

SMART GROWTH PLANNING PRINCIPLES AND PARKS AND RECREATION

Craig W. Kelsey, Ph.D.

Smart growth planning is a philosophy based on a set of principles designed to guide local communities in their efforts to promote and ensure development activities that yield improved quality of life, environmental sensitivity, economic revitalization and sense of community. Smart growth is an effort to avoid future growth patterns that operate independent of a total community vision and result in inconsistent and incompatible neighborhoods, business and industrial corridors, transportation options and quality of life resources.

Ten principles represent the basis of smart growth planning with each of these concepts speaking directly to the parks and recreation system.

Principle 1: *Mixed Land Uses*

Historically many communities have created land zones that are exclusive to one type of use only, such as business, industry, residential and the like. Suggested within the smart growth philosophy is an approach where these various aspects of community life are intermixed creating varied uses in close proximity. This allows for greater use of public land, increased number of citizens intermixing in business sectors and a revitalized sense of community. Citizens live closer to work sites making these intermixed areas attractive to residential living.

The parks and recreation system creates parks and trails that support this intermix of uses. Rather than neighborhood parks placed solely in residential areas, the parks and recreation system designs park plazas integrated with business zones, mini park hubs interconnected with walking and biking trail systems that allow moving easily between housing, transportation corridors and business uses.

Principle 2: *Compact Building Design*

Compact design, that is building vertically rather than horizontally and not consuming critical land space, suggests that structures and their associated amenities such as parking terraces be encouraged. This philosophy supports the preservation of green space and open space, and allows for undeveloped lands, streams, rivers and lakes to remain undisturbed. This type of design advances increased public transit, reduced traffic congestion, and maintenance and support costs are more efficiently utilized.

The parks and recreation system is then in a better position to weave green space, open space and trail systems through these more vertical structures. Coupling mixed use with compact design the parks and recreation system serves as a vital element of community sense and land use appeal.

Principle 3: *Range of Housing Opportunities*

It is not uncommon to find housing options defined by cost, neighborhood style and single focus design. By creating housing choices that are diverse and intermixed, transportation, education, and access to a variety of services is opened and available to a more diverse population set. When intermixing housing choices in new developments as well as existing zones, a greater housing balance is achieved with a variety of single family, multi-family, suburb and in-city options.

Parks and recreation is critical to creating a sense of community within a mix of housing options. Parks become vital as a public service working to meet a greater variety of citizen needs, such as young families, stabilized empty nesters, singles and senior citizens. With full range housing options, full range parks and recreation support opportunities are necessary.

Principle 4: *Walkable Neighborhoods*

One principle of smart growth that resonates with the parks and recreation system is the concept of walkable neighborhoods. This approach is one where the community is designed in such a way that residents can walk to those elements of the community that are important to them; such as schools, churches, public services, play sites, shopping and work. The commitment that the city design makes is to locate these services within an appropriate walking range of the mixed uses and housing options. Then the design of the community is such that walking is safe, accessible, interesting and possible.

The parks and recreation system is integral to this philosophy. The trail system designed and maintained by the parks and recreation entity may serve as the primary corridor for the walkable neighborhoods. Besides walking and biking trails serving a recreation purpose, they also represent the travel conduit of the neighborhoods.

Principle 5: *Sense of Place*

Smart growth promotes the idea that a citizen needs to feel a sense of place, of community, identity and pride. Elements of a sense of place may be different for each community. It may be found in distinctive community architecture, or intermixed green spaces, cultural identity, historical preservation or some combination of many components. Sense of place starts with a community accepted vision of what makes that particular community unique, special and attractive.

Many communities look to the already existing natural beauty that serves as a draw to community life. Other communities invest in the green and open spaces of the parks and recreation system to create that unique sense of place. The parks and recreation system may become the common focus for a community sense of place.

Principle 6: *Preserve Open Space and Natural Beauty*

Open space serves many purposes, such as green space, animal habitats, plant growth zones, production lands, recreation experiences and wet lands. Additionally, open space may be a part of the natural beauty of the community that supports quality of life experiences. Open space should be viewed as land that is worthy of protection, preservation or appropriate use and not just unused land.

The parks and recreation system is usually the land guardian for community open space and the responsible party for identification, purchasing, protection and maintenance of that community's natural beauty. The role of parks and recreation in supporting this principle of smart growth is critical.

Principle 7: *Community Involvement*

For these planning principles to be effectively used citizen participation, understanding, involvement and support is important. Citizens will find different components of smart growth particularly appealing and other principles of less interest. Each community will find the integration or combination of a mixture of these principles helpful. However, citizen involvement and commitment is necessary to garner the long-term support necessary.

The parks and recreation system is usually well experienced in providing opportunities for public involvement and input. The use of charettes, public hearings, focus groups, citizen based visionary workshops and the like represent a list of tasks that the parks and recreation system use on a regular basis.

Principle 8: *Direction of Development*

This principle encourages new growth in the direction of already existing infrastructure, neighborhoods, public services and to focus on in-fill rather than consumption and expansion into open space, green zones and areas of natural beauty. Rather than abandon older areas, development is focused inward creating a stronger revitalization and perhaps new energy into already established community areas.

The investment that the parks and recreation system makes is to maintain at a high level those already existing parks and recreation resources and to prioritize new efforts into older and well used areas of the community. The tendency is to expand outward, but this principle recommends a focus inward.

Principle 9: *Multiple Transportation Options*

An important aspect of smart growth is to create multiple systems of transportation, connectivity and

public service that is easy, effective and equitable. For many communities this would mean transportation planning, coordination of land purposes and public transit.

The parks and recreation system assists by encouraging the design, placement, use and maintenance of alternative transportation paths, such as, walking and biking trails that serve not only recreation purposes but may serve as an option for travel to work sites and use for other citizen needs.

Principle 10: *Cost Effectiveness*

In order for smart growth principles to work, the various components must be cost effective. Much of the success of smart growth relies on private developers finding ways to integrate these principles and still generate financial vitality. The government entity assists by reducing barriers to permit applications, regulations and procedures. At times code adjustments will be necessary but not at the expense of safety and prudence.

The parks and recreation system assists with an attitude of being a part of the success of proposed ventures that may require the parks and recreation system to adjust or perhaps vary from standard procedures. It is time for creativity and vision rather than restriction to traditional methods of thinking and planning.

Smart growth is an exciting and vital way to look to the future and create communities that are healthy, interesting and citizen friendly. Not all of the ten smart growth principles need to be applied in all settings. At times only one principle will be appropriate and possible. Perhaps a combination of principles will be most effective for that community.

Parks and recreation systems play a critical role in each of the ten principles and success of smart growth can be greatly enhanced by the commitment of the parks and recreation system.

Craig W. Kelsey, Ph.D. is the Dean, Extended University and a Professor, Department of Public Policy and Administration for California State University - Bakersfield. For more information on the use of smart growth principles in the parks and recreation system, contact www.play-safe.com