

THE CAPACITY FOR SMART GROWTH IN THE SARATOGA LAKE WATERSHED:
A STUDY OF THE LOCAL PLANNING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

THE CAPACITY FOR SMART GROWTH IN THE SARATOGA LAKE WATERSHED: A STUDY OF THE LOCAL PLANNING PROCESS

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This study explores the capacity of municipalities in the rapidly growing Saratoga Lake Watershed to manage development using smart growth policies. Through evaluating comprehensive plans and surveying and interviewing planning board members, we found that several smart growth goals were included in almost all the comprehensive plans, and planning board members expressed an interest in smart growth. Though there was a strong commitment smart growth in theory, we identified several barriers to implementation. These include limited communication between boards, resistance to higher-density development, the reactive nature of planning boards, and comprehensive plans that lack strategies for putting smart growth goals into practice.

INTRODUCTION

As the population in the Saratoga Lake Watershed expands and land develops rapidly, the potential impacts of sprawl must be addressed. This type of development can place a financial burden on towns, greatly reduce open space, and affect water quality and the overall health of a watershed. Development needs to be planned and managed so that population growth can occur while preserving quality of life and natural resources. An alternative approach to development is the body of principles and practices called “smart growth”. Several components of smart growth require a regional approach to planning, which is made difficult by the Home Rule system in New York that delegates land use control to local municipalities. Given the Home Rule system, it is essential to understand the political processes through which development is regulated on a local scale. We studied the amount of support for smart growth policies in the Watershed through examining the local planning process.

POPULATION GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

The rapid population growth in Saratoga County represents the fastest rate of growth in the Capital District. Between 1980 and 2000, Saratoga County’s population grew by 30.5%, and is forecasted to gain an additional 58,850 residents by 2040, accounting for 65% of the projected growth for the greater Capital District (CDTC 2007; Daniels and Sampson). In addition, a study by the Open Space Institute found that the amount of new construction and building permits in the Capital District is increasing faster than the rate of population growth, suggesting that development is consuming more land per person (Daniels and Sampson). In fact, one study found that between 1986 and 1997, land was developed at 4.65 times the rate of population growth (CDTC 2007). The Capital District Regional Planning Commission projects that 90% of population growth will occur in suburban and rural areas (Daniels and Sampson; CDTC 2007). With the current average suburban population density of two people per acre, it is predicted that this population increase will result in the development of 40,549 acres in the Capital District by 2040. Growth in suburban and rural areas has been accompanied by urban decline (CDTC 2007). “In 1950, 71% of the region’s residents lived in cities or villages. By the year 2000, that proportion had dropped to 42%” (CDTC 2007). The type of suburban development

occurring in the Capital District and specifically Saratoga County is described as sprawl by several studies (Hevesi 2004; Daniels and Sampson; CDTC 2007). Sprawl is low-density development that is scattered, promotes the use of automobiles, segregates land uses, and expands outward from a city or town (Johnson 2001).

IMPACTS OF SPRAWL

Suburban sprawl is associated with a myriad of negative impacts, including a dependence on cars, the expense of extending infrastructure like sewer and water lines to outlying areas while neglecting existing infrastructure, a lack of resources put towards revitalizing old neighborhoods, and a declining tax base in urban areas (Hevesi 2004; Downs 2005). Environmental impacts include reduced open space and ecosystem fragmentation, the removal of native vegetation, reduced species diversity, loss of farmland, elevated levels of air pollution, and increased energy consumption (Johnson 2001). A study on Upstate New York found that, “Sprawl has been shown to consistently degrade wildlife habitat, threaten agricultural productivity, and raise the cost of public services at all levels of government” (Hevesi 2004). Sprawl also affects water resources through increasing the amount of land covered by impervious surfaces such as roads, buildings, parking lots, and sidewalks (Moglen and Kim 2007). Unchecked development resulting in a significant gain in impervious surface area in a watershed is a major contributing factor to the impairment of a water body (EPA Smart Growth).

Impervious surfaces account for several forms of degradation in streams and lakes. Rainfall that would normally infiltrate into the ground instead becomes surface runoff that moves quickly over smooth pavement, thereby increasing the volume and velocity of surface runoff. This can cause erosion at the edges of streams (Moglen and Kim 2007). The surface runoff also picks up any pollutants (including oil, fertilizers, and heavy metals) and deposits them in the water body (Moglen and Kim 2007).

While there are many negative consequences of sprawl, there is a need for economic opportunities and housing for the growing population in Saratoga County. Population growth is not synonymous with sprawl; options exist for managing development to avoid or limit the detrimental effects of sprawl.

SMART GROWTH

One much-discussed strategy for managing development is the set of principles and practices labeled “smart growth”. Smart growth arose out of dissatisfaction with the trend of suburban sprawl and its associated problems (Downs 2005). Many different organizations (including several federal government agencies, environmental groups, planning associations, and home builders associations) promote smart growth as an antidote to sprawl and other urban issues (Ye et al 2005). Definitions of smart growth from these groups and the aspects they choose to emphasize vary widely based on the goals of each particular organization (Ye et al 2005). For the purposes of our study, we chose ten more specific elements of smart growth to guide our research:

- Directing growth towards existing development
- Compact building design
- Infill development
- Mixed-use development (commercial and residential)
- Walkable neighborhoods
- Providing a range of transportation options (including public transit)
- Preserving undeveloped land
- Preserving farmland
- Protecting water resources
- Preserving community character

These policies are loosely based on the ten principles for smart growth from the Smart Growth Network (an umbrella organization linking about 25 groups), although we adapted and substituted some policies according to what we considered to be relevant for the communities in the Saratoga Lake Watershed. Representing smart growth as a list of separate practices is useful for research and comparison, but in reality a smart growth initiative is more valuable when combining most or all of these elements. For example, a high-density development project without a mix of uses does not exemplify smart growth (Hevesi 2004).

