

50 growing closer



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Hidden Springs began with a master plan for 850 homes on 1,756 acres. Defenders call it sustainable smart growth. Critics say the community aggravates sprawl.

Hidden SPRINGS

by Peter Thomas

To Treasure Valley residents, the name “Hidden Springs” holds a conspicuous place amongst its brethren. While names like “Bridge Tower” and “Lakemoor” certainly don’t burden the ear, nor do they evoke the mental image that Hidden Springs does. Hidden Springs is a planned Smart Growth community in unincorporated Ada County, situated in the foothills approximately four miles north of the western edge of Boise. Whether the reaction is: “That’s the planned community thing up in the hills, right?” or “Oh, you mean Pleasantville? Yeah, it’s actually not bad up there,” area residents seem to have at least some basic conception of the development. The feature that truly differentiates Hidden Springs is neither its “hilly-ness,” nor its “pleasantvalley-ness,” but rather its Smart Growthy-ness.

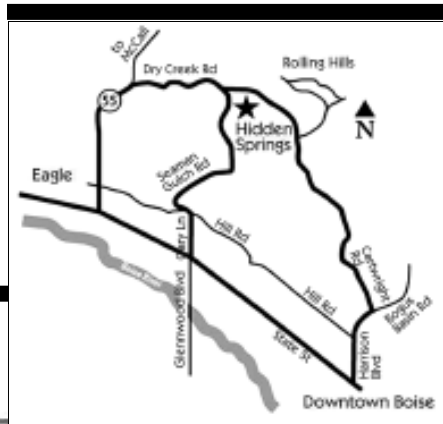
As the first Smart Growth development in the region, Hidden Springs’ design, approval and construction processes were atypical. It did not physically resemble the subdivisions that were rapidly becoming a ubiquitous feature of the late 1990s as they spread into what was previously farmland. Perhaps more unusually, it was designed with the specific intent to create



Eva Hoops/Hidden Springs

Realtors call Hidden Springs “a true community” where neighbors interact. Pictured: Hidden Springs Fourth of July kiddie parade.

and foster a sense of community and identity that would be distinctly “Hidden Springs.” Further, the design included ways to provide services—such as education, fire and mail—from within the community. Today, 12 years after the first houses were built, the current state of Hidden Springs is a useful example for identifying the effectiveness of policy decisions and design elements. It is the future, however, that will determine whether the Smart Growth ideals there are fully realized. Smart Growth principles aim to influence land use policies and development strategies to create more vibrant communities that reduce the number of vehicle miles that people travel daily and use less energy than more sprawling communities. Specific problems that conflict with that theme include the overextension of resources and infrastructure through sprawl and the loss of “sense of place” that has been associated with sprawl and urban decay. Smart Growth provides a comprehensive plan for creating such communities, including high-density housing, mixed-use planning and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. It is evident that these ideals guided the design of Hidden Springs.



Hidden Springs is the brain-child of developer Jim Grossman. An Idaho native and Colorado College graduate, Grossman moved back home to Ketchum to become a ski instructor at the Sun Valley Resort before joining the family property development com-



Frank Lundborg/Flickr

Hidden Springs sits in Dry Creek Valley about 10 minutes from State Street and 20 minutes from downtown Boise.

pany. After working in Arizona, he returned to Idaho in the early 1990s and began to design Hidden Springs. When asked about his plans, Grossman told the *Idaho Statesman* that, "Money isn't driving this. As important as it is, it is equally important to create something that is different and new and that hopefully enriches the lives of people that make their home out there." Rather than simply building another subdivision of cookie-cutter homes, Grossman wanted to create a community. That notion is still present in Hidden Springs today. In the official welcome letter, it states, "The most



Dry Creek Mercantile

The Dry Creek Mercantile, or “Merc” as the locals call it, houses a café, post office, and general store. The developer sparked controversy in 2007 with a proposal to sell the store to the homeowners, using open-space preservation funds.

valuable amenity is the friendly and caring residents who call this area home.” To many, the notion of community has been lost in contemporary American suburbia, where the car is the primary means of transportation. Community is essentially non-existent when people leave their garage at 7 a.m. and return at 6 p.m., and contact with neighbors is an irritating intrusion on personal time in front of the television. Grossman told the *Idaho Statesman* that he “envisioned a place where people sat on front porches and talked with neighbors and residents caught up on gossip at the general store. A community where the environment and open space were respected, and home businesses and rental units attached to houses were encouraged.”

