

Educational Initiatives Related to Housing in the Northeast: a Concept Paper

INTRODUCTION

We have decided to amplify on discussions to date regarding housing by considering the general question of housing “range of choice”. The issue we attempt to address is the identification of entry points a group of educators can use to investigate the housing portfolio in communities across the Northeast.

Two weeks ago, in a short white paper, we recall that the following topic surfaced during our October discussion:

Generating a Broader Range of Housing Choice. Builders and developers only produce housing that can be disposed of in housing markets. Shifts in those markets are not easy to anticipate and consumers are not always positioned to make informed choices about their housing options.

What follows builds on that notion by taking a deeper cut on the resource materials assembled by this committee since our meeting in Philadelphia. Considering those resources in total, it appears that a point of departure for many concerned with housing issues centers on the necessity of promoting smart growth. The principles underlying the smart growth discussion seem applicable across the board, even in communities experiencing slow or stagnant growth.)

SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES

A convenient reference is the Principles of Smart Growth (<http://www.smartgrowth.org/about/principles/default.asp>):

- [Create Range of Housing Opportunities and Choices](#)
Providing quality housing for people of all income levels is an integral component in any smart growth strategy.
- [Create Walkable Neighborhoods](#)
Walkable communities are desirable places to live, work, learn, worship and play, and therefore a key component of smart growth.
- [Encourage Community and Stakeholder Collaboration](#)
Growth can create great places to live, work and play -- if it responds to a community’s own sense of how and where it wants to grow.
- [Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place](#)
Smart growth encourages communities to craft a vision and set standards for development and construction which respond to community values of architectural beauty and distinctiveness, as well as expanded choices in housing and transportation.

- [Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair and Cost Effective](#)
For a community to be successful in implementing smart growth, it must be embraced by the private sector.
- [Mix Land Uses](#)
Smart growth supports the integration of mixed land uses into communities as a critical component of achieving better places to live.
- [Preserve Open Space, Farmland, Natural Beauty and Critical Environmental Areas](#)
Open space preservation supports smart growth goals by bolstering local economies, preserving critical environmental areas, improving our communities quality of life, and guiding new growth into existing communities.
- [Provide a Variety of Transportation Choices](#)
Providing people with more choices in housing, shopping, communities, and transportation is a key aim of smart growth.
- [Strengthen and Direct Development Towards Existing Communities](#)
Smart growth directs development towards existing communities already served by infrastructure, seeking to utilize the resources that existing neighborhoods offer, and conserve open space and irreplaceable natural resources on the urban fringe.
- [Take Advantage of Compact Building Design](#)
Smart growth provides a means for communities to incorporate more compact building design as an alternative to conventional, land consumptive development.

Re: Create Range of Housing Opportunities and Choices
(<http://www.smartgrowth.org/about/principles/principles.asp?prin=3>)

Providing quality housing for people of all income levels is an integral component in any smart growth strategy. Housing is a critical part of the way communities grow, as it is constitutes a significant share of new construction and development. More importantly, however, is also a key factor in determining households' access to transportation, commuting patterns, access to services and education, and consumption of energy and other natural resources. By using smart growth approaches to create a wider range of housing choices, communities can mitigate the environmental costs of auto-dependent development, use their infrastructure resources more efficiently, ensure a better jobs-housing balance, and generate a strong foundation of support for neighborhood transit stops, commercial centers, and other services.

No single type of housing can serve the varied needs of today's diverse households. Smart growth represents an opportunity for local communities to increase housing choice not only by modifying their land use patterns on newly-developed land, but also by increasing housing supply in existing neighborhoods and on land served by existing infrastructure. Integrating single- and multi-family structures in new housing developments can support a more diverse population and allow more equitable distribution of households of all income levels across the region. The addition of units -- through attached housing, accessory units, or conversion to multi-family dwellings -- to existing neighborhoods creates opportunities for communities to slowly increase density

without radically changing the landscape. New housing construction can be an economic stimulus for existing commercial centers that are currently vibrant during the work day, but suffer from a lack of foot traffic and consumers in evenings or weekends. Most importantly, providing a range of housing choices allow all households to find their niche in a smart growth community – whether it is a garden apartment, a rowhouse, or a traditional suburban home – and accommodate growth at the same time.

This interpretation of issues surrounding housing choice does not appear to be contradicted by American planning Association (APA) Policy Guide on Housing (<http://www.planning.org/affordablereader/policyguides/housing.htm>). Narrative around this topic on the APA web site falls under the category *Location and Diversity of Housing*.

A synopsis of that APA category follows:

- Comprehensive master planning, development regulations, and zoning ordinances are tools employed by the planning profession to protect residential neighborhoods from uses considered detrimental to and inconsistent with a "suitable living environment. However, contemporary urban planning practice has often focused on promoting and protecting traditional single family residential development, sometimes to the detriment of other housing needs.
- The location of housing affects many critical elements of life in society, including public schools your children can attend, promoting upward socioeconomic mobility, access to jobs, family safety, rates of appreciation in value, and wealth accumulation.
- Single family housing *can* be affordable housing. The issue is how that housing is developed and where. Land use regulations that dictate large lot sizes or specify architectural amenities often circumscribe lower-cost housing from communities. Creative development of clustered housing, and use of smaller lot sizes for homes are examples of planning tools that can lower housing costs, and make efficient use of land and resources.
- The location of housing affects transportation and the environment. New housing developed far removed from existing urban services and employment centers forces residents to drive to work, contributing to increased air pollution and utilizing limited resources to develop new roads and highways instead of maintaining existing facilities. In addition, the development process for residential uses frequently occurs without sufficient regard to the natural environment.

MORE DISCUSSION

To deepen the discussion extension educators in the Northeast might have on the subjects related to housing choice, it might be useful to consider three factors in greater detail. These factors are closely related but could be almost mutually exclusive depending on local circumstances. They are, in no necessary order of importance:

Factor I: Range of Choice

The entry point here would involve a housing inventory and some matching of that inventory with ideal types or housing options. The options menu would involve desktop analysis, taking take into account such demographic features as age, family size, income, proximity of services, etc. The inventory would entail arranging data from published, federal sources including the Decennial Population Census, the American Housing Survey, and so on.

Factor II: Affordability

A point of departure, referenced in other studies, could be the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definitions for affordable housing, based on yearly calculations of the median income for U.S. metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. According to the Conservation Fund study (<http://www.conservationfund.org/pdf/cbah%20report%20text.pdf>), HUD establishes household income ranges by percent of the area median income (AMI). Breakpoints are households with extremely low income (making less than 30 percent of the median income); low income (31 percent to 50 percent AMI); moderate income (51 percent to 80 percent AMI); and middle income (80 percent to 95 percent AMI).

Factor III: Conservation

Following the Conservation Fund study cited above, conservation development can take three forms across the landscape: 1) infill development or redevelopment in urban or village center, 2) suburban greenfield development, and/or 3). development in rural/exurban locations that avoids piecemeal decisions that slowly eat away at the rural and agricultural landscape and/or interrupt evolving networks of conserved open space lands.

NEXT STEPS

A question is whether this group of educators has the resources needed to investigate one or more of the above factors in an organized, substantive way. All seem to be pertinent housing questions and also questions that are transportable across state lines. The lowest hanging fruit at this point might be the possibility of engaging on Factor I, Range of Housing Choice.