We envision an ideal smart growth development pattern as new growth occurring in already existing neighborhoods (such as a town center or hamlet), with higher densities, compact building design, and a mix of housing and commercial uses. Rather than developing primarily in outlying land, infill development can utilize vacant spaces within existing built areas (Ye et al 2005). Higher density in some areas can limit the use of

surrounding open space, farmland, and environmentally sensitive areas for development (EPA). These areas can be preserved through various mechanisms such as the purchase of development rights (Daniels and Lapping 2005). People are offered a range of alternative transportation options, such as walking, biking, and public transit (rail or bus) (Burchell et al 2000). Ideally, development is clustered around public transit lines. Instead of the homogenous landscape created by suburban sprawl, smart growth advocates for “distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place” (EPA).

When considering neighborhood layout and design, smart growth draws on concepts from the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) and Traditional Neighborhood Design (Hevesi 2004). These movements advocate connectivity to existing development and grid layouts for neighborhoods, with a range of housing options and a mix of residences, workplaces, and stores. In terms of design, buildings should be inviting (for example, with porches) to encourage community interaction and each neighborhood should have central civic spaces (Hevesi 2004). Lastly, New Urbanism suggests ““a popsicle test”- meaning that an eight-year-old should be able to safely bike to a store to buy a popsicle” (Hevesi 2004).

There are several additional aspects of smart growth that are beyond the scope of our study, yet are still important. Smart growth seeks to provide a range of housing options for varying income levels (Smart Growth Online 2008). We do not address the obstacles to providing affordable housing due to its complex nature, but it is nonetheless a noteworthy goal of smart growth. In addition, smart growth encourages economic development in a specific form: promoting “neighborhood business” so people in a community can have an integrated living, working, and leisure space (Ye et al 2005). We do not directly evaluate the interest in this type of economic growth, though it is certainly directly linked to many of our ten policies (Hevesi 2004).

BARRIERS TO SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Unfortunately, smart growth is not practiced nearly as often as discussed. Downs outlines several obstacles that inhibit the implementation of smart growth strategies (2005). One issue may be opposition by homeowners. Although an abstract dislike of sprawl may exist, homeowners do not typically support increasing residential density in their

neighborhood. In this way, smart growth strategies of increased density and compact building design is impeded by a “not in my backyard” mentality. Limiting sprawl also has the effect of changing who benefits from the increase in land values that comes with new subdivisions. For example, owners of parcels in the outskirts of a city may expect to profit from major increases in land values, and would therefore oppose a shift to more compact growth (Downs 2005).

Edwards and Haines propose that smart growth focuses on urban areas and that most elements of smart growth beyond natural resource preservation are less relevant for small towns (2007). Since the watershed contains many smaller towns, this may be a significant barrier to implementing smart growth policies. In terms of general attitudes towards these policies, the public as well as the political community may be resistant to the major overhaul in the existing system required to implement smart growth policies.

It is possible that the political structure of land use regulation is a considerable barrier, in conjunction with direct opposition to smart growth. Landowners, developers, and local communities all making individual choices concerning where and how development occurs is an obstacle to the implementation of the aforementioned smart growth practices (Downs 2005). While some components of smart growth (particularly structuring development around a public transit system) necessitate more centralized or regional planning, New York delegates the power to regulate development to local governments through a system called “home rule”.

HOME RULE

In this system, local governments control land use in their respective municipalities, giving towns the freedom to perform most functions without interference from the state. Local governments in New York State have some of the most extensive home rule powers in the country (Dept of State 2008). Under the General Municipal Law, planning activities fall under the duties of local governments (Dept of State 2008). Since the state has limited standards for local planning, each city or town can engage in essentially any level and type of planning they choose (CDTC Report 2005). While planning individually keeps local concerns a priority, piecemeal planning makes the harmonization of growth management goals amongst municipalities extremely difficult (CDTC Report 2005; NY State

Commission Report 2008). However, since this is the existing system, it is imperative to understand the means by which it occurs. Local governments typically regulate development through a process that includes comprehensive planning, zoning, and actions by local planning boards.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Municipalities may create a comprehensive plan through which to guide land use management (Salkin 2000). The comprehensive planning process usually involves an assessment of the current state of land use followed by the identification of long-term visions and goals for the community (Dept of State 2008). Public participation through hearings, surveys, and informational sessions is an important part of the process (Comprehensive Planning Factsheet). If a town does not have a professional planner to aid in the creation of a comprehensive plan, they can receive help from the county or hire private planning consultants (Dept of State 2008).

Although comprehensive planning is an important planning tool, we suspect that it is often not utilized to its fullest extent. Municipalities may not update their plan often enough to reflect current concerns (such as projected population growth). Furthermore, the issue of disjointed planning due to home rule exists even if individual comprehensive plans focus on smart growth strategies for their own community.

ZONING

Creating a zoning ordinance is a procedure for regulating land use, density, and the location of development that can exist by itself, but must accompany a comprehensive plan (Salkin 2000). Zoning maps and zoning regulations serve different purposes. A map divides the municipality into various sections intended for different land uses, such as residential, commercial, industrial, or mixed use. Regulations explain what each type of land use designation entails, such as the amount of density allowed in a low-density residential district (Dept of State 2008). A municipality must have a zoning board of appeals to provide some flexibility from zoning designations in certain instances, (Moss 1975).

There are a variety of additional measures used by municipalities to ensure that proposed development projects conform to the comprehensive plan and zoning. For

example, special use permit zoning allows the municipality to evaluate a proposed development project to ensure that it will not have a negative impact on the surrounding area (Dept of State 2008). The comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance guide local planning boards in their role as “the real workhorse of the community’s land-use control program” (Salkin 2000). The planning board takes the two planning documents into account when making decisions regarding future development.

