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Idaho's Capitol fronts the Boise Foothills. A vibrant downtown and Foothills conservation are keys to sustainable growth.

11 Growing SMART

by David Webb

From the vital urban core of downtown Boise to future modes of transportation, a common theme emerges from this collection of essays. There is a need for “smart” strategies to sustain our urban experience, whether it applies to the redevelopment of urban decay along the Orchard and Emerald Street corridors or the proliferation of exurbs being carved out of green fields. As noted in the preceding chapters, urban growth can drastically change our community’s landscapes for either better or worse, and greatly affect our temporal ideas of growth and planning. Smart growth is not only essential to the health and well-being of a community, but also is an important factor in the quality of life a city offers. It is what distinguishes a good city from a great one. Smart growth is essentially a methodology; it centers on the relationship between housing, business, transportation and preservation. The successful relationship of these four characteristics comes together to produce a mixed-use development. For that to exist, the emerging complexities of urban sprawl and

impractical development have to be tamed. The method of community planning for smart, sustainable living places the emphasis on a mixture of uses in a relatively small space.

Future development should reflect a complimentary use of space and resources, much like the corner of 8th and Idaho in downtown Boise, where mixed-use development incorporates many of the fundamental “smart” necessities. Shops, restaurants, offices and nearby residential accommodations comprise a mixed-use environment that makes it a vibrant and sustainable place. A well-organized neighborhood of this caliber builds on the premise of narrow streets and the revitalization of existing infrastructure, along with large, pedestrian-friendly spaces for residents to socialize. Eighth and Idaho is also a testament to preservation. Many of the buildings on the corner have been used for decades due to preservation efforts by their owners and by the city. The functioning layout of 8th Street gives Boise a template for smart growth. In contrast, increasing urban sprawl and poorly planned living environments pose challenges—longer commutes, a stressed infrastructure and the loss not only of open space, but also of historical context.

Preservation

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Preservation is certainly not solely the practice of saving historic architecture or open space. In areas like the Central Bench, development in other parts of the city has left the area a disinvested community of empty storefronts and neglected infrastructure. Traffic crams the streets and abandoned buildings wait for tenants. Preservation can also mean reinvesting in a community like the Central Bench. The City of Boise has initiated the Blueprint Boise process designed to update the current Comprehensive Plan. Blueprint Boise acknowledges the impact that growth has on our current community and proposes several specific plans and/or strategies for managing future expansion. Among the plans considered are some specifically targeted at the need for reinvestment in our disinvested areas to, as Blueprint states, “promote the revitalization of underutilized existing centers over time.” These areas are the greyfields of Boise, the abandoned (but still functional) and neglected building spaces left to sit unoccupied and scarcely managed by their owners.

Another goal in Blueprint Boise would “encourage existing single-use centers to incorporate a greater mix of compatible uses, such as offices and housing, through infill, adaptive reuse, or redevelopment.” Policy changes are required to accomplish this goal, along with the cooperation of developers,

builders and investors who could financially benefit from reinvestment strategies. Because greyfields are generally commercially oriented, codes that would allow existing structures to be converted into high-density residential dwellings are complicated. There is no magic wand that can instantly allow for such adaptation of greyfields. However, the Boise's Comprehensive Plan is a good start.

Not only does preservation apply to the developed parts of the community, but it also relates to the open spaces we have come to enjoy. Today, planned communities such as Avimor and The Cliffs (formerly Hammer Flat) are poised for development. On paper, both developments look sustainable. Both have mixed-use, baseline modes of operation and appeal to consumers as planned communities. Homes, businesses and recreational opportunities formulate a cornerstone methodology for both. From a growth pattern standpoint, both planned communities contribute to sprawl outside the city's area of impact. Though smart planning is incorporated into Avimor and The Cliffs, the main issue against both has been open space preservation. With the Black Cliffs and Highway 21 as its foundation, The Cliffs is planned for a plateau east of Boise, a piece of open space valued for wildlife habitat within close proximity to the city. The idea that this beautiful piece of prime real estate will someday be platted with homes and businesses stirs an ardent push by some for its preservation. Avimor, on the other hand, is located northwest of Boise and miles from the city limits. Primarily planted in alfalfa, the cozy valley once offered passers-by a view of deer and at times, antelope and elk.

Both developments lie outside Boise's jurisdiction—they are beyond Boise's area of impact, but still affect the city through the need for transportation and other services. Essentially, the county determines decisions about property use outside of the city. Avimor and The Cliffs have the approval of Ada County; both met the legal requirements. Avimor is in the process of building homes, but The Cliffs has not reached that point. Legally, the growth that Boise has seen over the last several years has the right to exist. Current codes do not prevent building and sprawl from continuing. However, the recent use of easements and financial incentives for farm and ranch owners to keep their properties in agricultural use may be one strategy to stem the loss of open space, meshing rural development deals with urban needs. (The developers sold the land where The Cliffs was planned to the City of Boise as this publication went to press.)

