

To: Douglas Foy, Leader of the Office for Commonwealth Development
Fr: Amy Gee
Date: March 3, 2009
RE: Smart Growth in MA

MEMORANDUM

Congratulations for being the newly appointed leader of the Office for Commonwealth Development. Your leadership is necessary to encourage “smart growth” that would “steer development toward city and town centers and to preserve open space” in Massachusetts (Scott 2005). The following discusses major issues regarding sprawling in the state and provides my recommendations in response to existing flaws in the state’s zoning policy, particularly Chapter 40A and 40B, the lack of central government authority on community development, and the lack of supportive infrastructures to encourage smart growth in Massachusetts.

Issues of Existing Zoning Policy: Chapter 40A and 40B

Massachusetts’s existing zoning policy, particularly Chapter 40A and 40B, contributes significantly to the state’s sprawling issue. Chapter 40A allows land owners to bypass local control for property development and Chapter 40B allows developers to override local zoning laws as long as they provide a specific number of affordable housings to low income families as part of their development. These two chapters give land owners and developers the right to build anything they want with little or no influence from the public and the local government. Such policies overly favor one party, resulting in actions that are not necessary based on the interest of the community, which further contribute to the issues on hand (Theodoulou & Kofinis 2004).

Recommendations: Zoning policy revision is necessary to ensure community involvement in reviewing and approving special development projects. Public interest must be protected in order to encourage smart growth that can benefit the local community (Bozeman 2007). A comprehensive environmental assessment should be done for each project that outlines the impact of such development, followed by town hall meetings that allow the public to voice their opinions. Development should be granted only if there is a balance between supportive public voices and possible environmental impacts on the local community.

Lack of Central Government Authority on Local Development

Another issue that contributes to development sprawling is that there is no regional planning authority, or central government influence, on local community development. Cities of Massachusetts are known for their individual identities and do not communicate with their neighbors regarding specific development projects, even if such development is located near the border of multiple towns, which could result in traffic congestion or other undesirable impact for their neighbors. There is no central authority or top-down

governing protocol which is necessary to oversee development that could have an impact on various subdivisions (Orfield 2002). The lack of a central planning authority results in inappropriate space planning near community borders which further contributes to the sprawling issue.

Recommendations: Your office can create a network of alliance among state and local government to oversee development that impacts the regional level (Goldsmith& Eggers 2004). The network should include officials from various levels of government across different cities and towns. A special taskforce can be formed per specific planning project, and members can be drawn from the network to review and approve such development. This will ensure a central planning authority with fair perspective from different levels and locations to contribute to the analysis and approval of development projects that have a regional impact.

Lack of Supportive Infrastructures to Encourage Smart Growth

A third major issue of sprawling is a lack of supportive infrastructures that could otherwise encourage smart growth in Massachusetts (Likosky 2006). For example, developers may be building a large retail center connecting to existing roadways or transits, but such transportation remedy was not originally built to handle the amount of new traffic the development would create. In addition, developers may be building new residential complexes near existing commercial or industrial locations where there are no schools or community centers to support the families that are to reside in the new complexes.

Recommendations: A public-private partnership should be formed between local planning authorities and developers to assess and provide the environmental and infrastructural needs of a possible development. If a certain project is deemed appropriate, the planning authorities must ensure government actions are taken to provide the necessary infrastructures. The government must partner with the developers to ensure all anticipated needs of a project are being met by having ongoing communications and meetings at all planning stages. A public-private partnership allows resolutions to an issue that would otherwise be impossible to accomplish by one side only (Brooks, Liebman & Schelling 1984).

Sprawling creates a loss of open space and causes traffic congestion, and other urban development issues in the state of Massachusetts. Please consider my recommendations to revise the zoning policy, create a network of alliance among the government, and partner with the developers to improve infrastructure access. I hope your leadership can steer Massachusetts away from sprawling development.

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