PLANNING BOARDS

If a municipality has the resources for a planning department staffed with a professional planner, this individual is responsible for the technical aspects of planning and functions as a knowledgeable advisor to the planning board (Salkin 2000). Municipal planning boards are five to seven member entities appointed by the mayor or legislative body. Duties of the board vary, but can include the ability to prepare reports, assist in the creation of a comprehensive plan, and approve or disapprove subdivisions, site plans, or special use permits (Salkin 2000). For example, the Saratoga Springs Planning Board is a seven-member citizen board appointed by the Mayor. It is responsible for the approval of subdivision reviews, site plan reviews, special use permits, soil erosion and sediment control, and floodplain variances (Saratoga Springs). Depending on the scope of powers granted to it by the municipality, a planning board can have extensive authority in land use management.

County planning boards also have authority over certain land use issues in municipalities (Dept of State 2008). If a county planning board exists, municipalities are required to refer to it when an issue is located within 500 feet of a town boundary, among other situations (Dept of State 2008). However, if the county planning board disapproves the proposed zoning action, the municipal planning board may act contrary to the county recommendation by a super-majority vote (Salkin 2000). County planning boards can also provide technical assistance to local planning boards and can attempt to coordinate zoning and land use policies between individual municipalities to encourage compatible land uses (Dept of State 2008; Salkin 2000). In addition, regional planning councils between collaborating municipalities may prepare a regional comprehensive plan, aid in transportation planning, and conduct research (Salkin 2000).

Although a substantial amount of responsibility can be placed on a local planning board, its members do not necessarily possess the appropriate qualifications for the complex job of guiding development. According to the Capital Region Transportation Committee's Quality Region Task Force, "Planning Board members are frequently appointed with no requirements as to their experience with planning and no required training for their very important role in the community" (2005). This is especially of concern in communities that do not have professional planners at their disposal (CDTC Report). Planning boards are also prone to reactive responses to development proposals rather than proactive planning as a result of their often-limited capacity (CDTC Report).

New York recently passed a law requiring planning and zoning board members to receive four hours of training per year (Dept of State). Training can take the form of classroom instruction, on-site demonstrations, or self-study, and municipalities may define exactly what type of training the board members receive (Dept of State). According to the law, a planning board member could not be reappointed to the board if he or she fails to receive adequate training (Dept of State). Although the new law is a step towards increasing the knowledge of planning board members in certain topics, it may not be sufficient.

CENTRAL QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Considering the population growth and low density development occurring in Saratoga County, there is a need to manage development in a way that minimizes the negative impacts of sprawl. As there may be significant barriers to managing development using smart growth policies, our central research questions asks:

What is the level of support for smart growth policies from the municipalities and planning board members in the Saratoga Lake watershed?

Given the barriers to smart growth discussed above, our hypothesis predicts that there will be limited support in the watershed for policies related to smart growth, though municipalities with relatively higher populations and growth rates will be more apt to include these policies in planning.

METHODS

Our study took place in the twelve municipalities (Towns of Ballston, Charlton, Corinth, Galway, Greenfield, Malta, Milton, Providence, Saratoga, Stillwater, Wilton, and the City of Saratoga Springs) located in the Saratoga Lake Watershed in Saratoga County, New York. We did not include any villages within the watershed in our study. We used five methods of data collection to investigate the process of planning for smart growth in each municipality. These approaches were selected because they offer a wide variety of information.

1. *Collection of demographic data:*

We collected population information from the years 1990 and 2007 for each municipality from the US Census Bureau. After acquiring demographic data, we found the growth rate each town experienced. Demographic data allowed us to evaluate the comprehensive plans within the context of each town's unique situation. This data served as a foundation for our analysis.

2. *Collection of comprehensive plans* (see Appendix I)

We accessed comprehensive plans either online or by viewing hard copies at town halls in the case of Milton and Providence. We evaluated the plans based on their inclusion of the ten smart growth policies, how recently the plan was created or updated, citizen involvement in the development of the plan, and other aspects indicating overall quality. We created a rubric to analyze these various facets of the comprehensive plan, which was filled out individually to allow for differing viewpoints. Through assessing the comprehensive plans, we expect to find the degree to which the towns intend to focus on smart growth tactics for managing development.

3. *Survey:* (see Appendix II)

We attempted to survey each planning board member from the twelve municipalities in the Saratoga Lake watershed. The survey was distributed at planning board meetings or through the mail, depending on meeting cancellations and schedule conflicts. Prior to distributing the full survey, we showed a sample of the survey to a few planning board members to ensure clarity.

Upon completion and collection of the surveys, we entered survey answers into separate Excel sheets for each town, and later combined these documents. Survey answers were later analyzed in Excel. The purpose of the survey was to gain insight into the role of planning boards and planning board members views on smart growth.

4. *Interview:*

We interviewed nine planning board members from the municipalities in the Saratoga Lake watershed and one watershed coordinator from Vermont. On the survey cover page, we asked planning board members to give their name and contact information if they were willing to be contacted for an interview. We then chose interviewees from those that had responded based on their survey responses, and attempted to interview a representative cross-section of planning board members. These interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of the survey responses and collect more detailed personal perspectives.

5. *Attend planning board meetings:*

As an ongoing method throughout the study period, we attended at least one meeting for each of the twelve municipalities. Attending meetings allowed us a firsthand experience of how decisions are made, the level of citizen participation, and the general community opinion. As it was difficult to form a standard method of evaluation for the meetings, our data collection primarily consisted of recording the number of attendees, the topics on the agenda, and general opinions expressed by community members.

RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

We found that there has been considerable population growth in the watershed between 1990 and 2007 (Table 1). During this period, the population grew by 18.5% on average, which is slightly less than Saratoga County and far higher than New York State's 7.7% increase.

