the biggest threat to our water resources.*

**Less clean water, air, and land.**

When development is spread out and not well planned it has a negative impact on our water, land and air. Sprawl fragments natural habitats and degrades the health of a wide variety of plant and animal life. It also often means that more polluted stormwater enters our rivers and streams. And it creates more air pollution because of increases in the number of miles people must drive to get to and from work and to needed services.

**Fewer choices in places to live.** We are not creating enough housing to meet the needs of households at different stages in their lives. Even as demand continues to grow for conveniently located townhouses, clustered homes, apartments, live-work units and other innovations, many towns continue to mandate single-family homes on large lots. Often, building new housing like the older housing that already exists is illegal because zoning requires large lots that result in expensive large houses. The reasons for this situation are numerous: the belief that large lots save open space and natural areas (when in reality they fragment open space); fears that more housing will create more school costs (which is often not the case); a belief that any kind of multifamily housing is inconsistent with an image of “rural character.” The result is a vicious cycle: sprawl development reduces variety in housing types and prices while simultaneously encouraging development in more rural locations where land is cheaper.



*One- and two-acre zoning in towns results in high land costs and large new houses.*

**Fewer options for getting around and more time behind the wheel.** Low-density development requires getting in a car for almost every activity away from the home. There are usually no facilities for pedestrians and no nearby destinations to walk to. Transit becomes prohibitively expensive in areas with less than 4,200 persons per square mile. The 28 Massachusetts communities with this level of density in 2000 were cities, the inner suburbs of metro Boston and a handful of North Shore towns.



**Social division and tension.** The increasing dispersal of businesses and jobs from city and town centers to exurban locations reinforces the urban disinvestment that affects so many of our state's small cities. And, combined with continued high levels of residential segregation, sprawl contributes to an especially large "spatial mismatch" between the places

where most people of color live and where job opportunities are located.



**Fewer opportunities to combine exercise with daily life.** Rates of obesity are on the rise

*We need to make sure that everyone in our diverse population has a fair chance for affordable housing and economic well-being.*

in Massachusetts. Children and adults are less physically active, a fact that plays a role in heart disease, diabetes and other disorders. Because sprawl development discourages biking and walking, it contributes to these public health problems.

**The loss of a sense of place.** To the rest of the country Massachusetts presents the calendar New England of town commons surrounded by shingled houses, small-scale farms and woods along country roads, beaches backed by marshes and dunes, and historic, walkable cities with a human scale. Sprawl development destroys our traditional sense of place and produces a homogeneous real estate product that makes us indistinguishable from other parts of the country.

## **WHY HASN'T MASSACHUSETTS BEEN GROWING SMART?**

We have many issues to overcome, but the good news for Massachusetts is that we have a history of action and innovation when we identify problems. Indeed, Massachusetts pioneered many of the initiatives and programs that other states recognize as elements of smart planning: incentives and programs to promote the redevelopment of industrial “brownfields,” farm preservation, protection of natural areas, historic preservation, economic development in distressed communities, and affordable housing. Unfortunately, these programs evolved separately and sometimes worked at cross purposes because there was no clear policy guidance to use state resources and regulation to steer and shape development. At the same time, most regulation of land development has remained in the hands of 351 local governments, with occasional intervention from state government. Regional institutions that might coordinate planning and development among jurisdictions have very limited authority. There has been no strong policy to promote investment in our cities since the 1970s. A key missing ingredient in this stew of disparate initiatives was a statewide framework for coordinating investments and programs so that they help communities, regions, and the state to steer growth to appropriate areas, and then to make those places the best they can be.

## **WHY NOW?**

Massachusetts is at a crossroads. In the 1980s and 1990s, our state made a transition from the declining old economy of traditional manufacturing to the new economy based on information, knowledge and services. Two booms were followed by two recessions. During the booms, both residential and business development expanded in low-density sprawl along major transportation corridors and into the rural fringes of metropolitan areas, the “exurbs.” While residents welcomed the boom in jobs and income, many increasingly saw development in their communities as a threat to their quality of life.

Economic slowdowns create an opportunity to learn lessons from what happened in the last boom. We did not take the opportunity in the early 1990s to think about how changes in the way we develop land in Massachusetts could improve our quality of life, perhaps because we had not yet identified quality of life as the premier asset that it is in the new economy.

