

Dysfunctional Development

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Smart growth--which seeks to curb sprawl, preserve rural areas, shorten commutes and revitalize older cities and suburbs--is in trouble.

Predictably, pro-development forces are battling growth restrictions in outlying areas. But the smart-growth strategy also is under attack on a second front: Communities in Washington and the inner suburbs are fighting "infill" development as a threat to the livability and soul of their neighborhoods.

A good example is the massive Patent and Trade Office complex, which the federal government wants to build near the King Street Metro in Alexandria. The project would bring thousands of workers and cars and a large above-ground parking garage to an area already overburdened with traffic. Neighbors complain that the complex is out of sync with the scale and needs of their community.

True, the Alexandria location is consistent with smart growth and means shorter commutes for government workers. But a solution to sprawl that aggravates inside-the-Beltway congestion is not viable.

A development planned for Arlington's Clarendon community serves as a much better example of smart growth. The multi-use project that includes homes, shops and restaurants will be built on a former Sears auto center site that has been unused since 1993. Clarendon is embracing this project, although last year it mobilized to reject a proposed Home Depot store at the same site.

What made the difference?

According to residents, the new developers came with an exciting concept and showed flexibility in response to their concerns. The stakeholder process included numerous meetings of developers, community members, local officials and county planners.

The resulting plan includes many of the residents' requests, such as a commons that includes a "tot lot," a fountain and a band shell. The project also will feature a one-acre park with gardens and trees with town houses designed to match the area's bungalows. The developer also agreed to reserve funding to address possible traffic problems. Residents now believe that the new multi-use center will increase their property values.

The lessons are obvious: As growth continues, we won't be able to afford the political, economic and environmental costs of dysfunctional development. Smart growth that is really smart must include the right of citizens to shape their own communities.

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