Table 1. Population Increase in the Saratoga Lake Watershed, 1990-2007

MUNICIPALITY	1990 POPULATION	2007 POPULATION	POPULATION INCREASE
Saratoga Springs	25,001	28,782	15.0 %
Milton	14,658	17,020	16.1 %
Wilton	10,623	15,472	46.0 %
Malta	11,709	14,379	22.8 %
Ballston	8,078	9,342	15.6 %
Stillwater	7,233	8,177	13.0 %
Greenfield	6,338	7,927	25.0 %
Corinth	5,935	6,382	7.5 %
Saratoga	5,069	5,566	9.8 %
Charlton	3,984	4,114	3.3 %
Galway	3,266	3,753	14.9 %
Providence	1,360	1,813	33.3 %
<i>Saratoga County</i>	<i>181,276</i>	<i>217,191</i>	<i>19.8 %</i>
<i>New York State</i>	<i>17,990,455</i>	<i>19,490,297</i>	<i>7.7%</i>

Source: US Census Bureau

Though overall growth has been high, the amount of growth experienced by each municipality varies considerably. The populations of Corinth, Saratoga and Charlton have not experienced as substantial an increase, while Wilton, Malta, and Greenfield are growing faster than the County. The total population of each municipality also differs greatly, ranging from Saratoga Springs at 28,782 to Providence at 1,813. The variation in size and growth rates among municipalities shows that each town has different circumstances in terms of managing development, and some may have more incentive to implement smart growth practices. As stated in our hypothesis, we expected municipalities with larger populations such as Saratoga Springs, Milton, Wilton, and Malta to be more proactive and amenable to smart growth than smaller towns such as Charlton, Galway, and Providence.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

We collected and reviewed each municipality's comprehensive plan for the presence or absence of the ten smart growth policies (Table 2).

Table 2. Population and Number of Smart Growth Policies in Comprehensive Plan

Municipality	2007 Population	# of Policies in Plan (10 total)
Saratoga Springs	28,782	9
Milton	17,020	7
Wilton	15,472	7
Malta	14,379	10
Ballston	9,342	7
Stillwater	8,177	7
Greenfield	7,927	4
Corinth	6,382	3
Saratoga	5,566	4
Charlton	4,114	3
Galway	3,753	6
Providence	1,813	4

When reviewing the plans, we did not differentiate between broadly stated goals and specific, action-oriented strategies. Despite this limitation, our analysis allows for a basic examination of which smart growth practices the communities within the watershed value. Overall, we found that smart growth is incorporated into all of the plans to some degree; all municipalities include at least three smart growth goals, and several included many of the ten policies. As our hypothesis predicts, we also found that municipalities with larger populations included more smart growth goals and means of implementation in their plans. The five municipalities with the largest populations in 2007 (Saratoga Springs, Milton, Wilton, Malta, and Ballston) had, respectively, 9/10, 7/10, 7/10, 10/10, and 7/10 of the smart growth practices in their plans. In comparison, the four towns with the smallest populations (Saratoga, Charlton, Galway, and Providence) had, respectively, 4/10, 3/10, 6/10, and 4/10 practices included in their plans. The absence of a certain practice in a plan does not imply that the town opposes that aspect of smart growth in general, but perhaps

that a certain policy is not currently viewed as appropriate (see Appendix III, Table 3 for a more detailed chart of smart growth in comprehensive plans).

Our prediction that a high rate of growth (percent increase in population from 1990-2007) would be linked with interest and engagement in smart growth practices was not supported (Table 1). It appears that the inclusion of smart growth in plans is more closely associated with total population size. This may be because communities with a substantial population to begin with have already recognized the need to employ smart growth strategies to manage development. Some towns with high growth rates, such as Providence (33% from 1990-2007) may continue to have relatively small populations (Providence had a population of 1,813 in 2007) and have not yet determined a need for more growth management.

Through examining the plans, it became clear that municipalities incorporate some elements of smart growth in their plans far more than others (Figure 1). Goals and strategies related to *Preserving undeveloped land* and *Preserving community character* were present in 92% of comprehensive plans, whereas *Compact development* and *Directing growth towards existing development* were included in only 33% of plans (Figure 1). *Walkable neighborhoods* and *Infill development* were also featured in less than half the plans (Figure 1). This indicates that although most municipalities value preserving open space, there is less interest in planning for higher density, compact development in some areas to accommodate population growth while maintaining open space. For example, a Providence planning board member maintained that, “Compact building design is not something that is occurring in our town right now. We do not have to worry about advertising this form of development because no one is proposing that we start using this in our area” (pers. comm. 27 March 2009).

While preserving rural character and open space are nearly universal goals, strategies for achieving these goals vary considerably. Malta, for example, has a strong commitment to compact development as a tool to preserve open space. According to Glenn Rockwood, Chair of the planning board, Malta has a “cluster zoning law, which means that any property over 10 acres requires the housing to all be clustered and still maintaining 50% green space” (pers. comm. March 20, 2009). Saratoga Springs, another relatively large municipality, also values compact development. A Saratoga Springs planning board

member illustrated the City's policy for preserving open space through describing the proposed Beaver Pond Village subdivision. Less than 50% of the total 180 acres is developable, and developers are building on only 18 of the 180 acres, leaving 90% of the land preserved (pers. comm. 23 March, 2009).

Other towns (primarily low-density) use larger lot sizes as a central strategy for keeping land undeveloped and maintaining rural character. Thomas Siragusa of Greenfield's planning board noted that the comprehensive plan and updated zoning had "made minimum lot sizes larger instead of smaller so as to push back on development a little bit" (pers. comm. March 23, 2009). Greenfield has promoted the use of cluster development to some extent, but increasing lot sizes seems to be the principal approach to preserving open space. The town's comprehensive plan states, "The plan for Greenfield is to remain largely rural, with large residential parcels" (Greenfield). Barb St. Phillips of the Providence planning board also focused on larger lot sizes when asked about preserving open space (pers. comm. 27 March, 2009). Rather than effectively preserving large tracts of contiguous open land, increasing lot sizes tends to promote a sprawling development pattern, especially when significant population growth is occurring (Hevesi 2004).

