

THE EVOLUTION OF SMART GROWTH

The new mantra of land-use planning.

By Howard N. Ellman

In land-use planning, as in other fields that respond to developing trends, yesterday's truth becomes tomorrow's heresy. Housing and development trends often exemplify that truth.

Congress enacted the first housing bill in the late 1940s declaring as its goal, provision of a "decent home in a suitable living environment" for every American family. The then-current aspiration translated that concept into single-family residences each on its own quarter-acre lot. That type of development inevitably consumed acres of open land, pushing housing farther away from places of employment, creating long commutes in single-occupant automobiles, as well as other trends that we now condemn as "sprawl."

In addition to this, suburban growth had the effect of "hollowing out" the central cities from which the occupants of the new suburbia migrated, leaving a necklace of poverty, crime and decay around urban centers. Worse in some places than in others, the deleterious nature of the trend became painfully apparent in the urban riots of the 1960s. Those who initially attributed that phenomenon to reaction against the Vietnam War did not discern the wider cause or properly identify the nature and grievances of those actually rioting.

It is not the place of this article to recite that history in detail but only as a preface to where we are today: at a recognition that a vibrant, healthful and environmentally sound urban society requires development of mass transit, with the transit hubs strategically located with reference to urban jobs—connecting those jobs to residential concentrations. Achieving that goal should ultimately reduce traffic congestion, reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and contribute to commercial vitality by creating centers of activity in urban areas in existing city centers or within the near periphery.

The Transit Center in San Francisco is such a development. It represents the centerpiece of an urban plan that contemplates a concentration of high-rise office and other development adjacent to the Center and in the immediate vicinity. The plan includes

residential development as well, designed to capitalize on the synergy of mixed-uses, with the residential component creating activity that extends well beyond business hours, thus avoiding the sense that urban centers become deserted wastelands when commuters go home.

The Transit Center is currently under construction and designed to serve local, regional and statewide transportation facilities, including high-speed rail. The plan contemplates that the Center, located two blocks south of the traditional Downtown core, will be flanked by the tallest buildings in the city, specifically the Transit Tower, which was identified in the plan as the

"crown" of the San Francisco skyline. Barring unforeseen events, the plan seems destined to achieve its goals, given the vitality that already exists in the area. The Convention Center, the Giants' ball park, robust housing development and the synergy that the San Francisco economy derives from the bio-tech and high-tech enterprises have all settled in the Mission Bay development just a few blocks south.

It may well be that San Francisco provides uniquely fertile ground for such a smart growth example. In today's development and urban climate, however, it is an example that could very well exemplify tomorrow's truth, as well as today's.

I submit that its evolution is worth watching and may prove to be the bellwether for the best of future urban planning. Smart growth, indeed.



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