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Maryland's Second Generation of Smart Growth

Would have, could have, should have: What happened to this bright idea.

By Sandra Olivetti Martin

Smart growth was one of those brilliant ideas of the 1990s — a decade of unbounded optimism and big spending. Maryland was held up as a state model for the 21st century because it embraced planned sustainability.

According to proponents, old cities like Baltimore, Cumberland, and Frederick would regain their luster thanks to wise development guided by state planners. The rolling hills of the north, the flat farmlands of the Eastern Shore between the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay, the hundreds of thousands of critical acres buffering the Chesapeake and its branching tributaries — all would be rescued from the sprawl and gridlock that had afflicted the populous Baltimore-Washington-Annapolis triangle. To the east, the iconic Chesapeake would be saved from the red tide of degradation.

In short order, Marylanders would be breathing better air and walking to work in reintegrated communities of homes and businesses.

To make this grand vision of smart growth come true, the state planned to refuse investment in the infrastructure and public facilities of unwise growth. That money would instead nurture locally defined priority funding areas, all the while protecting rural heritage lands.

Now, a decade later, smart growth in Maryland has been declared imperfect, indicted by the University of Maryland's National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education.

"Managing Growth With Priority Funding Areas: A Good Idea Whose Time Has Yet to Come" — published in the Autumn 2009 issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association* — detailed in 23 pages how arrows in smart growth's original quiver missed their targets. "PFAs are not well integrated in land use decision making processes in many local jurisdictions," the researchers concluded. "State agencies have not altered budgetary systems to monitor and guide the spatial allocation of funds and there is little evidence that after 10 years they [PFAs] have had any effect on development patterns."

Little evidence was precisely what the figures showed. Land developed for single-family housing jumped from 16,945 acres statewide annually before 1998 to 18,108 thereafter, for a pre-post ratio of 1.07. The ratio inside PFAs was 0.96 and outside PFAs 1.11.

Thus, the researchers concluded, "it is clear that PFAs have not produced the intended effects."

The past is prologue



"Study calls Maryland smart growth a flop." That's how the Washington Post headlined its report on the growth center analysis. But workers in the smart growth vineyards are more inclined to say simply that the reality is somewhat different two administrations after former Gov. Parris Glendening signed the Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Act into law in 1997. Glendening — who claimed smart growth as the signature achievement of his two-term

administration — gave it a cabinet-level office of its own.

John Frece, who now directs the federal Office of Smart Growth at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, headed the Maryland office. Between those two jobs, he led the University of Maryland's Center for Smart Growth Research and Education. So he's looked at the issue from three perspectives: state, academic, and federal. "Maryland smart growth has many accomplishments it can claim and continues to have many," Frece tells Planning. "But I would also say it is not everything all of us who worked on it hoped it would be, and there are reasons for that."

To Glendening's successor, one-term Gov. Robert Ehrlich, smart growth was a stepchild. Ehrlich closed the smart growth office, fired its staff, and renamed what was left "priority places." In that incarnation, money appropriated by the state general assembly rewarded businesses that voluntarily redeveloped abandoned and neglected areas. Smart growth was hardly a priority during Ehrlich's term, which lasted from 2003 to 2007.

Smart growth returned to political fashion when Martin O'Malley, then mayor of Baltimore, defeated Ehrlich when he ran for reelection.

On a brisk day last spring, O'Malley stood alongside the white-capped waters of Chesapeake Bay to christen smart growth with its third name within a decade: Smart, Green, and Growing. The setting was picture-perfect: protected native grasses attesting to the health of the marsh that buffers a beach pounded by the waves of America's largest estuary. Besides beauty, there was political symbolism in that day's stagecraft.

The shoreline O'Malley chose belongs to the most prominent environmental action lobby in his electorate (and Virginia's as well), the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. In truth, however, the quarter-century campaign to restore the bay had been revealed as a costly failure. Smart growth, by some accounts, has been a toothless tiger. And those storybook waters that had served as a planning showcase for bringing back migratory striped bass are now known for their hypoxic dead-zones.