PLANNING BOARD MEMBER SURVEYS

We collected a total of 50 surveys from planning board members out of 78 distributed (64.1% response rate) and found planning board members to voice much support for smart growth principles. The majority of planning board members (70%) either strongly agree or somewhat agree that compact development is desirable to limit sprawl (Figure 2). Similarly, 67% of respondents agree to some extent that development should be structured to reduce the amount of vehicle travel necessary for residents (Figure 3). While this type of development could be interpreted in several ways, it generally refers to development that does not include sprawl. Jeff Cwalinski, Vice-Chair of Ballston, described the transformation that has led towns from compact development to suburbia:

"People kind of got away. You know, the car came along, highways got better, and people tended to move out. So that Traditional Neighborhood Design concept kind of went away. But then again, it's not to say that it's not needed or not desirable. Some people like that way of life and they should be allowed to live it" (pers. comm. March 17, 2009).

When asked to rank their municipality's priorities for development, respondents identified *Preserving Quality of Life* as the most important, followed by *Protecting Natural Resources* and *Preserving Open Space* (Figure 4). Members' personal priorities for their municipality were ranked in the same way (Figure 4). While the definition of *Preserving Quality of Life* would likely vary for each respondent, the high degree of importance assigned to open space and natural resources indicates that planning board members value these aspects of smart growth. In fact, natural resources and open space were identified as higher priorities than *Providing and Maintaining Public Infrastructure* and *Encouraging Economic Growth*.

Providing Public Transportation was the lowest priority in both cases (Figure 5). Thomas Siragusa of Greenfield thought that given fuel costs, public transportation would be helpful, but that Greenfield's rural nature made public transit unrealistic (although not impossible). Glenn Rockwood of Malta summed up the general outlook on providing more public transportation options:

"In a perfect world, yes, we should have more options, but the reality is they are not supportable by the public because it's just not what the public is interested in. We need to change our mindset in order to make that practical and it's just not today" (pers. comm. March 20, 2009).

It seems that the barriers to increasing public transit are primarily low population density and lack of interest from a public that is accustomed to using personal vehicles.

Providing and Maintaining Public Infrastructure was another low priority, and *Providing Affordable Housing* ranked low in members' perceptions of municipal priorities (Figure 5). *Increasing Tax Revenues* ranked low as a personal priority for their municipality, and most interviewees explained that fiscal matters were not a concern of the planning board.

The survey responses demonstrate that in theory, planning board members agree with major components of smart growth, including the preservation of undeveloped land and utilizing compact development to limit sprawl. Comprehensive plans also revealed support from municipalities for some aspects of smart growth. In terms of how this theoretical support for smart growth could be implemented, we asked several survey and interview questions related to the planning process to expand our understanding.

PLANNING PROCESS

There is a high degree of confidence among respondents of their planning board's ability to make sound decisions regarding development; 68% feel that the collective expertise of their board allows it to make informed decisions (Figure 6). 80% of planning board members indicated that they have received more than the minimum required 4 hours of training per year (Figure 7). However, there are several factors that respondents identified as affecting the ability of the planning board to implement the goals of their town. "Conflicting opinions among planning board members" affected the board a little for 58% and moderately for 18% (Figure 8). For 33% of respondents, "No planner or understaffed planning department" had a moderate or significant effect (Figure 9).

We found that although the title "planning boards" implies that this entity is involved in planning, most of the responsibility for proactive planning lies in the creation of the comprehensive plan and the translation of this document into the zoning ordinance. This is where lot sizes, density requirements, and subdivision regulations are created, all of which have a large impact on the placement and characteristics of development. Planning boards, in effect, serve as vehicles for carrying out the goals of the comprehensive plan and zoning regulations. "The number one thing that the planning board has to do is interpret the code correctly. The planning board is not a body to make laws; it is to practice, to interpret the law and guide the applicant appropriately," says Thomas Siragusa of Greenfield (pers. comm. 23 March 2009). The planning board does have significant input in proposed developments in terms of public safety (for example, providing a proper entrance for emergency vehicles), traffic issues, stormwater management, design guidelines, lighting, and other matters. However, the board's input is ultimately guided by zoning and the comprehensive plan. "If we really don't like a project, then we can encourage them to do it differently... But we can't approve or deny a project because we don't like it, or because we do like it. It either fits with the code or it doesn't" (pers. comm. March 23, 2009). It was clear through interviews and attending meetings that boards aim to adhere to the zoning ordinance, and by extension the goals of the comprehensive plan.

We also found that although a municipality can use all the tools at their disposal to manage development, a planning board is in essence a reactive body that responds to requests from individuals and firms. Cwalinski illustrates this finding:

“We don’t actively go out and talk to developers, we wait for them to come to us with a proposal, an application. It’s more reactive, it’s not proactive. The only thing I can say is when they submit a proposal, we can say, ‘This is what we would like to see’ and maybe in the future they would consider it” (pers. comm. March 17, 2009).

Over half of the survey respondents (57%) indicated their planning board spent 75-100% of its time reviewing applications (Figure 10). We also asked planning board members to identify the three tasks to which the board devotes the most time. *Subdivision review*, *Site plan review*, and *Special use permits* were by far the activities to which the planning boards dedicate the most time, with, respectively, 50, 49, and 29 respondents naming those duties as the most time consuming. In contrast, only five respondents cited the category *Advisory responsibilities*, and no respondents named *Preparing reports*. These findings support the conclusion that planning boards are primarily reactive rather than proactive.