This time, we are ready to make changes in the way we develop in Massachusetts. State government has begun to promote smart growth over sprawl growth. The Office for Commonwealth Development is charged with coordinating transportation, housing, environmental, and energy policy to promote smart growth, and the legislature established

## What would smart-growth Massachusetts look like?

There are ways to grow smart in all kinds of communities in Massachusetts—cities, suburbs and rural towns.

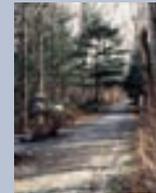
- **Thriving cities**

A renaissance of large and small cities alike provides a vital balance of jobs, housing, parks, and cultural activities with the diversity and spontaneous excitement that mark urban life.



- **Protected natural areas**

Protected natural areas preserve water supplies, biodiversity, and scenic and heritage landscapes, and bring nature into the city.



- **Lively and walkable town centers**

Town centers in suburban and larger rural towns become the heart of the community again as more people live within walking distance, creating a market for new business and new activities.



- **Travel choice**

There are more ways to travel from place to place, both short distances and long distances, including better pedestrian and bicycle routes, and improved public transportation in and between urban, suburban and rural communities.



- **Distinction between town and country**

Fewer isolated subdivisions, commercial strips and malls spread into the countryside while more sustainable rural economies provide good jobs and incomes for rural residents.



- **Healthy environments and water systems**



Clean and adequate water supplies, preservation of biodiversity, reduced air and water pollution, and more sustainable energy sources support a healthy environment for everyone.

- **Housing choice**

All kinds of households—young people, families, singles, empty-nesters, low and moderate income households, retirees, owners and renters—can find a decent place to live that fits their needs at a reasonable price.



new incentives for municipalities to focus housing in town centers. And as the affordable housing crisis has intensified and affected the ability of Massachusetts businesses to keep and attract workers, the business community has also begun to support smart growth solutions, especially in the production of new housing.

## **KEYS TO SMARTER PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **BEING SMART ABOUT WHERE GROWTH GOES**

*Where* should we accommodate development and growth? *Where* should we constrain development and emphasize preservation? These two questions are fundamental to good planning, but they are often politically difficult. This is particularly the case in Massachusetts, where the structures of municipal governance and taxation create the climate of a zero-sum game in which municipalities are always competing with one another. In order to be effective, we need to identify, at least in a general way, where the preservation and growth areas are best located and include citizens in the decision-making.

The locational aspect of current smart growth policy focuses on creating incentives for denser development in town centers and at transit stations. Although this approach has value, smart growth cannot be achieved on a town-by-town basis because municipal borders do not contain sprawl and its effects. A new balance of powers needs to be negotiated among the local, regional, and state levels so that incentives and actions are applied at the scale necessary to get results. Structural barriers to smart growth, like over-dependence on property taxes and outdated provisions of the state zoning law, need to be modified or removed. And state investments need to be made according to smart growth criteria.

***Farms and rural areas will only survive if we support programs that strengthen their economic viability.***



## INTEGRATING “GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE” WITH “GROWTH INFRASTRUCTURE”

Green infrastructure provides the framework for protecting ecologically important lands and water and for supporting heritage and scenic landscapes. Growth infrastructure supports and reinforces policies for directing growth to areas that have already seen development in the past or that are appropriate for additional development.

Our state needs a broader urban investment policy encompassing small cities and inner suburbs and including improvements in public education and urban economic development. In addition to focusing



***Many of the young professionals enjoying lunch in this downtown park also value the city's proximity to mountains and the ocean.***

on making urban areas great places to live for all kinds of people, from families to the elderly, we need to think about how to decide which suburban areas should be encouraged to become more densely-populated regional centers through provision of growth infrastructure and which should not. Citizens need to be meaningfully involved in these discussions and decisions. At the same time, a successful smart growth program also supports rural areas. Preservation areas where development is

not beneficial have to be sustained with programs for land preservation, farm-viability supports, and similar efforts focused on preserving environmental health and resource-based economic activities. Of course, both the growth and preservation areas must be balanced communities, with parks to serve communities in the growth areas and sufficient services and employment for communities in the preservation areas.