In the 2003 book that exploded a monumental failure, Howard Ernst — a political science professor at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis — laid the blame on spineless politicians, dithering scientists, and environmental advocacy organizations (including the Chesapeake Bay Foundation) unwilling to enter the political fray. The book, *Chesapeake Bay Blues: Science, Politics, and the Struggle to Save the Bay*, sounded a battle cry for activism, setting the stage for a retooled smart growth.

The program's new name, Smart, Green, and Growing, suggested a new vision, and the liberal, articulate O'Malley seemed to have put his political muscle behind making this new incarnation work.

This latest chapter in Maryland's smart growth saga is still being written. Recession, with its attendant deficits and diminished government services, complicates the story line. But the concept has infiltrated virtually every agency of Maryland government, where goals now extend beyond targeted development, rural preservation, and environmental sustainability.

With so many heads and hands at work — and smart growth line items part of budgets throughout state government — the results could multiply. Or so the reasoning goes.

Then to now

Smart growth's achievements in its first decade are short stories written in the blocks of Maryland's cities and towns.

Cumberland (pop. about 21,000), a western Maryland town in the rising Blue Ridge Mountains, had been abandoned by industry after industry. Today Cumberland's growing tourism economy capitalizes on its unique place in America's transportation history. The National Road, Western Maryland Railroad, and C&O Canal all come together there — as do two well-traveled cycling trails, the C&O Canal Towpath and the Great Allegheny Passage from Cumberland to Pittsburgh Trail. As one of Maryland's 16 designated Main Street towns — a facet of the smart growth program — Cumberland got state and local support to revitalize its Victorian downtown.

Smart growth policies are also visible in the preservation of open spaces and rural heritage. Maryland claims to have the greatest ratio of preserved farmland to total land mass of any state: nearly 535,000 acres protected under county and state preservation programs.

Such goals were at the center of the old smart growth's binocular vision. Cumberland was one of its priority funding areas, one of the developed towns, neighborhoods, heritage areas, enterprise zones, or brownfields where growth would be directed. The other half of the vision was rural legacy lands, the open spaces Smart Growth was created to protect.

The program's aspirations today are much grander, enabled by new laws, empowered by a plan, elevated to subcabinet status, and entwined with 15 state departments. According to Richard Hall, secretary of the Maryland Department of Planning, which houses the smart growth program, state residents are seeing "the most significant steps taken to achieve smart growth in Maryland in more than a decade."



The new vision

Here's what's new:

The Smart and Sustainable Growth Act of 2009, passed last year by the Maryland general assembly, aims to protect the principles of smart growth — and the investment that citizens make — by reaffirming that comprehensive local plans direct development. The new law defends smart growth not only against local challenges but also the state's high court, which ruled in 2008 in *David Trail v. Terrapin Run, LLC* that the plans were only advisory. To make sure local planning officials are on board the smart growth train, the new law requires local planning commissions and boards of appeal to complete an education course developed by the Maryland Department of Planning.

The law also establishes strict preservation goals and makes counties responsible for helping meet the targets. Maryland state planners trumpet the land-use provisions as unrivaled by any other state-level preservation efforts in the nation.

This year, at least a half-dozen pieces of new legislation have been filed under the heading of the Sustainable and Livable Communities Act of 2010 for the 90-day general assembly session that opened in January. Among the administration's proposals, the Governor's Smart Growth Subcabinet would include the secretary of nearly every state agency (even, for example, the Higher Education Commission and Department of General Services), all mandated to help make Maryland communities sustainable and livable.

One of the new laws would extend the historic tax credit from properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places to Main Streets and Maple Streets — the state's designation for targeted commercial and residential areas — and areas targeted for transportation-oriented development.

The newest Maryland effort is underpinned by 12 smart growth "visions," including the goals of ensuring environmental protection, economic growth, housing, and transportation options for citizens of all ages and incomes.

Beyond that, the state government has six livability principles for sustainable communities: "Provide more transportation choices. Develop safe, reliable, and economical transportation choices to decrease household transportation costs, reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil, improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and promote public health."

Each of the six is in turn subdivided into a set of methods. More transportation choices are to be achieved through a commuter tax credit, the transportation enhancement program, the community safety and enhancement program, and the climate change action plan.

Another even broader part of the vision is PlanMaryland, now being developed in meetings with environmental action groups and developers and, soon, citizens. From the meetings, state officials hope to gain "practical, action-oriented strategies to create vibrant, economically competitive communities."

