

USDA Rural Development

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Committed to the future of rural communities.

Balancing Farmland and Open Spaces with Rural Economic Development



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What is a Rural Community?



- It depends on who you ask!
- 49 million Americans live in rural communities
- 75 percent of the total land area in the U.S. is rural



Virginia



Berlin, Maryland

What is Smart Growth?

- The Smart Growth Network, a network of non-governmental organizations representing a diverse set of interests, have identified 10 principles to help communities get the results they want from growth.
- www.smartgrowth.org

Smart Growth Principles

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

SG Principles adopted by 38 national organizations, 50 units of gov't, 40 NGOs and 13 private sector groups.

Challenges to Rural Smart Growth

- Rural communities generally have higher unemployment
- Lower property values, equals lower tax collections
- Fewer retail sales per capita are made in rural communities
- Smaller city staff size makes it hard to pay attention to comprehensive planning and regional collaboration
- The number of small communities within commuting distance of our urban centers makes region wide planning efforts difficult

Challenges to Rural Smart Growth

- In small towns there are more interconnections between planning commissions and land sellers
- Lower land prices reduces the economic benefit of compact growth
- Desire of rural residents to have larger lots and more space
- Tough economic conditions brings pressure to create jobs, grow, develop and increase revenues at any cost
- Local government self rule is a principle that this country believes in so its difficult to take away planning decisions

Farm Restructuring

- The number of farms nationwide has been on a declining trend since peaking at 7 million farms in 1935 ²
- The 2007 Census of Agriculture counted 2.2 million farms in the US which was 4 percent increase from 2002 ²
- But there has been a 12% drop in farms since 1982 and a 70% drop since 1935
- Farm prices and low profits made land development one of the only options for land owners at the urban fringe
- With so many willing sellers farmland has been readily available for conversion

Farmland Values

- This year has seen a substantial improvement in profits for many farm operations including the San Joaquin Valley ³
- ERS projects a 31 % increase in net farm income this year
- Farm profits are a major engine to SJV economic growth
- Farmland prices have held steady the last few years in spite of economic trends
- Improved farm prices could drive land prices in an upward trend giving more incentive to compact growth.
- Compact growth should be a win–win for farm advocates and for cities

Farmland is a Finite Resource

- With increased worldwide food demands and most arable land already developed US agriculture has the possibility of becoming the Saudi Arabia of food products.
- We need to maintain our national food security
- Agricultural products are still being exported in large volumes compared to other U.S. manufactured products
- If large numbers of farm acres are retired then rural areas will need to find a new engine for economic development

Can We Afford to be Consumers and not Producers of Products?

- As people once we stop growing we start an aging process that ends with the grave
- Growth in the SJV appears to be inevitable
- Fortunately communities unlike us humans with proper planning can extend and direct the growth process in a positive manner

How to Grow and Maintain Rural Character: Three Broad Goals

- 1. Support the rural landscape** by creating an economic climate that enhances the viability of working lands and conserves natural lands.
- 2. Help existing places thrive** by taking care of assets and investments such as downtowns, Main Streets, existing infrastructure, and places that the community values.
- 3. Create great new places** by building vibrant, enduring neighborhoods and communities that people, especially young people, don't want to leave.





Goal #1: Protect valuable farmland.

Goal #2: Enhance the existing downtown.

Goal #3: Build new neighborhoods that are adjacent to town.

Smart growth in a rural community: How could it work in the landscape?

1. Support the Rural Landscape

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- Creating an economic climate that enhances the viability of working lands and conserves natural lands is the first step
- Strategies, tools and policies that support this goal include:
 - Right to Farm policies
 - Agricultural zoning
 - Renewable energy development



Country Store in Vermont



Peach Farm in Delaware



Wind Turbines in Iowa

2. Help Existing Places Thrive

2



El Dorado, Arkansas



Starkville, Mississippi

- **Communities can help their downtowns, Main Streets, and other existing places to thrive through:**
 - Fix-it first policies
 - Rehabilitating existing structures, like schools
 - Incentives to encourage infill and brownfield redevelopment
 - Updated zoning ordinances and development codes that support compact, walkable development

3. Create Great New Places

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- When building new neighborhoods, they should be vibrant, enduring places where people want to live.
- Strategies, tools, and policies that can help create great new places include:
 - Community visioning and policy alignment
 - Designating growth areas and areas for preservation
 - Recognizing developers that build great places



Keene, New Hampshire

Resource Materials

1. Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities ICMA 2010 Used by permission
2. USDA “2007 Census of Agriculture”
3. USDA ERS Farm Income and Costs: 2011 Income Forecast

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