To Grossman, creating a sense of community meant having an old-fashioned “town center” as a central gathering place for community events, business and shopping. One design element of the “town center” is a central mailroom. Rather than using traditional mailboxes, residents come into contact with their neighbors. The mailroom is located next to an establishment called the “Merc” where locals can pick up basic necessities, coffee, drinks and food. Nearby is a public space designed for community events such as concerts and farmers’ markets. These locations were integral to Grossman’s

concept of public interaction. Aside from simply having an old-fashioned town center and usable public space, designing a community meant creating an identity. Part of this identity lay in the architectural style of the town area, which, according to Idaho architect Charles Hummel (and designer of the Hidden Springs Fire Station), is definitely identifiable as both “Western” and “Idaho,” and has style elements similar to town centers like Ketchum and Gooding. This also very distinctly embodies concepts found in the Congress for the New Urbanism, whose ideals are similar to Idaho Smart Growth. According to its charter, “[a]rchitecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history and building practice.” By incorporating elements of “Idaho-ness,” such as a weathered wooden pasture fence and an old-fashioned town center, Hidden Springs provides residents with a sense of identity that is often lost in many subdivisions that are indistinguishable from one another. Hidden Springs is Intermountain West; it is Idaho ... it wouldn’t pass as Southern California or Maine.

Incorporating architecture that recalls old Idaho city centers addresses another primary concern of Smart Growth. Because these old city centers preceded the automobile, they were designed to be accessible and comfortable to pedestrians. Needless to say, most streets today, as automobile-friendly streets, tend not only to be uncomfortable to walk down, but also may be simply unsafe. No land developer can force people to walk, but Hidden Springs incorporates physical design elements intended to promote walking to and from the public spaces. Features such as narrower streets make a major impact by both slowing traffic and leaving room for more spacious sidewalks, including a grass barrier between the sidewalk and the street. Planters and landscaping further insulate pedestrians from the sound and stress of traffic. Finally, some form of shade, whether from trees or awnings, increases comfort for pedestrians. Hidden Springs’ design reflects a conscious effort to include these kinds of elements to create a pedestrian-friendly street. In addition, parking space is limited to both encourage walking and maximize public space.

Pedestrian-friendly streets lose much of their charm in the absence of a meaningful public community space. The Merc/mailroom and adjacent park are unquestioningly the center of public space in Hidden Springs, whose design has, in fact, had an impact on the sense of “community” found there. Many residents feel at ease letting their school-age children ride their bikes, knowing that everyone keeps an eye out for one another. The Hidden Springs website offers a summer swim club for children, a list of teenage babysitters and informal social groups ranging from playgroups for toddlers

to cooking groups for adults. This level of self-driven community involvement does not exist by accident. It is an intentional counter-reaction to sprawl, where large lot tract houses separate neighbors from traditional opportunities for interpersonal contact. A true sense of community has another great benefit. As people return to socializing and spending more time with their neighbors, they begin to connect with their physical environment and take responsibility for keeping it attractive and pleasant. This has traditionally been accomplished through covenants, conditions and restrictions set by neighborhood groups. Designers and architects, however, have begun to incorporate design elements that encourage people to proactively maintain the environment. Hidden Springs strives to keep up a pleasant appearance in both ways. Like many other neighborhoods, old and new, it has a comprehensive set of codes and restrictions regarding house appearance and other subjects. Hidden Springs, however, has gone further in encouraging people to care about their community by creating a sense of "place."

A primary cause of the loss of place is the rise of undifferentiated houses placed among cul-de-sacs in the midst of large subdivisions. People tend not to feel personally connected to neighborhoods that have no identifiable characteristics aside from different street names. In creating neighborhoods people care about, along with a sense of identity and place, it is a designer's job to understand what specific design elements resonate with people in any specific place. Grossman built on the lessons he learned as a child in Ketchum about the notion of a town center and used architecture familiar to him to re-create the feel of early Idaho downtown buildings. Additionally, the houses themselves are brightly colored and are definitely distinct from the prefabricated beige houses that were popular at the time Hidden Springs was started. Another feature of the houses is that their design recalls pre-automotive neighborhoods, with large porches, small front yards and garages located in the rear of the house. These specific elements are designed to further increase community interaction.