PLANNING BOARD MEETINGS

Attending planning board meetings provided insight into how decisions are made, the varying issues facing towns, and the relationship between the planning board and the public. We attended meetings in all towns except Milton and Saratoga (due to cancelled meetings and schedule conflicts). These meetings ranged from half an hour to over four hours, depending on the items arranged for discussion on the agenda. Attendance rates were higher when a public hearing was scheduled or when more controversial projects were proposed, as compared to meetings with more basic procedures (such as lot line adjustments) on the agenda. More debate and controversy was generated when a proposed development could have a larger impact on neighboring parcels or the community at large through altering traffic patterns, noise or visual impacts, increased stormwater runoff, or wetland disturbance.

In Galway, a town with a relatively small population, wetlands were a controversial issue. At a meeting on February 24, 2009, a new development was proposed much too close to a wetland, sparking the public’s attention. Due to much community controversy, a lengthy public hearing occurred leading to postponement of the final decision until next month’s planning board meeting. In an interview with a Galway planning board member, she also spoke of the importance of protecting the wetlands, stating that “Galway has water everywhere and many forget this. The number of wetlands is a major concern. Runoff off a

person's property, blacktops, etc. We must remind the citizens to stay away from the wetlands!" (pers. comm. 20 March 2009).

There were noticeable differences between meetings at larger municipalities and those at towns with smaller populations. We grouped the six towns with populations less than 7,000 and found an average attendance of six, while the municipalities larger than 7,000 had 14 people in attendance on average. Only one of the six smaller towns reviewed a new project, while three of the six larger towns had a new project on the agenda. For example, the meeting we attended in Providence had only two people in the audience, one subdivision on the agenda and a public hearing in which these two people stated their thoughts. This relaxed meeting seemed standard for Providence, a town with only 1,813 residents that is part of the "very rural part of Saratoga County" (pers. comm. 27 March 2009). Though we were only able to attend one meeting at each town, we obtained a general picture of the development proposals coming before planning boards in towns of varying sizes, and we had the opportunity to witness the planning process firsthand. We did not attend any county planning board meetings, but several survey and interview questions addressed the issue of regional planning.

REGIONAL PLANNING AND INTER-MUNICIPAL COORDINATION

As discussed above, regional coordination is a key component in the successful implementation of some smart growth strategies, particularly structuring development around a public transit system. However, the majority of planning board members (62%) do not favor a regional planning board over local planning boards to prevent sprawl (Figure 11). While there seemed to be theoretical support in interviews for a regional planning board to enhance inter-municipal coordination and planning, most felt that increased regional authority might infringe on the ability of the local planning system to achieve what is best for individual municipalities.

According to Mr. Rockwood,

"The more information there is and the more cooperation there is, the more likely it is to have a region that is more sustainable for everybody, but giving them too much authority I think could diminish the individuality of the county... I think most communities like their individuality and their own sense of place... I think that their [existing regional boards'] input is valuable in terms of making recommendations, but they shouldn't have the power to, have the authority to dictate what happens" (pers. comm. March 20, 2009)

A Galway planning board member described the apprehension of creating a regional planning board by stating that it,

“Deals with turf, no one wants anyone else on their turf. We want the county to come up with a way to make it work so that turf will not be an issue. Population number is not the problem; no one wants to give their power away” (Pers. Comm. 20 March 2009).

Larry Woolbright of Milton’s planning board commented that since towns are unlikely to give up their jurisdiction, increased regional planning would require a state level change (pers. comm. 10 April 2009). According to Woolbright, planning for concentrated development in town centers with outlying areas of forest and farmland is almost impossible due to local control over planning and zoning.

Although a state mandated shift to additional regional authority is highly unlikely as well as unwelcome, there is a marked lack of contact between planning boards. 68% of survey respondents said their planning board consulted with other towns’ planning boards or officials either “rarely” (64%) or never (4%) (Figure 12). While this may be due to existing rules regarding input from one planning board to another (pers. comm. 27 March 2009), it highlights the limited communication between boards. Based on interviews and observations from meetings, we found that individual towns typically have limited interactions with one another unless required by law. A Corinth planning board member illustrates this finding:

“At the Saratoga County training conference, I did speak with some other town planning board members, however that is the extent of our communication. We do notify other towns if a project is on the border, but that has not yet occurred during my time on the board. (Pers. Comm 23 March. 2009)”

John D. Murray of Stillwater’s planning board discussed the planning process for the Luther Forest Technology Park, which is to be located in both Stillwater and Malta. In this case, the developer’s representatives must get approval from both planning boards. In order to streamline the process and reduce delays, Malta and Stillwater gave the responsibility for stormwater management inspection to the DEC. According to Murray, “That is good cooperation amongst all parties” (pers. comm. 27 March 2009). In this case, it seems that coordination was only achieved through delegation to the state level.

The lack of coordination between boards may affect the ability of municipalities in the watershed to implement smart growth on a broad scale, and it also has an effect regardless of whether smart growth is involved. 48% of planning board members

indicated that *Lack of cooperation from neighboring towns* affected the ability of the board to implement the goals of the town a little, and 12% felt that it affected the board significantly (Figure 13). This indicates that increased communication between planning boards in some form would be beneficial for the municipalities in the watershed.

Based on our comprehensive plan evaluations and survey results, there is considerable support for some aspects of smart growth, especially preserving open space and natural resources while maintaining community character. Support for smart growth is particularly evident among municipalities with larger populations. In light of these findings, we might expect that development would occur mostly according to smart growth principles. While the scope of our study does not include an evaluation of actual development patterns, observation of the area suggests that an integrated application of smart growth policies is not widespread in the watershed. Therefore, we must consider possible reasons for the divergence between the general approval of smart growth and the apparent lack of it in reality.

