What Works when It Comes to Planning for Smart Growth?

In 1997, Maryland caught the attention of urban planners and city officials across the country with the passage of its Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation initiative. As this incentive-based approach to managing growth reaches its 10th anniversary, Maryland and states across the country continue to wrestle with the challenges of community development and land conservation.

To examine the program's impact and effectiveness, land-use researchers joined state legislators, local government officials, home builders, environmentalists, and academicians in early October for a three-day conference entitled "Smart Growth @ 10: A Critical Examination of Maryland's Landmark Land Use Program." It was organized by the University of Maryland's National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education and RFF.

"The trade-offs we face in urban planning, the competition between open space and sprawl, the tensions between population density and traffic congestion—all these issues have only intensified over the past 10 years, in Maryland and many other parts of the country," said Margaret Walls, RFF senior fellow and co-organizer of the conference.

Although Maryland's Smart Growth legislation is often held up as a model for other states, most conference participants conceded that the initiative has not been as successful in controlling urban sprawl as they had hoped.

"As we face a booming population, rising sea levels, a warming planet, escalating gas prices, and a troubled housing market, the need for aggressive action is urgent," said former Maryland governor and Smart Growth visionary Parris Glendening in his keynote speech.

The cornerstone of the Maryland program is the concept of "priority funding areas" (PFAs), or town centers and urbanized regions of the state that receive priority for state infrastructure dollars. Because it eschews the "stick" approach of urban growth boundaries in favor of offering the "carrot" of state funding, Maryland's program has always been seen as more incentive-based than regulatory.

Several papers presented at the conference, however, suggest that PFAs may be failing as means for containing new development and need to be revised and strengthened. For example, the amount of money earmarked as incentives under the Smart Growth law represents only about five percent of the overall state budget, according to Gerrit-Jan Knaap, director, National Center for Smart Growth, Jungyul Sohn of Seoul National University, and Rebecca Lewis, a University of Maryland graduate research assistant.

Most participants agreed that increasing density in PFAs is essential to achieving Smart Growth goals. Reaching this outcome may be easier said than done, however. Elizabeth Kopits, EPA; Virginia McConnell, RFF and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County; and Daniel Miles, University of Maryland, Baltimore County; looked at the density of development across different regions of eight Maryland counties, along with the density limits allowed in those regions. They found that the density limits established in zoning laws have typically only constrained development in the more rural, large-lot zoning areas.

Despite Smart Growth's shortcomings, the opportunity now exists to embrace fundamental changes, according to workshop participants. Decisionmakers must confront the current challenges in order to drive change and support Smart Growth as an important mechanism for influencing development patterns in Maryland and nationwide. ■

▸ To learn more, visit www.rff.org/rff/Events/SmartGrowthat10.cfm.

▸ 2007 Nobel Peace Prize Recognizes Climate Change Research and Leadership

In October 2007, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (▸ IPCC) and former Vice President Al Gore for their efforts, according to the citation, "to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about manmade climate change, and lay the foundations for measures that are needed to counteract such change."

The award to the IPCC gives new recognition to a scientific process that RFF researchers have contributed to for many years. The IPCC is a structure of working groups involving hundreds of experts who periodically report on the status of knowledge in the many fields that describe the science of climate change, its impacts, and possible responses to it.

Successive IPCC assessments have marked the growth of the scientific consensus that the planet's climate is warming, and that the principal cause is the rising prevalence of gases generated by human activity, primarily carbon dioxide created by burning fossil fuels.

Among the RFF researchers who have participated in drafting IPCC reports in the nearly two decades since it was founded are Senior Fellows Alan Krupnick, Roger Sedjo, William Pizer, and Richard Morgenstern.