A good balance between supporting green infrastructure and growth infrastructure is critical to our economic future. Our state's prosperity depends on continuing leadership in the innovative services and industries that depend on highly educated “knowledge workers.” These highly mobile workers tend to be younger than average and value the quality-of-place and quality-of-life attributes of Massachusetts, such as the combination of lively urban areas and outdoor nature activities. The enterprises they work for help keep our economy competitive, which creates opportunities for all kinds of workers and businesses. If unplanned, sprawling development continues and we lose our distinctive Massachusetts sense of place and quality of life, there will be economic consequences.

## BUILDING COMMUNITIES THAT INCLUDE, RATHER THAN EXCLUDE

It is a truism that if you design a place that works well for elderly persons and children, it will be a good place for everyone. In the same way, smart growth policies that promote equity will benefit all our citizens. Growing sprawl during the twentieth century was accompanied by urban disinvestment and racial segregation—for many years abetted by federal housing and tax policies. Residential segregation by race, though somewhat attenuated compared to the past, remains a fact of life in Massachusetts. Populations of color and poor people remain concentrated in the old urban centers of the state. The 2000 census showed that most of the population of Boston and some smaller cities such as Lawrence is composed of people of color and Latinos, making them what is sometimes called “majority minority” cities. Regardless of income, in metropolitan Boston, black populations are concentrated in just a few communities—Randolph, Brockton, Milton, Boston, and Everett—while Latinos are more likely to live in Lawrence, Chelsea, Lynn, Everett, and Revere. The meaning of these data is that African Americans and Latinos are more likely to reside much farther from job opportunities, which are increasingly spread throughout a region and not in a few core areas.

In addition to the economically disadvantaged cities where citizens of color are concentrated, economic disparities exist in rural areas as well. Farming is difficult to sustain economically, other jobs are hard to find, tourism provides low-wage and seasonal work. Some residents travel many miles to reach their jobs in resort areas, in distant cities, and sometimes in different states.

## **A STATEWIDE AGENDA FOR SMART GROWTH**

Around the commonwealth, people are looking for new ways to shape development for housing and economic prosperity in the 21st century. They want to create lively communities, protect natural resources, provide open space, and preserve historic character. In the fall of 2004, the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance sponsored roundtable discussions in every region of the state to identify regional priorities for smart growth. The results of those meetings are the foundation of this Action Agenda.

**Create a new local-regional-state balance in planning and land-use regulation.** Land use policy, planning and regulation should occur at the right scale to address the problems and the opportunities of the 21st century. Municipal government is often too small to affect the large systems and markets that operate across town and city borders: transportation systems, markets for housing, labor, goods and services, drinking water supply and wildlife habitat. At the other end of the scale, state government is often too big and rigid to be effective on the regional or local level. Regional institutions have little authority. We need a new way to balance state policy leadership, regional action, and local understanding of problems and impacts.

**Link transportation investments to land use policy and decisions.** Transportation is not an end in itself. Transportation policies and investments should improve people's access and mobility while serving our collective interests in economic development, environmental protection, and equity. The goal of a transportation policy is to support decisions about where we want to live and work, not the other way around. That means that transportation policy must be closely tied to land-use policy. Transportation decisions should be made after we have more answers to the questions: Where do we want to grow? How do we want to grow?

**Balance housing development and environmental protection.** Smart growth is both about meeting housing needs and environmental protection, including preserving critical open space. Protecting our state's water resources and biodiversity and reducing air pollution are important to all citizens, and every community needs access to nature and recreation. At the same time Massachusetts has one of the most expensive housing markets in the country because we are not producing enough housing. By growing smart in compact, walkable developments, we do not have to pit housing development against protecting natural areas.

**Tailor smart growth policies for cities, town centers, suburbs and rural communities.** We need complementary urban, suburban, and rural areas within a smart growth framework. To direct growth to urban areas we must pay special attention to promoting reinvestment in cities and town centers. To promote viable rural areas we must support the economic and environmental sustainability of rural communities. And we must provide incentives and appropriate investments for smart growth in suburban areas where compact new development and redevelopment will accommodate more growth, enhance the sense of community, and support regional goals.

**Incorporate equity values and measures into smart growth policies.** We need to make sure that smart growth policies increase rather than diminish fairness and opportunity for all Massachusetts

residents. There are, however, many complex factors that affect equitable growth. The first step in ensuring fairness is to collect and analyze sufficient information so that we can better understand how policies that shape development patterns can promote equity.

