

Why smart growth falls short

O'Malley has a chance to succeed through more aggressive state action

By Gerrit-Jan Knaap

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Although Maryland has a national reputation as a leader in smart growth, urban development continues in places where it is not wanted and rarely occurs in places where it is desperately needed, a University of Maryland report reveals. Further, in several smart growth performance measures — multi-family housing construction, per-capita vehicle miles traveled, housing affordability and compact development — Maryland ranks near the middle of the 50 states and has not measurably gained ground over the last decade.

Smart growth in Maryland was launched in 1997 by then-Gov. Parris Glendening, and it became his signature initiative. The program required state agencies to focus spending on urban infrastructure in priority funding areas and on land preservation in rural legacy areas. Mr. Glendening also created the smart growth subcommittee — the precursor of **President Barack Obama's** sustainability partnership — and an office of smart growth, the precursor of offices of sustainability in several federal agencies. Subsequently, the O'Malley administration strengthened the relationship between local planning and zoning, required local governments to report annual measures of progress, and increased efforts to promote transit-oriented development. If smart growth has not curtailed sprawl in Maryland, it has not been from lack of trying by state government.

The report has some good news. Evidence suggests, for example, that the state's efforts to stimulate development around transit stations have promise, that transit ridership continues to rise, and that the state has preserved millions of acres of farm and forest lands. Furthermore, there are reasons to interpret negative trends cautiously. It is impossible, for example, to know what would have happened had the state not refused to subsidize sprawl; and 10 years is not a long time to change deeply entrenched patterns of human settlement. Unfortunately, though indicators tell a lot about current and historic development trends, they cannot by themselves explain why those trends occur. Despite these qualifications, it is hard to believe that Mr. Glendening and his colleagues hadn't hoped for more evidence of progress than the University of Maryland report provides.

Measurable progress has been elusive for many reasons. Maryland is the wealthiest state, with a corresponding strong demand for large houses on large lots. Support for the program has wavered since Mr. Glendening left office. The state has lacked the budget conditions necessary to fund a robust, incentive-based approach. And, perhaps most fundamentally, the appeal of Maryland's incentive approach to smart growth is the lack of regulations that compel change on the part of developers or local governments. It should thus not be a surprise that such change has been slow and disappointing.

Achieving smart growth success will require fundamental change in the way development is planned and managed. **History** suggests that such change has improved prospects for success in a governor's second term. Governor O'Malley now has an opportunity to build on what he inherited and what he has begun. In the current period of slow growth, he can turn what some perceive as a crisis into an opportunity to make smarter growth a reality.

To build on what he has inherited, Mr. O'Malley should work with local governments to enhance the effectiveness of priority funding areas — the state's key growth management tool. Local governments want more flexibility in how PFAs should be drawn. If more flexibility can be

exchanged for stronger controls on development outside PFAs, that's a trade he should work hard to make.

To build on what he has already started, the governor should accelerate and strengthen efforts to adopt a state development plan, which has been statutorily required since the 1970s. Mr. O'Malley formally announced his intention to adopt such a plan in July 2008. Now that his second term has begun, he should deliver on that promise. In this era of sustainability, that plan must also incorporate the still-evolving climate action plan and the watershed implementation plan just submitted to the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** as part of the multistate effort to clean up the **Chesapeake** Bay.

Maryland has a long tradition of progressive and aggressive policy response to land use and environmental issues. The Glendening administration pioneered an innovative approach to smart growth based on incentives and targeted state spending. Although Mr. Glendening should be lauded for his efforts, 10 years later it is clear that approach has not achieved its intended goals. Governor O'Malley has a reputation for using data as the basis for informed management decisions. In that tradition, the University of Maryland indicator report, by showing where we are and are not making progress, could serve as the basis for bold, new actions on his part.

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