

Leading Smart Growth
Draft for circulation and comment
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Many people at many levels have their hands on data and decisions that can contribute to smart growth: □Governors. □Transportation planners. □Non-profit leaders. □Builders. □Researchers. □School superintendents. □Mayors. □Zoning officials. □Poets. □City administrators. □Developers. □People doing estate planning. □Dairy farmers deciding where to fence their cows. □Movie makers. □Extension agents. □Architects. □Many, many others.

As I work with leaders in the smart growth movement, I offer them readings and other resources, unpacking a tool kit intended to make leadership of smart growth more effective, more satisfying, more creative and to encourage those wrestling with these issues to "keep on keeping on." □Of the work of repairing the world, the Talmud says, roughly: "You are not obligated to complete the task; neither are you permitted to abandon it."

And the principles of smart growth define the task which we are "not permitted to abandon":

- Mix land uses.
- Take advantage of compact building design.
- Create housing opportunities and choices.
- Create walkable communities.
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
- Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities.
- Provide a variety of transportation choices.
- Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost-effective.
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

But the tools I offer require some explanation. □□□Taken from the great books, poetry, videos, and contemporary research, they are far from doctrinaire. Among them are letters of Thomas Jefferson, views of our role on earth from *The Bible*, contemporary leadership research from Harvard and MIT, readings from classical Chinese literature, teaching tales from Native American tradition, mental and physical exercises and experiments from the Center for Creative Leadership, a video of the first Three Tenors concert, the PBS movie *Divided Highways* and the story of the conflict between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. □Along with numerous other exercises and frameworks, these resources serve to explore shifts in our thinking and increase our understanding of why real leaders who have made an impact on this field have been able to do so. □Everything in the "tool kit" can serve to increase our own capacities to provide sustained leadership in the

challenging arena of smart growth—whatever our leadership role in that work, be it exalted or modest, formal or informal.

The purpose of this essay is to provide a written logic that links these readings and resources and to provide some explanation of why I think they are critical to the leadership of smart growth. □□What follows, here, is a "weaving together" that I usually do in person. □But I have committed it to the written page, so that it can go with you in your work. □Missing, perhaps is the laughter and good spirits, the wondering out-loud among us, that is part of our usual conversation. □□Still a written record, a map of the territory of these resources is a good thing. □To begin our journey, here is our first road sign, one of ten that I am in the process of developing.

1) We are working together to create a roughly right train of thought over a very long time about how we want to develop—as communities, as states, as a nation, even globally.

Therefore, with a personal sense of urgency, we must take a very long and patient view of our work. □

It is helpful to remember that there have been many ideas that have shaped, and will shape the notions that we associate with Smart Growth. □For instance Thomas Jefferson, in one of his letters, made an impassioned case for the United States remaining an agricultural power, noting that the soul of the country was reflected in its agricultural heritage. □Yet he returned to the question a decade later and wrote a second letter noting that without a manufacturing base, the country could not survive as a major power. □His debate within himself is one that continues today. □

In a sense, the roots of our contemporary smart growth dialogue (and disagreements) find their source in traditions and conversations that go back thousands of years. □For example, a close reading of Genesis in *The Bible* uncovers two very different and opposing views of our role on earth. □One exhorts us to multiply and have dominion over all the earth. □The other places us as stewards of a garden. □□The teaching tale, *Who Speaks for Wolf*, from a Native American tradition thousands of years old, reminds us that when we are thinking about how we wish to live, it is wise to consider the costs of leaving out even one stakeholder who may have critical information. □□The contemporary work on managing change of John Kotter, at Harvard, reminds us of the importance of "early wins" and a "guiding coalition" in our efforts at change. □And Ron Heifetz at the Kennedy School reminds us that we are on the territory of "leadership without easy answers". □

Not only are there many ideas from many eras and many traditions that are part of the dialogue on leadership of smart growth, there have been many leaders whose hands have helped guide us and have shaped the movement—leaders at all levels and of many different political persuasions. In Maryland, where I live, the effort to save the Chesapeake Bay began decades ago, many governors ago, and continues today. In Michigan, where I grew up, the need for economic development in the rural areas, attention to the role of the Native American nations, the revitalization of Detroit, all have been central concerns over a very long time, with governors from both sides of the aisle providing leadership. These long-term efforts at sustainable development, wiser land use, and smart growth, by necessity must be tackled by leaders at all levels of public service, of a variety of political persuasions, and decade after decade.

Even when you or I, because of a particular dimension of this work to which we are particularly committed, may feel we are losing ground, yet the train of thought moves forward bit by bit: This year an emphasis on preservation of farmland, another year an emphasis on reclaiming vacant land within the cities. With a long view, and a broader perspective, we can see how those who move us forward on these issues may approach them in quite different ways, coming from all walks of life, and serving in many different roles.

It's important to realize, however, that those who lead, and the citizenry they serve, carry a jumble of notions from the past of what the problems are and what the solutions are. An example of that jumble is evident in the argument between those who see wilderness as inviolate, and those who see it as a resource, detailed in the video *The Wilderness Idea*, which traces the relationship of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, the first director of the US Forest Service. Our contemporary conflicts over the role of wilderness are rooted in, and reflected in, that history.

