ADOPTING SMART GROWTH TO SAVE MONEY, PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT, AND ENHANCE ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

Virginia continues to grapple with the impacts of sprawl — with its focus on more compact and efficient growth areas. In recent decades, suburban sprawl has taken an enormous toll on Virginia’s taxpayers, communities, and environment. For example, the impact on family budgets from long, costly commutes has been significant and contributed to the 2008 real estate collapse in the outer suburbs. These challenges, combined with limited federal, state, and local funding for public infrastructure and services, make smart growth — with its focus on more compact and efficient development — a public policy imperative.

Virginia has taken some steps in recent years to better link land use and transportation, including the incorporation of land use as a key factor in prioritizing transportation projects under SMART SCALE. However, much more needs to be done to ensure that transportation and other infrastructure investments in cities, towns, and locally-designated growth areas are efficient, walkable, and mixed-use communities. This smarter approach to development offers opportunities to meet changing market demand and to link growth, quality of life, environmental protection, and infrastructure savings, while boosting economic competitiveness. Further action is needed to advance smarter growth in Virginia, including strengthening state and local partnerships to study infrastructure costs and target tax dollars to more compact, walkable, transit-accessible growth areas.

BACKGROUND

In recent decades, suburban sprawl has taken an enormous toll on Virginia’s taxpayers, communities, and environment. For example, the impact on family budgets from long, costly commutes has been significant and contributed to the 2008 real estate collapse in the outer suburbs. These challenges, combined with limited federal, state, and local funding for public infrastructure and services, make smart growth — with its focus on more compact and efficient development — a public policy imperative.

Virginia has taken some steps in recent years to better link land use and transportation, including the incorporation of land use as a key factor in prioritizing transportation projects under SMART SCALE. However, much more needs to be done to ensure that transportation and other infrastructure investments in cities, towns, and locally-designated growth areas are efficient, walkable, and mixed-use communities. This smarter approach to development offers opportunities to meet changing market demand and to link growth, quality of life, environmental protection, and infrastructure savings, while boosting economic competitiveness. Further action is needed to advance smarter growth in Virginia, including strengthening state and local partnerships to study infrastructure costs and target tax dollars to more compact, walkable, transit-accessible growth areas.

Good data is essential. State and local governments should estimate and report:

- Projected population and employment growth and the potential for residential units and commercial square footage under their existing comprehensive plans and zoning;
- Residential and commercial capacity of vacant and underutilized land within existing growth areas (not greenfields) if developed or redeveloped as compact, mixed-use, walkable development, and estimate infrastructure costs under both a development pays its fair share through proffers, impact fees, or other contributions, and enable them to provide incentives to encourage development within compact growth areas.
- Reversing this trend and steering our communities back toward smart growth — efficient, compact, walkable communities with good public transit — is essential to meet the evolving needs of Virginia residents and businesses, and protect our communities and environment.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Target scarce state infrastructure dollars to compact, walkable, transit-oriented places.

Enable local governments to ensure new development pays its fair share through proffers, impact fees, or other contributions, and enable them to provide incentives to encourage development within compact growth areas.

Reject proposals to weaken local land use authority for comprehensive plans, zoning, and reviews of utility infrastructure.

Ensure Go Virginia economic development and federal Opportunity Zones are tied to smart growth (mixed-use, walkable, and transit-oriented locations) and link industrial sites to freight rail.

Improve data collection on land development and infrastructure costs.

Strengthen the use of designated growth areas and service districts, with an emphasis on prioritization between nearby counties, towns, and cities.

Strengthen land conservation tools including Transferable Development Rights, Purchase of Development Rights, and conservation easements.

CONCLUSION

Many fiscal conservatives and conservatives agree that the way we have grown in recent decades is costly for taxpayers and results in more traffic, air and water pollution, loss of farms and habitat, and a lower quality of life. Reversing this trend and steering our communities back toward smart growth—efficient, compact, walkable communities with good public transit—is essential to meet the evolving needs of Virginia residents and businesses, and protect our communities and environment.