At the outset, preservation of open space was a prominent feature of the design. In total, of the 1,884 acres in the development, the *Statesman* reported that between 810 and 900 [were] to remain permanent open space designated as farmland, natural space and wildlife preserves. By promoting dense housing developments, an abundance of open space became available for public use. In addition, a community farm was started as a way to preserve farming and rural traditions in Hidden Springs. While the farm had existed for nearly a century and a half, it was certainly not a foregone conclusion that it would remain. Around 100 acres, it provides residents



Gavin J. King

Hidden Springs features more than 800 acres of open space and expansive views of the foothills.

access to organically grown vegetables as well as a way to actively participate in the process. As residents find use for the open space, the likelihood that they will take an interest in its upkeep increases. On the Hidden Springs website, residents are encouraged to “participate in community cleanups, pick up a bit of litter while you walk and avoid muddy or wet trails.” To provide ongoing source of funds, a transfer tax where a percent of a home’s sales price, paid by the seller, is devoted to a preservation account managed by a nonprofit conservation association.

Idaho Smart Growth and the Congress for the New Urbanism promote mixed-use development as one way to reduce automobile commuting. Trends in the 20th century leaned toward the separation of commercial, residential and industrial districts within a municipal area. Compounded by the mass ownership of the automobile and the relative convenience of the



City of Boise

In 2000 the National Association of Homebuilders awarded Hidden Springs its Platinum Award for Smart Growth. In 2010, home prices ranged from about \$140,000 to \$750,000.

Interstate Highway System, different areas of usage may be significant distances apart. It is not uncommon for people in large metropolitan areas to commute up to two hours to and from work every day. Incorporated into Hidden Springs is the concept of mixed-use design, which New Urbanism defines as the "concentration of civic, institutional and commercial activity...embedded in neighborhoods and districts." In other words, neighborhoods should provide basic essentials such as housing, food,

employment, education and recreation within walking or biking distance. This greatly reduces the negative impact of mass automobile transit and its supporting infrastructure. Jim Grossman's concept was to build a mixed-use community outside of Boise in a manner that would greatly reduce the amount of automobile use necessary for the residents. A significant amount of space near the front of the development is intended for commercial usage. Ideally, the most efficient use of that space would be businesses that provided services and employment to residents. Closely related to the inclusion of mixed use in a development is attracting a socioeconomically and culturally diverse population. The term commonly used is "affordable housing," which is not synonymous with subsidized or low-income housing. The implication of having a mixed-use community where people can walk or bike to work is that there will be a diversity of income levels. While dentists, doctors and executives make an attractive potential market for developers, the idea of mixed use cannot be realized in a community without cooks, teachers and janitors. In order to reduce automobile use and commute times, it is vital to provide affordable housing to all community members. Ideally, according to the Idaho Smart Growth guiding principles, "neighborhoods should offer a range of options: single-family homes—duplexes, garden cottages and condominiums—and accommodations for dependent elders." Grossman's original ideal was to provide a mix of housing, so he designed three separate "neighborhoods"—The Village, The Valley and The Foothills—representing three different price levels, with lot prices at the time in The Village starting at around \$45,000 and up to \$214,000 in The Foothills.

Despite the bold concepts behind Grossman's development, Hidden Springs has had its share of struggles. As an Idaho Smart Growth board member and land use policy expert, Gary Allen is quick to note that Grossman was a dreamer, not a developer. The design seemed to be too "high end" and the development quickly ran into financial problems. Hidden Springs was returned to GMAC, a large mortgage company from whom Grossman Properties had borrowed. This was neither the beginning nor the end of struggles for Hidden Springs. From the early stages of development, it faced unique challenges in implementing its goals. With its new and untested design, Hidden Springs had to jump major hurdles to earn the approval of the Ada County Planning and Zoning Commission. Its design and function represented something new and untested in the area. One of the issues was how to provide services that were typically the provenance of governmental entities. Providing sewer treatment, for example, required the development to fund the physical infrastructure and maintenance, in addition to adopting a plan that adhered to strict state regulations. Police

services, through the Ada County Sheriff's Department, needed to cover the construction site long before revenue would be generated by residents. Education, fire protection and emergency response, street lights and other basic services had to be cobbled together by an entity not accustomed to doing so.

