

PAUL MCMORROW

A frugal answer to zoning pitfalls, needlessly slashed

Sprawl isn't so much a deliberate choice as it is a product of bureaucratic inertia.

By Paul McMorrow | NOVEMBER 29, 2011

THESE SHOULDN'T be controversial statements - gasoline isn't getting cheaper; land is finite and exhaustible, so sprawl is a waste of land; building new roads and sewer lines is more expensive than using the ones that already exist; it's no fun to sit in traffic. The logical end of these statements, that we need to find more efficient and more productive ways to construct buildings, shouldn't be politically divisive, either.

But in Washington, there's a vast difference between the way things should work and the way things do work. For example, there's no logical reason why Sustainable Communities, a modest Obama administration effort to encourage efficient patterns of real estate development, should be a political lightning rod. There isn't anything political about smart growth. The program was nevertheless shredded to appease the Tea Party.

The Sustainable Communities program should have been a chance for tree huggers and budget hawks to hold hands and play nicely together. The program broke down bureaucratic silos and coordinated policies across federal environmental, housing, and transportation agencies. It doled out small grants to municipalities, regional planners, and nonprofits engaged in anti-sprawl planning. Before having its funding rescinded by Congress earlier this month, it was operating on a \$100 million budget - a pile of crumbs, by federal standards.

In practice, Sustainable Communities-style smart growth means fewer subdivisions, denser and more walkable town centers, and linking new development to transit. Smart growth creates the type of vibrant mixed-use neighborhoods that Jane Jacobs

celebrated a half century ago, but there's no policy imperative in urban romanticism. Governments are embracing sustainable development because building better is an obvious answer to growing environmental and fiscal crises: If we're going to build new homes and businesses anyway, we should at least construct them in a way that's not deliberately wasteful. This wastefulness applies to the open space that sprawl consumes, as well as the enormous cost of developing and maintaining the infrastructure serving new suburbs and exurbs.

Sprawl isn't so much a deliberate choice as it is a product of bureaucratic inertia. Outdated zoning codes are often stuffed full of provisions that force the construction of isolated, traffic-choked, single-use subdivisions. Zoning that was written decades ago often doesn't allow dense, mixed-use, transit-oriented development. Since many communities don't have the staff, budget, or planning expertise to overhaul their zoning, sprawl spreads on its own momentum.

Sustainable Communities tried to halt the momentum behind sprawl by giving communities money to make their zoning match smart growth best practices. It was a bridge between municipalities' broad desires to build smarter neighborhoods, and the street-level zoning that enables smart growth development to proceed. The federal grants are especially needed by suburban cities and towns, which lack the budgets and staff to write substantive zoning code changes.

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The Metropolitan Area Planning Council, the regional planner for 101 communities around Boston, got \$4 million from Sustainable Communities last year. It is using the money to plan for new development along the Fairmount Line in Boston and along the Green Line Extension in Somerville and Medford. It's planning new bicycle lanes in Westwood and Dedham. It's turning around an outdated industrial park in Framingham. It's planning for new development in Everett, Hingham, Lynn, and Millis, and helping Littleton and Essex balance economic development with open space preservation.

This kind of unglamorous, labor-intensive work is happening around the country. The demand for planning funds far outstrips the supply - this year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development received \$500 million in funding applications for a \$100 million pool of grants. But this year's batch of grants will be the last. Tea Party

activists have been assailing Sustainable Communities as a tool for making municipalities subservient to Washington bureaucrats; alternately, they've denounced it as the soft launch of a socialist-inspired UN takeover of America's government.

In response House Republicans cut all Sustainable Communities grants from a recently enacted mini-omnibus budget. The House actually wanted to go even further, prohibiting any HUD funds from being deployed in support of what it called "ill-defined rubrics, such as 'sustainability,' 'livability,' 'inclusivity,' and equity.'" And it cut a \$100 million placeholder for Obama's doomed \$38 billion high-speed rail initiative for good measure. Never mind that the cuts will wind up costing more than they save: These days, craven power plays are good politics.

Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at Commonwealth magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.