Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities

HOW TO ACHIEVE ECONOMIC VITALITY AND A SAFE AND HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES AND SMALL TOWNS

Photo Credits (left to right): NRCS, EPA, Clark Anderson
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
Types of Rural Communities

- Gateway communities
- Resource-dependent communities
- Edge communities
- Traditional Main Street communities
- Second home and retirement communities

Photo Credits (left to right): Clark Anderson, NRCS, NRCS, EPA, EPA
Historical Rural America

- Small towns in rural areas served the agriculture economy
- Were mixed use, compact, and walkable by necessity; had regional transportation connections (RR or river transport)
- Physical form varied by region

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What’s Changing in Rural America Today

- Economy, culture, transportation has changed
- Some rural communities are growing rapidly, others are declining
- Clearly a need for economic diversity and a need for expanded choice for where to live, how to get around, where to work
Challenges Facing Rural Communities

- Fewer farms and farmers
- Loss of forest and other natural and working land
- Rapid growth at metro edges
- Shrinking population in some communities
- Limited access to jobs, services, and transportation
- Limited planning capacity

Photo Credits (top to bottom): NRCS, EPA, NRCS
Smart Growth: A Response to Rural Challenges

- Development that provides:
  - Choices for where to live and how to get around
  - A stronger, more resilient economy
  - A safer, healthier place to live
  - Opportunities to protect the things that you love about the place you live (farmland and open space, natural beauty, sense of community, etc.)
So what does smart growth mean for a rural community?

When you’ve seen one rural community... you’ve seen one rural community.

Photo Credit: EPA
A New Publication:
Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities

- Partnership between the U.S. EPA and ICMA – a Smart Growth Network publication
- Lays out a framework for rural communities and small towns seeking to implement smart growth
- Set of tools, case studies, and resources
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.
1. Support the Rural Landscape

- 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

Photo Credits (top to bottom, left to right): National Trust for Historic Preservation, EPA, NRCS
### GOAL 1: SUPPORT THE RURAL LANDSCAPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Tools &amp; Policies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.a. Ensure the viability of the resource economy in the region</td>
<td>• Use value taxation</td>
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<td>• Tax credits for conservation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Right to farm policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.b. Cultivate economic development strategies that rely on traditional</td>
<td>• Renewable energy development</td>
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<tr>
<td>rural landscapes</td>
<td>• Value-added farm and forest products processing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ecosystem services markets</td>
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<td>1.c. Promote rural products in urban areas and support other urban-rural</td>
<td>• Purchase of development rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>links</td>
<td>• Conservation easements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Fee simple acquisition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Agritourism and ecotourism</td>
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<td>1.d. Link rural land preservation strategies to great neighborhoods</td>
<td>• Direct marketing to consumers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Government purchase of local products</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “Buy local” campaigns</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Agricultural, ranching, or forestry zoning</td>
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<td>• Rural home clustering</td>
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Supporting the Rural Landscape: Direct Marketing of Rural Products

- Communities can help support the rural economy by promoting rural products in urban areas, like this Farmers’ Market in Ithaca, NY.

- Other strategies include:
  - Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
  - Agritourism
  - Value-added farm and forest products processing

Photo Credits: City of Ithaca
Supporting the Rural Landscape: TDR and Priority Funding Areas

- Transfer of development rights policies and priority funding areas can direct growth to desired locations while protecting important working and natural lands, like in Montgomery County, Maryland (pictured here).

Photo Credits (left to right): Lee Langstaff, EPA
Supporting the Rural Landscape:Investing in the Farm Economy

- Yolo County, California is a largely agricultural county on the edge of a major metro area, important for local and state agricultural economy.

- Pursued farmland preservation through:
  - Marketing of locally grown and organic produce ("Capay Valley Grown")
  - Right to farm ordinance
  - Land trust involvement in conservation efforts
2. Help Existing Places Thrive

- 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

Photo Credits (top to bottom): National Trust for Historic Preservation, EPA
# Strategies, Tools, and Policies

## Goal 2: Help Existing Places Thrive

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Tools &amp; Policies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.a. Invest public and private funds in existing places</td>
<td>• Fix-it-first  &lt;br&gt; • Historic Preservation and the Main Street Approach  &lt;br&gt; • Parks and natural resource areas as destinations  &lt;br&gt; • Streets and streetscape improvements  &lt;br&gt; • Targeted new development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.b. Encourage private sector investment</td>
<td>• Infill development incentives  &lt;br&gt; • Overcoming barriers to infill  &lt;br&gt; • Redevelopment readiness certification  &lt;br&gt; • Split-rate tax</td>
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<td>2.c. Build on past community investments</td>
<td>• Adaptive reuse  &lt;br&gt; • School rehabilitation</td>
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<td>2.d. Foster economic development in existing downtowns</td>
<td>• Local business survey  &lt;br&gt; • Business recognition program</td>
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Renovating existing buildings, like the James Dean House in Rosemont, New Jersey, can help preserve a community’s historic assets.
Helping Existing Places Thrive: Streetscape Improvements

- Streetscape improvements on Main Streets like in Victor, Idaho (pictured here) can help lower traffic speeds and provide parking to support local businesses.