DISCUSSION

Several reasons for the resistance towards some aspects of smart growth and the lack of implementation emerged throughout our research. Since the towns with smaller populations included fewer smart growth policies, it is possible that some aspects of smart growth are less relevant for small towns. In their study of smart growth in the comprehensive plans of towns and villages in Wisconsin, Edwards and Haines observed that smaller towns included fewer smart growth policies, and proposed that some policies were less applicable for towns with low population density (2007). Similarly, policies such as *Directing growth towards existing development*, *Compact and infill development*, and *Walkable neighborhoods* were notably absent from the plans of most small towns in the watershed (Table 3). Thomas Siragusa of Greenfield commented that when reading about sprawl and suburban planning, he often questions if the ideas apply to a rural town like Greenfield (pers. comm. 23 March 2009). Phil Giordano, a Corinth planning board member, stated that, “While I agree with it [compact building design], I do not think that it is necessarily important to be completed in the town of Corinth because we do not have that high of a population” (pers. comm. 23 March 2009). Barb St. Phillips of Providence

stressed that her town would rather have spread out development than growth where some development already exists because Providence is a rural town (pers. comm. 27 March, 2009).

While it is logical that towns seeking to preserve their rural character may view compact development as contrary to that goal, low-density communities still have an opportunity to utilize compact, mixed-use development on a smaller scale. There have been some strides towards this, such as Greenfield's mixed-use hamlets. It may be that widespread acceptance of these growth management strategies will not occur until population growth has caused perceptible changes to the landscape. Larry Woolbright described the development pressure facing Milton that could change the nature of the town. Woolbright wishes that Milton had more time to become familiar with certain planning tools, noting that the town is "just getting its feet wet" with planning and zoning (pers. comm. 10 April 2009).

Another explanation for the hesitance towards some aspects of smart growth is homebuyers' personal preferences for lower density development. Some might argue that sprawl is a reflection of a free market economy; that is, developers are only building what people want to buy and zoning codes with large minimum lot sizes are based on the community's desire for this type of development. According to the Vice-Chair of Ballston's planning board, Jeff Cwalinski,

"It is important to try to preserve open space. But at the same time, it is also important to provide a variety of housing... . There are some people who want to have a large lot... and that is absolutely fine with me. They bought the house, they should locate it where they get the maximum enjoyment and the government shouldn't be dictating where they should put the house" (pers. comm. March 17, 2009).

Mr. Cwalinski noted that Ballston had one area with Traditional Neighborhood Design that was compact and promoted walking, but he stressed the importance of allowing larger lots for those who prefer them. "You can't force a developer to build something that doesn't sell. They're spending the money, they are taking the risk, they've got to get the reward" (pers. comm. March 17, 2009). However, a key characteristic of a free market is consumer choice. If there were one or two appealing examples of Traditional Neighborhood Design or other types of smart growth development in the watershed, people might become more aware of the options available to them and would conceivably begin to view smart growth as a feasible alternative. A major criticism of existing New Urbanism developments like

Kentlands in Maryland is the high price of housing. Andres Duany, a founder of New Urbanism, offers his solution to this issue: “Yes, they are expensive. They are outrageously expensive. That’s why there needs to be more of them” (Flint 2006). Duany proposes that towns change their zoning codes to encourage New Urbanist developments in order to offer more options and bring down prices. “It’s a matter of supply and demand. People are desperate to live in places like Kentlands, as an alternative to lifeless, mindless, frustrating sprawl” (Flint 2006). While no planning board member we interviewed in the watershed expressed such a negative opinion of their town’s layout, Traditional Neighborhood Design might be viewed as equally desirable if there were more tangible examples.

In terms of how more smart growth projects could occur, it is important to consider what step in the planning process is most likely to facilitate this change. As mentioned earlier, we found that planning boards rarely engage in proactive planning; instead, the comprehensive plan and zoning code define the most influential aspects of development. According to Thomas Siragusa of Greenfield, “Whatever you draw up on a piece of paper in terms of zoning and minimum lot sizes, that is what you are going to get” (pers. comm. 23 March 2009). Furthermore, a Saratoga Springs planning board member observed that developers are inclined to push the limits of what is allowable, and that a “culture of approval” contributes to a tendency for planning boards to concede to developers. Clearly, this is not always the case, as many other interviewees noted that their board makes recommendations and encourages developers to change design elements if there are concerns, but it may still be a factor. John Murray of the Stillwater planning board commented that, “There is a lot of latitude that the planning board has, within reason, but if a planning board is too extreme then they are running into the risk of an Article 78... . . . when a person or a company sues the municipality” (pers. comm. 27 March 2009). We also noticed when reviewing comprehensive plans that some had a vision or goals related to smart growth that were not fully represented in a plan for implementation. The major implication of these findings for putting smart growth into practice is that the comprehensive plan must be clear and direct in its intentions, and ensure that certain regulations are mandatory (if that is the intention of the town) to relieve planning boards of the need to encourage developers to have a higher standard.

Case Study: Directing Growth Towards Existing Development

As stated previously, interest and support for smart growth exists, but municipalities encounter numerous obstacles inhibiting them from putting this support into practice. To illustrate the intricacies of implementing smart growth, we chose to highlight one of the ten smart growth policies that could greatly advance the process of managing development: directing growth towards existing development. This component of smart growth advocates open space to be preserved in a manner that serves the public while also providing a means of dealing with population growth. However, developers typically do not favor this type of construction because of pre-existing regulations in developed areas that are present less often when building on undeveloped land (Smart Growth Online 2008). New developments occur more often than additions to an existing community because some homeowners are reluctant and feel that more housing units may decrease their home value or appeal of their neighborhood. Cost is also a concern with this type of development. Retrofitting and revitalizing certain parts of a town require vast amounts of money that developers may opt to put towards creating new developments and not dealing with pre-existing regulations.