PlanMaryland, its framers write, "will enable state, regional, and local governments to assume joint responsibility in achieving sustainability goals by coordinating formerly largely independent responsibilities [and forging] new partnerships between levels of government, focused on newly defined, shared goals that no single level of government can achieve, but for which all must share responsibility."

Joint responsibility means there are even more significant steps divided among state agencies. Among them is the Climate Change Commission action plan. In elevation, Maryland is a state of extremes: the Blue Ridge Mountains on the west and the islands and

coastlines of the east. Maryland is not only bordered by the Atlantic Ocean but also divided in two by the Chesapeake Bay, which in turn is fed by a network of rivers.

Government agencies are working to understand the threat of rising sea levels and forestall the damage. This effort is directed by three agencies — Planning, Environment, and Natural Resources — and includes a Climate Change Commission with 61 specific actions spelled out at www.mdclimatechange.us.

Gov. O'Malley is well known for his devotion to data. He brought with him from the Baltimore mayor's office the suffix "Stat" (expressed as CitiStat) and extended it throughout state government as StateStat. Included in StateStat is BayStat, AgPrint, GreenPrint, and GrowthPrint, the inventory of data describing benchmarks in progress toward a Maryland that is Smart, Green, and Growing. BayStat tracks progress in the state's new two-year plan to aid the bay by restoring natural filters. GreenPrint charts the state's annual purchases of environmentally sensitive land. AgPrint maps permanently preserved agricultural lands. GrowthPrint leads to the Maryland state data center.

Online, the Stats and Prints and all the multiple choices therein are accessible not only to planners but also to everyone who cares to look.

Another new law — the Smart Growth Goals, Measures, and Indicators and Implementation of Planning Visions — requires even more measurement. It also requires local planning commissions to submit annual reports to their municipal governments to specify smart growth measures and indicators.

"We're getting back to basics in language as well as planning," says Hall, the secretary of planning. "We've been trying to recognize what's in place, in state or local government policies and programs, and what's the best way forward with what already exists."

Will it work?

Will smart growth's second generation succeed better than its first? The answer has economic and political components.

Recession has hamstrung planning innovations everywhere and forced environmental activism into retreat, as the world saw in the shortcomings of the climate change conference in Copenhagen in December. Meanwhile, O'Malley and his Smart, Green, and Growing program stand for reelection in November. Should O'Malley lose, Maryland's smart growth programs no doubt would be forced into yet another iteration, perhaps even retirement.

As noted by John Frece, who has observed smart growth's halting progress from the beginning, things can change when planning and politics collide. "There's a difference between what you can ideally do from an academic perspective and what you can do

practically in a political world where you have to secure votes to support proposals that may be controversial," he says.

Three profiles

Several people figure prominently in Maryland's new smart growth program. One of them is Andrew Ratner, who recalls Gov. O'Malley's first words to him: "social media." "I looked at my boss, the secretary of the Maryland Department of Planning, and he looked at me," Ratner says, "and we both realized we had just gotten a dictum and we had better follow through." Thus Ratner's transition was complete.

Before Ratner left the Baltimore Sun in a newsroom purge in the spring of 2009, Facebook, Twitter, and blogging had become part of his job. That experience helped in his new job, as director of communications and education for the Maryland Department of Planning.

"The governor understood government had to work hard at communicating with people, and these new tools are effective ways," says Ratner, who is responsible for the social media component of Maryland's renewed smart growth program. He notes that President Obama has set an example of how powerful the new media can be, from reaching out to fundraising to redoing the White House website.

Ratner has created the blog Smart Growth Maryland (www.mdp.state.md.us/YourPart/blog.shtml), revamped the department website (www.mdp.state.md.us) to make it easier to navigate, and created pages on Twitter and Flickr. Facebook and YouTube are next.

"Social networking is a very different model, very much about sharing," Ratner says. "Part of the issue with smart growth, which is abstract, is to do it in ways that will strike home and show how it connects to daily lives."

That was his goal in creating the online survey "What Does Smart Growth Mean to You?" He posted it, went out to lunch, and returned to 40 replies. Altogether, about 100 replies were posted within two days.

