

Helping Massachusetts Grow Smart

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Kristina Egan, Director, Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance

Good morning.

How many of you walked to school when you were kids?

And, how many of you have children or grandchildren who now walk to school?

In most audiences, almost all the hands go up for the first question and only a sprinkling rise for the second question. To put some hard data to it, the highest level of traffic during the weekday is at school bell times – when school begins and ends – because most parents drive their children to and from school. Once you add in all the other driving a typical suburban mother does, she will spend 17 full days a year behind the wheel. This is more time than the average mother spends dressing, bathing and feeding her child.

I recently became a suburban mother, so I care about this kind of drain on a family. But, I originally got into the work I do because I like clean air, clean water and clean land. (Some might call me a ‘radical environmentalist’!) I don’t just like these things because they are intrinsically good, but because they support life, and in particular human life. Fans of the renown naturalist, Aldo Leopold, might recognize this thought from the Sand County Almanac: “land yields a cultural harvest.” We are inextricably linked to the natural environment. So, what happens if the land is no longer healthy? What culture is “harvested”, and what impact will there be on human life?

A few years back, Business Week defined the cultural harvest in the US thus: “We’re the quirky civilization that rides elevators to the second floor and buys electronic stairsteppers to condition our thighs. We drive to convenience stores and hurry back to our treadmills.”

You might identify more with this story:

A young couple wants to move back to the suburb of Boston where one of them grew up. The houses cost too much, so they look further a field. They drive until they qualify – as they say - and end up with a house in a new subdivision with a thirsty lawn and a roundtrip commute of 1.5 hours.

In Massachusetts, in fact, we are consuming land seven times faster than our population is growing. Most of the land is lost to residential development. To give you an idea of the scale, the average new home built between 128 and 495 is on a lot the size of a football field. Another way to think of it is we are losing two acres per hour, according to a study by Mass Audubon.

The prevailing pattern of development in our state is low density and haphazard construction of houses, office buildings, and stores. This sprawl has consequences that affect just about everyone in the state.

- For families, expensive housing and expensive commutes add up. Most American families spend over half their income on housing and transportation expenses. For lower-income families, the proportion can be much higher. Long commutes also mean less time at home, and less time engaged in the community.
- Sprawl also reinforces social dividers. Urban disinvestment and decline can be partially attributed to the public resources that have been diverted to serve suburban and exurban communities. Massive investments have been recently made in transportation infrastructure, but communities of color and low-income residents often have poorer access to services, education and jobs. For example, a short transit trip from Roxbury to downtown Boston can take up to one hour – the same time it takes a commuter to travel from the outer suburbs. By 1990, nearly 80 percent of impoverished school-aged children lived in older cities and towns. Most of our inner cities have high concentrations of people of color, and we continue to be one of the most segregated states in the nation.
- In addition to the loss of natural areas which harms and fragments wildlife habitat, sprawl increases air pollution from traffic, increases water pollution both from lawn care products needed for big lots and from run-off from traffic, and can impact water quantity, due to large lawns and also from the amount of impervious surface.

On the Cape, the problems over the past two decades have been particularly acute. The homes on the Cape – many of which have become second homes – are expensive, despite the rapid rate of home-building. Traffic was bad when I used to come down here as a little girl. But, now it's worse. And, the Cape's water quality and quantity is in danger from all of the development. Maybe some of you have seen nearby woodlands disappear or coastal heathlands destroyed.

It may seem obvious that development is the culprit, and therefore conclude that development must be stopped. I'd like to offer another way to think about the issue. When properly directed, development is not the problem, it is the solution.

Growth is coming whether we want it or not, so let's think together about what we want to build where. In fact, good development can help us better offer equal opportunity to get a good education, a good job, or a good home. We need to build the best cities and suburbs we can. We need to build what needs to be built and save what needs to be saved.

This is what's called smart growth. Smart growth is well-planned development that protects open space and farmland, revitalizes communities, keeps housing affordable and provides more transportation choices. In other words, we need to be strategic about where we develop as about where we preserve.

A quick way of gauging whether development is smart growth development is to ask whether homes, shops, jobs, schools, churches, and parks are located close enough together that our kids can ride their bikes wherever they need to go, without asking us for a ride every ten minutes.

The type of development I'm suggesting is actually a pattern of development that is traditional in New England. Think of downtown Chatham.

However, we face challenges to growing smarter in MA. In most places, building a downtown like Chatham is illegal under local zoning laws.

- We are experts in Massachusetts on how to be a NIMBY – Not in my backyard. Perhaps it is a natural, human reaction to fear change, especially when the change would be in your neighborhood and you fear a large apartment building out of scale and out of character with surrounding homes. But, the collective impact of so much NIMBY is less housing for those who need it most. 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.

- We also have a long tradition in New England of loving “home rule.” 351 different cities and towns make land-use decisions. We pride ourselves on keeping control local, but again, the collective impact is an irrational pattern of land use across the state. We need to cope with regional issues. We have watersheds. Commute sheds. Job markets and housing markets. Air basins. And transportation networks. None of these environmental, economic development or traffic issues respect town boundaries. We need more of a bird’s eye perspective to collectively solve the problems we face. Ultimately, we need to figure out how to balance local empowerment with regional and state coordination so that the Commonwealth as a whole benefits.
- Lastly, I’ll mention the challenge that I primarily work on, which is the inconsistent and contradictory state policies that result in sprawl. Decades of public investment in highways, subsidies for developing farm land, and misguided housing policy drive our scattered development and emergence of so many “Anywhere, USA” strips and subdivisions. If we can change state level policy, we pull on a level that can have a ripple effect over all our landscapes and cityscapes. We have made some progress at the state level, with programs that and a farmland preservation program. But, we have miles to go, and we at the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance could use every bit of help you might be able to offer.

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: funds to clean-up contaminated abandoned factories to make room for new jobs and homes, tax credits to

encourage the rehabilitation of historic buildings, farm preservation and natural area protection programs. So, we've got the basics down, and we are now seeing some other trends which will reinforce smart development and smart conservation:

- Government needs to save money, and it's a lot cheaper to provide roads, sewer, schools and emergency services if development is compact.
- Consumer preferences seem to be changing, or at least the market is now responding to these changes. More and more young professionals want to live in culturally diverse and rich places, like cities and village centers. And, with the graying of the population, elders want to retain their independence when they need to give up their cars. A denser, walkable neighborhood better fits this need, and we are now seeing many empty nesters moving into cities.
- And, gas prices are increasing.

I'd venture that everyone here wants to make sure that Boston doesn't end up like Phoenix. So, to wrap up, I'd like to suggest a few things that you can do:

- Get to know your town planner and find out what developments are planned for your community. Then, help shape those proposals through the public process, and give housing developments a fair shake. A good regional resource is the Association to Preserve Cape Cod.
- Contribute to buying some of the precious habitat left on the Cape. Contact the Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts and make a donation.
- Keep your eye on Beacon Hill. The Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, who I work for, just won two big victories – brownfields and permitting – and we needed people from all over the state to weigh in with their state Representatives and Senators. Next year, we're focusing on supporting public transit, zoning reform, raising investment in affordable housing and land protection. Passing around a sign-up sheet.

If you care about global climate change. If you care about a more just society that can offer better educational and economic opportunities. Or, if you care about keeping the precious field or forest nearby. Or all of the above. Then, smart growth is part of the solution.

I'd like to close with this:

“When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests his beauty on the water, and the green heron feeds.
I come into the peace of the wild things who do not tax their lives with the forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

I might add a small post script to this lovely poem by Wendell Berry: “After you’re done resting, go call your Senator!”