Photo Credits (left to right): Charlier Associates, Inc., City of Victor
3. Create Great New Places

- 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

Photo Credit: City of Keene
### GOAL 3: CREATE GREAT NEW PLACES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Tools &amp; Policies</th>
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<tr>
<td>3.a. Update strategic and policy documents to accommodate new growth</td>
<td>• Visioning</td>
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<td>through compact and contiguous development</td>
<td>• Places worth preserving</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Designated growth areas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Infrastructure grid and transportation options</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Distinctive local character</td>
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<td>3.b. Reform policies to make it easy for developers to build compact,</td>
<td>• Policy alignment</td>
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<td>walkable, mixed-use places</td>
<td>• Walkability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Parks and open space</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Traditional neighborhood development</td>
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<td>• Form-Based Codes</td>
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<td>• Context-sensitive design</td>
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<td>• Green street design</td>
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<td>• Low-impact development</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.c. Recognize and reward developers that build great places using</td>
<td>• Smart growth recognition programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>smart growth and green building approaches</td>
<td>• Green building</td>
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Creating Great New Places:
Comprehensive Planning in Vienna, Maryland

- New places – build places where people, especially young people, want to live.
  - Compact, walkable, mixed-use
  - Historic connection
  - Form is part of the rural paradigm of places

- Vienna, Maryland created a community vision plan and got their codes in order to attract this type of development.

Photo Credits (top to bottom): Vienna, Maryland; The Conservation Fund
Creating Great New Places: Fostering Transportation Options

- Bozeman, Montana has created a fixed-route bus system (Streamline) to serve students, faculty, commuters, enhancing the viability of downtown.
- Provides a great example of a fixed-route bus system that has thrived, even with small population.
Smart growth in a rural community: How could it work in the landscape?
The Bottom Line... for Rural Communities to Consider

- Assess current conditions (best assets, key challenges)
- Engage in a collaborative visioning process
- Develop and implement policies to achieve that vision

Photo Credits (left to right): Worcester County, NRCS, EPA
EPA’s Office of Sustainable Communities: Working in Rural America

- EPA Office of Sustainable Communities is active in many rural communities (~20% of applications for assistance come from rural communities)
- Governors’ Institute workshops include rural focus – Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, Iowa, and North Carolina
- Rural related guidebooks:
  - Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities”
  - “Essential Smart Growth Fixes for Rural Planning, Development and Zoning Codes” (not yet released)
- Rural focus moving forward:
  - Rural development category: 2010 Smart Growth Achievement Awards
  - Strong interest from USDA Rural Development for collaboration on smart growth strategies for strong rural communities

Photo Credits (top to bottom, left to right): NRCS, NRCS, EPA
Sustainable Communities Partnership

• Working with HUD, DOT, and USDA to think through how the Partnership’s activities could better serve Rural America

• Tasks
  o White Paper
  o Program Analysis
  o Case Studies
  o Stakeholder Contacts
  o Performance Measures
  o Rural Tour?
  o Pilot Project?

Photo Credits (top to bottom, left to right): EPA, EPA, City of Keene
For Discussion: The Economic Development Frame

- Economic development is the driving framework for many rural communities...
  - How can we articulate our message in terms of the economic benefits smart growth approaches can provide?
  - And how can we make the case that communities should consider land use as an integral part of their economic development strategies?
A Few More Case Studies

Photo Credits (clockwise from top left): National Trust for Historic Preservation, EPA, EPA
Waverly, Iowa (population ~10,000) is in the process of recovering from floods from 2008 and revising their comprehensive plan.

Asked for assistance with the following policy analysis:
- Conduct an audit of Waverly’s comp plan and development regulations to identify opportunities to integrate smart growth concepts.
- Establish green infrastructure strategies city-wide.
- Increase housing options and infill strategies in Waverly to accommodate the demand for housing as a result of the floods as well as new growth.

Held a public workshop on smart planning in May 2010 – stakeholder meetings, design charrette, and open house.
Waverly, Iowa – Final Products

- Policy Memo on Green Infrastructure and Housing Options
- Final Design Concepts
- Learning about federal investments and how they can help implement local vision
Rapidly growing cities in Teton Valley, Idaho (pop. ~1300 each)

Accommodate growth in the cities:
- Articulate the vision: community wants a thriving, revitalized downtown and development that respects the land
- Revise policies and codes to allow for compact, mixed-use development
- Strategic public investment
What is your vision for the future?

Communities across the country have concluded the vision is important:
- Guides public policy
- Public investment
- Provides a stable investment climate for the private sector
- An image for the future
Victor, Idaho

- Design guidelines for traditional neighborhood development and small lot zoning;
- Strategies for increasing connectivity and pedestrian friendly streets;
- Concepts for turning Hwy 33 into a boulevard.
- Beginnings of a downtown vision;
Victor, Idaho: Supporting smart growth outcomes with transportation investments

- State highways in downtowns create challenges:
  - Traffic
  - Noise
  - Pedestrian safety
  - Economic development
One solution... that’s being pursued in Victor

- Public investments in road infrastructure can support community goals AND traffic flow goals.

- Boulevards: Victor is using paint as an interim step.

- Partnership can help make this type of solution the status quo, not the exception
Main Street Victor
For More Information

**EPA:** [http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/sg_rural.htm](http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/sg_rural.htm)  
**ICMA:** [http://www.icma.org/ruralsmartgrowth](http://www.icma.org/ruralsmartgrowth)

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