**Reward smart growth choices by businesses and communities.**

Successful smart growth requires that we provide new incentives and align existing requirements and benefits to promote smart growth outcomes. When communities and businesses make the choice for smart growth development, they should be rewarded. The state can make sure that its own regulations and requirements reflect in practice the idea that those who try to achieve smart growth goals and meet performance standards receive priority in investments and in permitting.

**Invest in a sense of place through good design.** Smart growth promotes infill development, redevelopment, and higher densities in designated growth areas. People often fear density in the abstract, while enjoying it in practice, as long as it is accompanied by good design and a sense of place. Well-designed higher-density housing can provide the privacy and amenities that many people seek in low-density development. A sense of place comes from the design of the public realm—the parks, public squares, streets, sidewalks and landscapes that belong to the whole community. Although smart growth is not just about development projects, and state-level reforms are not typically project-oriented, the state must promote the highest standards in projects with state funding. Good design and planning make the difference in public acceptance of smart growth.

## **THE ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTOR— IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT GOVERNMENT**

Although the mission of the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance is to promote state-level reforms to enable smarter growth in the commonwealth, we believe that the private sector also has a critical role to play. Business has encouraged government to keep taxes moderate and bureaucracy lean. This means that the private sector needs to support market mechanisms that promote smart growth. Today, business leaders are very conscious that the high cost of housing in Massachusetts endangers our ability to keep and attract an educated labor force. Banks, foundations, universities, and private investors who understand that our state needs to be viewed as a good place to live in order to be economically successful can step up to this challenge and help make smart growth business as usual in Massachusetts.

# THE ALLIANCE CHALLENGE

## THE ALLIANCE CHALLENGE: STATE REFORMS TO PROMOTE SMART GROWTH

*Go beyond conventional intergovernmental relationships.* Coordination of state-agency activities to focus on more efficient, smart growth development patterns makes sense. This has begun to happen with the establishment in 2003 of the Office for Commonwealth Development (OCD), which oversees the state's environmental, housing, transportation, and energy agencies. We need to measure, however, whether the incentives and disincentives that influence daily choices made by individuals, businesses and nonprofits, and governments about where and how to locate development actually promote smart growth outcomes. Moreover, although municipalities will continue to be the foundation of civic identity and government in Massachusetts, it is impossible to attain smart growth development patterns by focusing only on the municipality as the primary arena for action. We need to develop innovative ways to link municipalities within regions and regions within the state.

*Link smart growth initiatives more closely with economic development.* Economic development agencies are not part of the OCD portfolio or explicitly linked to the state's Sustainable Development Principles. Economic-development incentive programs should be embedded in a smart growth framework, focusing, for example, on job creation for smart growth in cities and rural areas, rather than distributed to almost any community, regardless of relative need.

*Create a more open and participatory process.* Success in steering new development in Massachusetts into more smart-growth-friendly patterns will depend on raising public and political awareness and understanding of the benefits of smart growth and the costs of continued conventional development patterns. So far, the tendency has been for the state's sustainable development principles and new initiatives to be created within government and then presented as a *fait accompli*. One exception was the 40B Task Force, where reform proposals were hammered out by stakeholders with different interests. The big issues such as land use regulatory reform, a long-term state transportation plan, and property-tax reform need this kind of participatory structure at a minimum—not only to create a consensus for change but also to attract innovative approaches to promoting smart growth in Massachusetts.

The Alliance recommends a set of big and small steps over the next three years to begin changing the state framework for development and its system of incentives and disincentives so that more individuals, businesses, developers, and government agencies make the choice for smart growth:

- > **Create a set of statewide land use goals for conservation areas and development areas that recognizes different regional conditions through an open and participatory process.** The Office of Commonwealth Development has developed Sustainable Development Principles and a list of policy criteria for awarding discretionary funds to municipalities. State officials are reluctant to create a map that reflects a plan to implement these principles and policy criteria, preferring very general discussions of location. Successful application of the principles and policy criteria, however, requires a more nuanced and flexible articulation of the expectations for smart growth outcomes under different circumstances, including support for affordable housing creation, working landscapes, and natural resources, and protection of open space in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Development of state land use goals should include a public participation process, which would also serve as an opportunity to raise public awareness about smart growth benefits.
  - Incorporate measures of progress toward these goals into criteria for state agency actions and expenditures and for state aid and funding programs for municipalities.
  - Develop a program of systematic public participation in policy development for land use goals and smart growth initiatives for the diversity of urban, suburban and rural areas.
  