Transportation

Boise is losing its battle with traffic congestion. With growth that has occurred outside the city, roads in and around Boise are clogged with commuters, a pattern experienced by other urban areas. It appears from the multitude of orange cones and the "Pardon Us For The Inconvenience" construction signs of the Ada County Highway District that efforts are being made to alleviate this problem. But can the issue be successfully addressed simply by improving existing roads? More asphalt doesn't necessarily resolve traffic congestion. The valley is beginning to understand the costs of such a development strategy. Plans to accommodate traffic flow are best solved by smart growth, which utilizes the full potential of a mass transit system. Currently, Boise's transit system is inadequate for the size of the community. Valley Regional Transit has limited options to update the system and provide for an attractive alternative to personal transportation. Funding is a critical issue for VRT and mass transit in general. Additional funds are required to improve the system. One solution may be a local option tax or the issuance of municipal bonds to fund transportation projects. A local option tax is a plausible solution. An extra fraction of one cent in local sales tax could be used to upgrade Boise's transit system. For this option to work, the Idaho State Legislature would first have to grant municipalities like Boise the authority that resort towns like McCall and Sun Valley already have. Once allowed by the Legislature, citizens of the city or town would vote on the new tax, which would require a supermajority (two-thirds) vote. The local option would empower the citizens of Boise to choose whether or not this solution is right for them.

Additional strategies for combating transportation issues are outlined in the "Greenhouse Gas Reduction Strategies for Boise" report. Appointed by Mayor Dave Beiter, six prominent community members make up the Climate Protection Program Advisory Committee, whose goal is to "assist in the development of greenhouse gas reduction strategies..." The committee's July 2008 report provides some viable strategies. In addition to the adoption of a local option tax, it is recommended that "transit-oriented development," which places residential infrastructure in proximity to areas of work and traffic corridors, be adopted. The plan considers providing incentives for residential dwellings to create higher-density living areas that "support transit along traffic corridors." These dwelling units would be near the mass transit infrastructure, which would increase the ridership of city's public transit system

and revitalize areas along the routes. This recommendation also endorses “Location Efficient Mortgages” that would encourage lenders to offer mortgages to commuters who chose to live closer to work. This financial tool could mitigate the need to live further from the city because of more affordable housing options. The committee also recommended “employer alternative transportation programs” that target Boise building owners, developers and other city employers by providing incentives for “density bonuses,” “zoning changes” and “expanding downtown parking districts.”

Limits of Growth

Sprawl, as defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, is “to spread out in a staggering or disordered fashion.” Certainly, the key term is “disordered.” Today, an array of homes, businesses, roads and mass development reach across Boise and the surrounding areas. “Disordered” sprawl has bled into the valley’s open spaces. During the early days of Boise’s history, growth simply occurred. Towns essentially grew in convenient locations, a pattern evident in many of the West’s early settlements. However, with the advent of the automobile and without the proper planning of space, resources and housing alternatives, sprawl has developed. For Boise, this has gobbled up much of our open space and swelled the present city. Growth has choked out the individuality of places like Collister, Ustick and the areas around Orchard and Emerald and replaced that with a municipal backdrop of uninterrupted homes and businesses. Boise has seen great changes in the physical layout and structure of its neighborhoods. Collister and Ustick were once agricultural landscapes—open spaces of fields and orchards considered by their residents as townships apart from Boise. They were almost entirely farming communities, shipping fruit and other agricultural commodities to the metropolis via rail line. Named after their prominent patrons, these two small towns offer Boise a unique and individualized stamp on its history. Early Ustick and Collister point to a picture of what once was—a bustling hub of mixed-use development and a heritage of smart planning based on a philosophy that contrasts to sprawl.

The introduction of the trolley system (mass transit) and later the automobile led to the beginning of sprawl, eventually causing one-time outskirts villages like Ustick and Collister to lose their identities. As commute times into larger municipalities like Boise were shortened, more residents migrated out of the city. Once the automobile replaced much of the nation’s public transit options, growth of unexpected proportions flooded into the country’s

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open spaces. Boise was not immune to this expansion, leading to what we now see—homes, businesses and development of all kinds filling the Boise Valley. The remains of our farming townships are pushed further west and privately held open space near the city is being sold for developments.



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A subdivision consumes farmland near Meridian in West Ada County.

Sprawl has its reasons. Once understood by municipal governments and citizens, Boise can work in concert with its residents to enable smart growth planning, which can potentially quell or mitigate future sprawl. Its resolution starts with simple, yet effective strategies. Boise has an inventory of high- and low-income housing options, but insufficient middle-income housing opportunities. The downtown area currently employs approximately 40,000 workers, according to a Capital City Development Corporation estimate. Only 2,000 downtown residential dwellings exist. The CCDC has published a “Workforce Housing Policy” with recommendations and strategies to address

this issue. By establishing more mid-range housing options, life in downtown could outweigh the conveniences of suburban living.

Much depends on a citizenry that is informed about the impacts of growth on transportation, pollution and habitat preservation. Education about the benefits of smart growth is key to implementing effective solutions for Boise. Without smart strategies to guide to our city's future, issues such as transportation and preservation will challenge Boise's livability as we move forward. This collection of essays provides readers with a context to understand not only the rich heritage of our city, but also the challenges confronting neighbors and city officials in their quest to make this the "most livable city in America." The essays are filled with optimism about the citizens who care about their neighborhoods and get involved to shape our future community. Today's activists and developers follow the traditions and vision articulated by their predecessors who built neighborhoods like Collister and made Boise the cultural and economic center of the valley. The students' essays reveal how investigating one's environment can lead to significant insight and foster a commitment to help Boise realize its vision.

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What are the most important aspects of a "livable" city?

"Aspects of a livable city include efficient transportation modes, open space preservation and sustainable policies for future growth. To be successful, a city's political culture and value proposition(s) should align together to promote these three aspects of a livable city."