

**EVALUTING THE SMART GROWTH OPTION:
Negatives vs. Benefits - and the probability of their realization**

An Allied member statement by Joe Rution, July 2008

Let's look at the build-out "Smart Growth" option, that proposes dense new in-city developments, and development of new public transit.

Its downside: it impacts our cityscape and will add population. The improved transit options entailed also even have some downside, because public transit infrastructure is not entirely benign as far as tangential, annoying impacts.

Many might say they are willing to pay that price, *if* the Plan can deliver its promises: workforce availability, fewer commuters, traffic snarls, "greener" behavior, open space protection, and affordable housing options.

Bug in the Ointment: Ability to Deliver

But here is where the *real* question lurks: **CAN THE PLAN SUFFICIENTLY DELIVER ON ITS PROMISES OF FUTURE BENEFITS?** The approach is only "sustainable" if it can deliver on its promises. What are the chances it can deliver enough results to make it worthwhile?

On close examination, the building option doesn't come close to passing the test. Its benefits are far too unlikely and insubstantial. (We hope to get the opportunity during this process to show you why there are better options – with no real downsides – that can come as close to accomplishing the same goals.)

EVALUATING THE PROMISES OF THE "SMART GROWTH" OPTION

Can the new workforce housing promised in the option achieve its desired results?

First, a little on predicting the adequacy of proposed measures: the law of "Tipping Points".

Tipping Points: How much is needed to have an effect?

The main threat to the possibility of realizing on these promises is simply the question of *adequacy*: whether the option will provide enough housing, obtained by the right occupants, to make even a dent in the targeted problems.

The answer depends on "tipping points", a concept from epidemiology that social and political scientists now know applies to their efforts. In short, it says that measures intended to effect desired results do not always produce results on a proportionate, input-output linear basis. *Appreciable results only show after a certain critical level of effort*

is made. Whether a policy or effort amounts to simply a token, producing insignificant results that don't justify the cost of the effort, or is one that produces a real perceptible effect, depends upon its reaching this "tipping point".

Will we approach a tipping point?

Let's cut to the chase. Given our attitudes toward growth and cityscape, and the limitations of our physical resources, there is no way we are going to build enough of the prescribed new housing to even have any perceptible effect on these problems, much less put an appreciable dent in them. Realistically, we can't hope to approach the "tipping point".

I would bet you this: any official who even proposes to build anything close to the necessary amount of housing – especially in dense, big buildings – would be run out of town.

EVALUATING THE INDIVIDUAL "PROMISES"

Lets more closely examine the specific promises of the Smart Growth/Housing option, and the chances of them being realized.

The essence of the option that calls for action in the form of more development seems to be this: That our core and escalating problems are rooted in high housing costs that drive our key people out of town. It proposes improving our public transit, and building new, dense in-city housing in proximity to this transit and to the center of jobs and commerce. This, it is promised, will bring existing commuters into town as residents and local workers. Being close to places where they work, shop and recreate, they will drive less, walk more, use the public transit, and thereby free up the highways - and lessen our carbon footprint. Their presence here will result in a more vibrant and culturally interesting city. We will once again have an ample core workforce right here in our midst, improving our labor situation. And since these people will now live in-city, there will be less pressure to build in our outlying open spaces.

Though we can't expect the advocates to produce absolute proof it will work, the option sounds plausible and attractive. What are the probabilities of success? Let's evaluate each of its promises.

1) "Open Space protection"

We can easily dispense with the notion that building more units in town will somehow lessen development pressure on the outlying open spaces. While this "smart growth" tenet may be plausible in most places that have *finite* development demands – it may play in Peoria - our "attractiveness quotient" assures that there will be *infinite* development pressure on those open spaces, no matter how much we build in town.

2) Workforce availability

The “smart growth” Option for building dense new housing in-town promises to replenish our reservoir of workforce personnel, and lessen the number of commuters who create traffic snarls at rush hour.

Remember the law of “tipping points”.

We have never tried to quantify the scope of the workforce shortage problem – to try to get a measure of how much housing would be needed to dent it - but we know it is formidable. How many units would we have to build before we were able to perceive any across-the-board results? Can we ever – given the traditional community consensus on growth and constrictions of our limited resources – expect to build enough to reach that tipping point?

Given the enormity of the perceived problem, can anyone guess how much housing we would we have to build before reaching that point? ... before we begin to recognize a perceptible – if not substantial – dose of real benefit?

