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Why Old Lefty Tree-Huggers Are Slow to Embrace the New Sustainability What's So Smart About It?

By Joe Rutian

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Santa Barbara's political order has been reshuffled. Old lefty environmental slow-growthers are taking potshots at today's progressives—the sustainability-oriented smart-growthers—while the development crowd cuddles up to them.

There's not much mystery about the development community's affinity for smart growth since it emphasizes high-density urban land use, thus opening a door that has for many years been slammed shut in Santa Barbara.

But what about the graying growth control crowd taking issue with today's popular progressive agenda?

It is curious that most on either side share similar values—not only environmental concerns, but a desire to avoid the several consequences of affordable housing shortages, and to keep this city both intimate and beautiful.

So, why do they disagree so heatedly when it comes down to how to realize the shared goals? What's with these aging veterans who once manned the ramparts for environmentally conscious measures such as “living within resources”? Why does the smart-growth paradigm, so universally embraced by progressives, give them pause?

With age comes an instinct to preserve what is precious from the folly of fashion, born of first-hand experience that what's lost is usually lost irretrievably. Remember, these folks were the progressives of their day, and in the liberal genome resides an inclination toward skepticism: a demand for empirical proof, a penchant for free thought, and a reluctance to swallow whole any formula for salvation.

Second is evidence that the fashionable sustainable smart-growth movement is high on true belief, the intoxication of turning practical purposes into holy causes. Faith in the universal, infallible application of the movement's precepts has led its subscribers to view as apostasy any criticism of the application of the tenets of their creed—like inclusionary housing, or the massing of densities downtown on the promise of all manner of benefits.

At the heart of the smart-growth (or New Urbanism) formula, upon which hope for sustainability is pinned, are a few basic tenets. First is the anti-sprawl formula: build up, not out, in order to spare outlying open spaces. A strong transportation component dictates that this dense urban development be placed in proximity to convenient alternative transit. In tandem with a strong push for affordable housing, this will result in fewer commuters and reduce dependence on auto use for

getting around town as well.

This is the catechism of most contemporary planners, architects, and environmentalists. And why not? It sounds perfectly plausible, has seductive symmetry, and is rooted in the antithesis of all the bad development—sprawl, strip malls, long commutes, congestion—that has beset American landscapes during the past few generations. So why can't everybody get with the program?

Because the devil is in the details.

Santa Barbara's desirability factor changes everything, eviscerating the anti-sprawl premise that dense in-city development will supplant building in outlying open space. That works where development pressure is finite, as it is in most places; here it is anything but finite. Building housing towers downtown will never slake the appetite to develop, say, the Gaviota Coast.

Our desirability factor also has effects on real estate economics that destroy the efficacy of our bonus density and inclusionary policies—current lynchpins in our hopes for producing workforce affordable housing. It results in the “market-rate” units being priced out of reach of workers, and their well-heeled occupants generate the need for even more workforce than the projects can house. “Affordability by design” is a myth in places as desirable as Santa Barbara.

The success of smart growth depends upon modifying behavior—for example, weaning us off of our addiction to the automobile (not yet ancient history despite current gas prices) and our penchant for the American dream of the freestanding house and yard. As much good sense as these intentions make, their accomplishment is anything but a sure bet: Policy at odds with prevailing public preferences is high-risk speculation. If we base development policy that will dramatically transform this city on shaky premises, and it doesn't work, then the cure will be one hell of a lot worse than the disease.

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