Now Ratner is a convert. "Social media enable you to create a product, propel a cause, as I did in my former life," he says. "Sustainability and livability are important causes, and I'm happy to be part of the solution."

A better main street



Thirty-five-year-old Adam Ortiz notes that he has two full-time jobs, but only one pays him. His salary as deputy chief of staff for Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown supports his work as mayor of Edmonston (pop. 1,200), a working class town in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C.

His city is a success story for both Gov. O'Malley's smart growth program and the president's stimulus package. Edmonston's citizens benefit, too, because they are getting a new main street.



That street is Decatur Street, where \$3.1 million will be invested on two-thirds of a mile of rebuilding and streetscaping, partly to solve a flooding problem. "Ninety-seven percent of the problem," Ortiz says, came not from the nearby Anacostia River but from "stormwater from towns and cities around us."

An innovative engineering solution adopted from 300 B.C. — three bus-sized Archimedes screws that turn pumps — had stopped most of the flooding. But the city was also determined to go beyond an engineering solution to renew Decatur Street.

"We had learned firsthand about bad stormwater management," Ortiz explains. "We were also very concerned about our river and the Chesapeake Bay, so we've picked up ideas here and there from local advocates and water societies and research in Portland and Seattle. Then the town council took the ideas and ran with them."

Edmondston had designed its new street and was about to start work, so when federal stimulus money came along, the project was shovel-ready. More streets, starting with those intersecting Decatur, will be redesigned and landscaped. Some of the original Decatur Street money will also be invested in upgrading the green quotient of public buildings.

The new Decatur Street will be narrower — 24 feet wide instead of 30 — and it will meander more. It will be shaded by native hardwoods planted in sidewalk tree boxes that also serve as stormwater filters. Median plantings will absorb stormwater and increase habitat. Birds and bats are especially welcome, Ortiz says, because his town has more than its share of mosquitoes.

The lesson for planners, Ortiz says, is making a project like this holistic. "It's not just about getting from Point A to Point B but about how we get there, how we connect the

community and interact with the natural environment. All these things and concepts we've tied into one project."

What smart growth means for him, Ortiz says, is that "we have to do everything we've done in a more sustainable way, and that includes how we manage our communities and live everyday."

The federal analog

So promising is Maryland's system — infiltrating smart growth throughout every department and virtually every action of state government — that federal smart growth is following the same model.

That may not be coincidental given that Maryland's first smart growth director, John Frece, now has essentially the same job in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. At the national level, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation are joining the EPA in working for smart growth. The federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities is guided by six livability principles that sound remarkably like Maryland's.

"With lightning speed," Frece says, "the secretaries pledged publicly to incorporate the principles into all that they do." Now, he reports, "We meet weekly. We're in e-mail and phone contact daily. We are absolutely in each other's business in a way never seen before. We have a genuine, active, cooperative relationship."

As an example, Frece speaks of DOT's TIGER (for Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grants, with \$1.5 billion in Recovery Act money to fund multimodal transportation projects. That amount can't meet the demand. So, Frece says, "the Department of Transportation turned to EPA and HUD and asked for help in determining which meet all of our needs. The partners see this as opportunity to set livability criteria."

Frece says the partnership between agencies could fundamentally change the way the federal government does business. "Instead of working at cross purposes, as if housing were unrelated to transportation and transportation to public and environmental health," he says, "we're all working together to try to figure out how to be more efficient in all three areas — and get out of the way of state and local government."

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Resources

Images: Top — Chesapeake Bay is the backdrop for the ceremony marking Gov. Martin O'Malley's signing of the latest smart growth legislation. With him are cabinet members and state legislators. Photo from Maryland Climate Action Plan. Middle — Wicomico County is one of the counties cited in the *JAPA* article as not having met its smart growth targets. Photo from Maryland Climate Action Plan. Bottom — A smart growth success: Decatur Street in Edmonston, before and after. Photos courtesy EPA Region III.

Two sessions scheduled for APA's National Planning Conference in New Orleans next month will focus on smart growth. One session will explain Arizona's Smart Growth Scorecard, a tool used by 13 state agencies to make state grants and loans. The other conference session will explain natural resource protection zoning, which links land conservation and land development concepts. Learn more at www.planning.org/conference/program/.