Grossman's Smart Growth goals have not all been fully realized. While the website states that Hidden Springs "will offer a variety of homes so that people of many ages, incomes and backgrounds can live at Hidden Springs," it might be a stretch to argue that there is true socioeconomic diversity there. As a former teacher at Hidden Springs Elementary, William Waag got the impression that "It's almost as though the community screens potential residents before they were allowed in ... not only would I say that it is NOT diverse, but I think diversity of culture and values is almost exactly what the residents are trying to avoid." His assessment was that it seemed to be a popular location for upper-class businessman and doctors to raise their children outside the influence of lower socioeconomic classes and cultures. Addressing the lack of population diversity, Allen and Hummel both noted that there is a limit to "designing people's behavior." While there are varying levels of cost for lots, Hidden Springs was not necessarily designed to provide housing for people with moderate to low incomes, and as an "upper-middle class place," it may actually be less exclusive than the designers originally anticipated. Without the availability of affordable housing for individuals of average income, locating centers of employment in Hidden Springs is also a major challenge. A vast majority of working individuals commute to Boise every day. Without significant employment, it could be criticized simply as another example of urban sprawl, albeit a pleasant looking, expensive example. This fact directly conflicts with the design of Hidden Springs as at least a partially self-contained development. Despite Hidden Springs' proximity to Boise, the actual commuting distance is significant, and drivers must travel out of their way to reach the major arterials that service the Treasure Valley.

Key components of Smart Growth are missing from Hidden Springs. Some criticisms are aimed at the struggles that it has gone through financially, a lack of diversity, a minimal amount of employment and seemingly an increase in the traffic congestion on State Street and Hill Road. These hardly represent a sterling picture of Smart Growth in action. This invites the question: "Is Hidden Springs a failure?" In response, it is necessary to look at the larger context in which Hidden Springs exists. In analyzing Hidden Springs and its relation to Smart Growth, Gary Allen stressed that it is simply a component in a much larger picture. The future of Hidden Springs, and its

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Critics call it “Pleasantville” in reference to the 1998 movie spoof of a too-perfect American suburb. Residents treasure their walkable streets with parks, community gardens and vintage architecture.

success as a Smart Growth community, has more to do with surrounding developments in the long term, perhaps a century or more. If land use policy and developers adopt and maintain Smart Growth ideals, then Hidden Springs will be an important part of that picture, explained Allen. Concerns take on a different light in a larger picture. Hidden Springs, from a policy and design standpoint, is a fundamental step in the right direction. A considerable amount of employment in the community requires a large business or several employers. To attract businesses requires reaching a threshold of population. At 1,000 homes, Hidden Springs falls far short of the threshold for a standard grocery store, which requires around 14,000 homes in its market area; even something as small as a restaurant may require as many as 3,000 homes. Should the proposed Dry Creek development adjacent to Hidden Springs generate another 3,000 homes for the market area, however, then the commercial space in Hidden Springs may start to become a viable place to consider opening a business. This, in turn, may lead to a demand for



The Land Trust of the Treasure Valley works with the Hidden Springs Town Association to maintain a conservation easement. Homebuyers pay a “transfer fee” for a trail and open-space conservation fund.

affordable housing, which may not be in Hidden Springs, but may be located in a neighboring community.

As similar developments are designed and constructed, Hidden Springs provides an example of the process for implementing many Smart Growth ideals. Despite its obvious struggles, Hidden Springs is by no means a failure. It was constructed with no contemporary local or regional precedents of any type. After their new concept struggled through the approval process in the late 1990s, developers watched as their design was realized and did their best to dynamically adapt to specific concerns. Developers brought to fruition the idea of a more energy-efficient, dense urban space with usable, comfortable public space and pedestrian access. The state of Hidden Springs is summed up succinctly by Gary Allen: “Hidden Springs is as good as it could be, for what it is, but let’s not make it something it’s not.” For any of its perceived successes and failures, it may realistically be too early to tell

whether Hidden Springs will represent the beginning of a trend in housing developments, or if it will become nothing more than an oddity that nobody can quite figure out. Just as the measure for determining Hidden Springs' fate is time, so is it the measure for determining the fate of the Smart Growth principles that apply there. Smart Growth is more than just elements of architecture and design. It is more than lobbying groups and land-use policy. For Smart Growth to have the impact it desires, its ideals will have to transcend the Smart Growth label and instead represent "normal." In that process, Hidden Springs is a first step.

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