Don’t forget, most of the housing to be built under this Option will be privately developed and sold at market-rate - units over which we have no control as to who inhabits them. Some may be local workers, but we can’t be sure about how many. The assertion that the market-rate units can be made “affordable by design” to local workers ignores the economics of “desirable” places. A review of prices of modest condo units in other popular “smart growth” communities bears this out. (Check out Seaside, FL for example, a “flagship” Smart Growth design. If tiny units bring what they do there, imagine the price tag in Santa Barbara.)

Try to picture yourself as a local employer, feeling the pinch of the labor pool shortage, wondering if and when you’ll experience any relief as a result of this new housing. How much would have to be built before it begins to make it perceptively easier to hire and retain: cops, firefighters, schoolteachers, emergency personnel, nurses, government workers, clerks, secretaries, auto technicians, computer technicians, retail managers? Insurance agents, graphics designers, dental technicians, young professionals? How many others am I leaving out? How many units are we envisioning before we get anything more than a relative handful of individual success stories?

Again, I contend, any official who proposes to build that much would be run out of town.

3) Fewer Commuters & Traffic Relief, etc.

Use your instinct and imagination. How many units do you think we might have to build before we create a dent in the amount of traffic & air pollution created by our estimated 20,000 +/- daily commuters?

How many before there is a substantially higher chance that our kids will be able to find a unit they can afford here? *Really* try to imagine, and picture that amount being built here.

4) “Green” lifestyle modification

Suppose we could inspire “European” urban consciousness on the part of the new residents, and pry them away from car dependence to some degree (I leave it to your intuitive judgment as to whether that is possible). Given the amount of housing that might conceivably be built, is it reasonable to expect that degree of behavior modification to have any really perceptible effect - even if, by some miracle, 100% of the new residents were “with the program”? And remember, there is no guarantee that each unit will go to an “ideal target candidate” - who will work and shop in the area, be inclined to walking and taking public transit.

This is a “seat of the pants” urban planning assumption; no solid examples exist of similar approaches elsewhere *that yield these desired results*.

5) What about Cultural Enhancement?

One of the “Smart Growth” tenets is that increased densities of population downtown will pollinate cultural and social vitality. The paradoxical twist, however, is that Santa Barbara already has an abundance of all that, without the density. One might ask: being already the beneficiaries of such a fortuitous blessing, why would we invite more density?

Reminder: The “Efficiency” quotient of the Option

And lest we forget: the whole effort is based upon a model – “Smart Growth” or New Urbanism” - that comes with no proven track record assuring that it will work. What will be the “efficiency quotient” of the small percentage of price-controlled units that do get built? What about the far more numerous unrestricted units? If we don’t control their occupancy, will they be inhabited – continually - by the “target” workers, instead of, say, retirees, vacation homebuyers, out of towners seeking a Santa Barbara pied-à-terre? Who says?

The smart growth model is a hopeful and seductively attractive one, that might be effective in some cities - but still a heck of a gamble on which to pin the future development policy in a unique place like Santa Barbara.

The odds of it working? It would seem to require a “perfect storm” of unlikely, fortuitous circumstances.

What if it doesn't work?

For the “Smart Growth” housing plan to work, it needs more than just more housing. The units actually have to be occupied by the “target” players: folks who will be local workers, who otherwise would be commuters, and who are amenable to public transit, walking, and a local focus.

What if they aren't – or enough of them aren't? Remember, we don't control the occupancy of most the units. If there aren't enough such people, we will only have increased the population – spinning off the need for *even more* workforce (thus exacerbating the problem) – and more drivers clogging the local roads.

We will have altered a cityscape that most people deem close to ideal, just the way it is. We will have added population that further frustrates a top priority - of remaining a small, intimate, low-density community. And we would have placed on the tracks a locomotive - in the form of “new paradigm” high-density development policy – that will be hard to de-rail once it gets up its head of steam (that being the nature of development policy decisions).

Isn't at least a little more housing better than nothing?

If we *aren't* capable of building the necessary amount, wouldn't the “token” effort still be worth its cost?

That, of course, depends on the *costs* of that token amount. Keep in mind what those costs are: the most significant is an irreversible transformation of a cityscape most people deem just fine as it is, and an increment of growth in a city cherished for its “small town ambience” and intimacy. The effort might make us feel better for having done something - and yield a number of warm and fuzzy anecdotal success stories - but if it isn't undertaken in a scale necessary to yield meaningfully appreciable results, is it worth those costs?