This element of smart growth has many advantages that could tremendously benefit the public that are perhaps not realized because it does not earn the abundance of publicity given to other smart growth policies. Projects with this goal in mind are often proposed by innovative private real estate developers who try to acquire permission from local governments to build new projects at higher densities than found in surrounding areas, and create a variety of housing types all within a single project (Downs 2005). These developers are aware of the profits that could result from building in this more sustainable manner.

Some towns in the watershed include this practice in their comprehensive plan, and seven of ten national associations promoting smart growth incorporate this particular aspect into their recommendations for growth management (Smart Growth Online 2008). Each of these organizations promotes this feature of smart growth in the manner that best suits their goals. For example, the Trust of Public Land states that their primary concern is to make existing communities seem more attractive than living in the countryside outside of the

town center (Ye et al 2005). One state-level strategy to further this component of smart growth is to draw boundaries around existing population centers and name them "priority funding areas", thus making growth outside of these areas less attractive, as they will not receive much funding for public infrastructure (Horton 2000).

While this is only a single practice within the umbrella of smart growth, it entwines with other aspects, including preserving quality of life and promoting walkable neighborhoods. Rather than creating gated communities and dead end streets, rebuilding and adding vertically to a given area can reduce traffic, maintain community spirit and strengthen the economic base in a given area. Unfortunately, this policy receives mediocre attention, and only 33% of the towns in the Saratoga Lake watershed include this specific practice in their comprehensive plans (Figure 1). Still, various interviews show support for this practice and some towns in the watershed do aspire to reinvest in existing neighborhoods. Wilton's comprehensive plan, for example, seeks to add to residential developments in the Jones/ Northern Pine area (Wilton). It is hoped that this will be accomplished in a fashion that does not compromise the quality of life that already exists (Wilton).

Greenfield, a town with a population of 7,927, seems to have predominantly low-density development. However, that does not eliminate the possibility of adding onto existing communities; Greenfield aims to do so through emphasizing hamlets and town centers (Greenfield). Though Greenfield consists of mostly low density residential developments, the town remains conscious of the abundance of natural resources that must be preserved. This ultimately gears most of their goals towards protecting natural resources (Greenfield). Ballston, a town with a similar population size, has included in their comprehensive plan the goal of retrofitting any building conform to current design and layout standards made by the zoning ordinance (Ballston).

Saratoga Springs, the urban center of the Saratoga Lake Watershed, includes the majority of smart growth policies in their comprehensive plan. The City pays much attention to fulfilling this particular practice of smart growth with its booming downtown district. This small urban hub offers much opportunity for infill, redevelopment and vertical expansion of lower buildings within its core. The entire comprehensive plan is geared around the idea of sustainability, hoping to "continue to concentrate commerce and

business in the inner core of the City. The few special areas that prove exceptions to the rule should be carefully controlled”(Saratoga Springs). Enough funding is available for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of existing areas. This could help in reintroducing more affordable housing to the City (Saratoga Springs). Despite the fact that funding and the determination to complete this type of construction exists, smart growth practices rarely gain implementation due to the position that municipal officials take even though they are in agreement with the theoretical principles of this nature of growth.

When already existing communities experience growth rather than outlying areas, vehicle use can also decrease. As most public transit systems tend to be in the town center, residents will not need to rely on cars for travel, but will be able to utilize a public transportation service. Bolstering the local economy is also an indirect benefit of directing growth towards existing communities. Open space preserved on the outskirts of town can include farmland, allowing for local food producers to supply the town with their products. In an interview with Larry Woolbright, he spoke of the benefits of agricultural land around populated town centers.

However, due to the fact that local municipalities hold complete control over planning and zoning, this type of planning is nearly impossible. To achieve the vision of land use described by Woolbright, more inter-municipal cooperation should occur, a goal stated throughout Saratoga Spring’s comprehensive plan. This collaboration could address issues that transcend municipal boundaries, potentially allowing for this smart growth practice to be implemented.

As regional planning could help facilitate the implementation of several other smart growth components, the lack of coordination between neighboring towns in the watershed is a possible concern. The preservation of a town’s distinct sense of place tends to be the main reason for hesitation towards increasing the authority of a regional planning board, however, individual community character will not necessarily be lost if a regional council were to gain more influence. Regionalization could offer many opportunities: a strengthened public transit system, increased amounts of farmland to provide local food sources, and a stronger local economy.

CONCLUSIONS

The general support for most aspects of smart growth from the municipalities in the watershed is promising. Maintaining open space and community character, utilizing mixed-use development, and protecting water resources were goals present in the majority of comprehensive plans. Results from our surveys also showed that planning board members prioritized open space, natural resources, and quality of life. Members also largely view compact development and planning for reduced vehicle use as positive strategies. Unfortunately, these elements of smart growth are lacking in comprehensive plans, due to a number of possible factors outlined in the discussion. As planning boards are reactive rather than proactive, and the comprehensive plan and zoning code hold such weight in the planning process, the tools for implementing smart growth need to be incorporated into plans with little room for interpretation. Furthermore, we found that a lack of inter-municipal coordination may be a barrier to effectively planning for smart growth. Increasing communication between towns could facilitate the sharing of ideas for effectively implementing growth management strategies. As the population in the watershed increases, the towns will have to plan ahead in order to manage development. Since most communities value open space, some of the less easily accepted elements of smart growth (such as higher density, compact development) may have to be more integrated into comprehensive plans in order to accommodate population growth while preserving undeveloped areas. There is a need to build these findings concerning attitudes towards smart growth and planning capacity by examining smart growth (or the lack of it) in practice. Future studies could explore examples of smart growth in action in the watershed, or possibly look at one municipality's comprehensive plan and zoning code in depth to see how it affects actual development patterns.

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