- > **Reform state land use and development regulations to promote smart growth development patterns.** Our antiquated state land use law (Chapter 40A) contains sprawl-generating mandates while focusing land use decision-making on the municipal level. We need to link elimination of sprawl mandates that municipalities cannot control to a zoning approach that provides locations for compact and mixed-use development, streamlining of the permitting process for projects that result in smart growth outcomes, and protective zoning for natural resource and open space areas. Other development regulations, such as the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) should be reviewed in light of smart growth objectives.

# THE ALLIANCE CHALLENGE

- Eliminate Approval-Not-Required (ANR) subdivisions and reduce vesting of zoning rights (grandfathering) from eight to three years while providing expedited permitting for development that meets smart growth criteria.
  - Allow natural resource or agricultural-preservation zoning that is balanced by greater density in town or city centers, locally or through transfer of development rights programs.
  - Require zoning to be consistent with adopted municipal plans.
  - Revise Chapter 40R (Smart Growth Zoning) to remove disincentives for adoption by municipalities.
  - Review and revise MEPA and other environmental regulations as needed to ensure that they promote smart growth outcomes while preserving environmental health.
- > **Promote intermunicipal cooperation for smart growth.** Despite the fact that Massachusetts municipalities are too small to affect the wider systems and forces that shape their local environments, state programs are organized for vertical relationships between the state and the town, rather than promoting more horizontal regional connections.
- Provide incentives such as more flexibility in land use matters and revenue powers to municipalities that plan, zone, and share tax revenues for smart growth outcomes, for example, by reducing vesting rights, allowing some sales tax powers, or targeting economic-development tax incentives to these cooperating municipalities.
  - Convene a task force to study how to make regional planning agencies more effective in promoting intermunicipal smart growth development without imposing additional mandates or bureaucratic requirements on municipalities.
  - Convene a state task force to study barriers to housing production and the effect on sprawl of dependence on the property tax and Proposition 2-1/2.
- > **Create a long-term, statewide transportation and mobility plan through an open and participatory process that focuses on smart growth outcomes.** In the post-Big Dig era of financial constraints, Massachusetts needs a new transportation vision and implementation plan. The legislature has created a Transportation Finance Commission and the state has produced a 20-year statewide transportation plan that includes some laudable goals, including improved air quality, environmental justice, responsiveness to an aging population, and promotion of biking and walking. Unfortunately, the process for public participation and input is lacking. Without a process that

includes discussions with the diverse constituencies around the state, the plan will suffer from a lack of new ideas, and the state will forego the opportunity to forge a consensus about the transportation future of the state.

- Ensure a robust public participation process, including some education and orientation for the general public on transportation issues and choices.
- Establish a broad-based advisory committee to review the plan in detail and develop recommendations for improvement.
- Identify priority areas for development where transportation investments will be focused.
- Identify alternative funding mechanisms to ensure that all elements of the plan can be adequately funded.

> **Create a coherent and comprehensive set of policies to ensure that smart growth development incentives create greater equity.**

- Remove impediments to fair housing for families with children, persons with disabilities, and populations of color.
- Provide incentives for creating housing for people across the income spectrum, with particular attention to moderating the spatial mismatch between housing and jobs for poor people and people of color.
- Support economic-development and job-creation policies in rural areas that enable these communities to retain their rural character.

> **Create and implement an urban revitalization and reinvestment policy for cities outside the Boston core.**

Massachusetts has not had a targeted urban policy since the 1970s. With their walkable scale and historic fabric, our state's cities should be premier locations for smart growth development and redevelopment, but many continue to suffer disinvestment and decline.

- Recapitalize the brownfields fund and revise brownfields programs to enhance redevelopment by both nonprofit and for-profit entities.
- Give funding priority for infrastructure upgrades and rehabilitation to urban areas throughout the state.
- Assist cities in developing business-recruitment programs with pre-permitted economic development sites.
- Provide incentives for intermunicipal cooperation groups to include cities and their surrounding suburban towns.
- Provide technical assistance to enhance local capacity.