And our quandary over transportation options is similarly rooted in a history now many years distant. The PBS movie *Divided Highways* reminds us that Dwight David Eisenhower, who signed legislation for the interstate highway system, carried in his head notions shaped during a miserable early experience in a military caravan crossing the US troops on poor American roads after the First World War. Eisenhower was further influenced by seeing the Germans moving military equipment on the Autobon in the years of WWII. It is startling to realize that the soaring overpasses and clover-leaves we drive on, these marvels of engineering, were shaped by emotionally powerful experiences and events so long in the past. Now we look at the problems we face in the wake of that unfolding, and wonder why we didn't foresee them.

What we might learn is not that roads are the problem but our thinking is. Rather than blame, we might turn to learning—beginning much earlier, with good research, to notice the impacts of our policies, and learn from those impacts in order to make adjustments. Here a poem may guide us. "One source of bad ideas" by Minnesotan Robert Bly, reminds us that,

There's a boy in you about three
 Years old who hasn't learned a thing for thirty
 Thousand years. □ Sometimes it's a girl.

This child had to make up its mind
 How to save you from death. □ He said things like:
 "Stay home. □ Avoid elevators. □ Eat only elk."

You live with this child, but you don't know it.
 You're in the office, yes, but live with this boy
 At night. □ He's uninformed, but he does want

To save your life. □ And he has. □ Because of this boy
 You survived a lot. □ He's got six big ideas.
 Five don't work. □ Right now he's repeating them to
 □□ you.

The question Bly poses to each of us, is this: What once-useful idea, what strategy that once saved our lives, is now dangerously limiting our possibilities? □ Many past public policies, at all levels, may fall into that category. □ And our challenge is to be as thoughtful as we can be now so that our current strategies don't create the negative unintended consequences that we are facing from past policies. Yet knowing that we are facing many ambiguities, we still need to act and we do so realizing that we need to learn from the impacts of our policies as those impacts unfold. □

Yet not all efforts, nor all changes, are so grand an example of public policy as is the interstate system. □ On a corner of the University of Maryland campus, we can see how one small traffic circle transforms the safety and aesthetics of a small patch of a community. □ The circle was installed within the last year, first on a make-shift basis, and then designed as a permanent feature. □□ I'm particularly appreciative of its beauty and safety because it replaces an intersection where a student, dazed by exams, slammed into my brand new car a few years back. So I'm delighted that our research on the safety value of traffic circles (here I would cite the work of Reid Ewing, with the National Center for Smart Growth), and our efforts at aesthetically appealing design (here I would thank Ralph Bennett and his colleagues in the field of architecture and design) can operate together at a local scale, and make a significant difference. □□ So we have at least one small place where science and human values together move us in the direction of improving our lives.

And some efforts, some changes, are even at a smaller scale than that one traffic circle. □ They are quietly personal: my step-son moves to Capitol Hill and walks to work. □ An artist makes the decision to move into the Mt. Rainier arts district. □□ I put an easement on eight acres of private property in Michigan hoping that at

some point a trail across it might link with a conservancy preserve behind me. □
 Not all the actions are collective or public. □ Some are personal, and they too shape our future.

And all these efforts—grand public policy, small design changes, personal decisions—are part of the tapestry of smart growth. □ Whether the language we speak is that of economic development or conservation, opportunity or aesthetics, safety or quality of life, research or practice, forceful strong leadership or full inclusion, water quality or jobs, it will take all of us over a very long time, through many changes in many administrations at all levels, through changes anticipated and unanticipated in demographics, through necessary and surprising changes in thinking, to move us, in some kind of zig-zag fashion, in a roughly right direction, closer to a "still-being-defined" destination. □

Ron Heifetz at Harvard calls this "leadership without easy answers" meaning that the problem is ill defined, and that the solution will have to be arrived at through a process of learning, rethinking, forming new understandings, and creating something that doesn't yet exist. □ Together. □

Yet this is a train of thought built of ideas shaped and reshaped over time. □ And ideas are expressed (mostly) in words. So leadership of smart growth requires careful attention to language—choosing words that are evocative, precise, honest, direct, engaging. □ John Frece, who serves as Communications Director of the National Center for Smart Growth, is a master of that kind of language and speaks forcefully of its importance. □ And as a poet, I live with the knowledge that words are about communicating a truth so powerful that it grabs a hold of us and won't let go. □ Even those of us who are a little jaded and may think words are all about "spin", can recall in our own lives how powerful, for good or for ill, some words can be. □

We may be tempted on a given day, to assume the battle, or the war over "how we grow from here", has been won, or lost. □ John Gardner's advice (in his last book, *Living, Leading and the American Dream*) is that anything worth fighting for is a battle fought and re-fought. □ Often by the next generation. □ Gardner, one of the great leadership practitioners and theorists of our time (the architect of much of the civil rights legislation, secretary of HEW, founder of Common Cause, head of the Carnegie Institute, professor at Stanford) believed that each generation would find new challenges in the consequences of the solutions created by the generation before. □

So John Gardner would remind us that it is our turn to have our hand on this one. □ Others will follow us. □

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