Dumb Growth

The smart-development movement has made sprawl worse, not better

NEARLY 20 YEARS after its inception, Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA) is a dismal failure. Instead of reducing sprawl by limiting development to designated urban areas, as the Legislature intended, we have subdivisions from Arlington to Tumwater housing people who work in King County. Instead of affordable housing resulting from a more intensive use of land, a median-income family cannot afford a median-priced home anywhere in King County. In Seattle, GMA-based growth regulations have added 45 percent — about $200,000 — to the cost of a median-priced home.

Despite these and other unintended consequences, we have yet to recognize the problems created by the GMA. Rather than change course, our planners and politicians — at the behest of the organized environmental community — are ordering more of the same. How did we get here?

SMART GROWTH

Washington's GMA is based on the principles of a national planning movement called "Smart Growth." The movement is based on the belief that the suburban, auto-depen-
dent development that swept the land following World War II is fundamentally flawed.

Smart growth advocates believe that suburban neighborhoods of detached homes with shops and services a short car trip away and jobs in a city somewhat farther away cause a host of ills — a wasteful use of land; higher costs for roads, utilities and services; and the desertion and blight of traditional downtowns. Is it any wonder that a movement confident that it had the solution to problems such as these would name itself "Smart Growth"?

In Washington, the GMA directed local governments to adopt plans to accomplish goals consistent with smart growth principles. The primary goal was to prevent sprawling low-density development by establishing urban growth boundaries. King County — home to 30 percent of the state's people and 40 percent of its jobs — was the most important of these local governments, and its decisions would reverberate throughout the region. Environmental advocates and planners dedicated to smart growth dominated King County's planning process. They were committed to stopping any further conversion of rural land to urban uses.

While developers scrambled to save proposed planned communities such as Redmond Ridge and Trilogy, in which they had invested millions of dollars and years of review, the principal debate before the county was whether the urban growth limit would be "permanent" or merely "long-term and unchanging." For practical purposes, the line established with the 1990 passage of the GMA is permanent. King County decided that none of its 323 square miles of rural lands could be used to meet the needs of its growing population. Growth would only occur in urban areas through infill and high-density redevelopment.

THE RESULTS ARE IN

The results were easy to predict. A task force of real estate experts appointed by the county said that the fundamental assumptions of the plan were not consistent with the market forces that drove real estate development. University of Washington geography professor Richard Morrill said that "the planning bureaucrats ... have declared war on the single-family home." Others predicted that people would simply drive until they found housing they wanted at prices they could afford. The county adopted the plan. History has shown its critics were right.

Recent census data show that King County, outside of Seattle and Bellevue, has grown faster than those two cities; the counties adjacent to King County have grown faster than King County; and the counties even farther out have grown even faster. Despite the rhetoric and planning policies encouraging density and infill, Morrill says, "The real story is one of decentralization." This is in large part the cause of our dysfunctional transportation system.

Last February, UW economics professor Theo Eicher concluded that GMA regulations added $200,000, or nearly 45 percent, to the cost of a median-priced Seattle home. By far the greatest cause of this increase was the restriction on the supply of land suitable and

Snoqualmie Ridge, with its walkable neighborhoods and convenience to recreation and shopping, is one possible model for smart urban planning in the Puget Sound region.
available for residential development.

The Seattle Times could barely contain its editorial outrage: "The UW study is a well-formulated footnote. It spells out the trade-offs that most residents have already accepted. ... Nothing is free. We must pay for what we value."

No doubt a comfort to those who actually have to pay the price. The planners I talked to echoed the Times. The study was about what they expected — no big deal, no need to change course.

WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY...

How did our leaders make planning decisions that doubled the cost of our housing and condemned so many of us to endless hours stuck in traffic? First, the decisions were complex and their consequences not obvious to those who did not understand real estate development. Second, we are who we are. That is, we live in the region sometimes referred to as Ecotopia. We are all, in a sense, environmentalists.

When I moved here in 1977, I brought along my dog-eared copy of The Whole Earth Catalog, purchased on the second anniversary of Earth Day. I debated with friends the advantages and disadvantages of active and passive solar heating, researched earth-sheltered homes, and thought of the day when I could leave the city for an off-the-grid life in the country. In short, I fit right in.

Faced with complex land use decisions and lacking an understanding of the consequences, how would a population of environmentalists make those decisions? Some — those most interested in and committed to the issue — would study carefully and come to their own conclusions. But most of us, busy with our own lives, would find a shortcut. The planners committed to smart growth and environmental groups were on one side of the debate. Real estate professionals — that is, developers and their paid lackeys — were on the other. Who would the citizens of Ecotopia trust? The Audubon Society or the Building Industry Association of Washington? Was the outcome ever in doubt?

WINNERS AND LOSERS

Our smart growth planners, blind to the consequences of their plans, certainly consider themselves to be winners. The members of the organized environmental community no doubt sleep peacefully, secure in the certainty that the costs they have imposed on the rest of us are for our own good. But, as far as I can tell, that's it for winners. The losers include all of us who have paid way too much for our homes and spend way too much time in traffic.

But there are many others who pay the price for our shortsighted planning decisions. If you hoped that your children could live in the community where they grew up, but they haven't gone to medical school or law school and therefore can't afford to live in their hometown, you are paying the price. If your formerly quiet neighborhood is now crowded with new town homes, apartments and condos, with more on the way, you are paying the price. If you are a longtime resident of one of the sleepy small towns once far outside Seattle's orbit, where the open fields have recently sprouted homes inhabited by people who leave before dawn to get to work, you are paying the price.

THE SOLUTION

The most perceptive book about real estate development following World War II was not written by a planner but by a reporter for the Washington Post — a self-described kneek-jerk environmentalist. In Edge City, Joel Garreau set out to discover why the rural Virginia countryside where he lived was being transformed into what he described as "Houston."

Garreau discovered a critical difference between planners and developers. Planners are driven by ideology. "The planners seemed to think that human behavior was malleable, and that nobody was better equipped by dint of intelligence and education than they to do the malleting..." Developers had no ideology — they merely sought to give people what they wanted. "Their unshakeable observation was: If they gave the people what they wanted, the people would give them money." It was this insight that made sense of what Garreau observed. Edge cities, he wrote, were "the manifest pattern of millions of individual American desires over 75 years."

After Edge City was published, Garreau was asked to address a group of planners. He gave them this advice: "Planners used to be taught that if they built a superior environment, it would create a superior class of humans. Forget it. It doesn't work. Work with the humans you've got, the way they actually behave."

Garreau's simple and common-sense advice fundamentally conflicts with the way we plan in Washington. If we followed his advice, we would build communities that people want to live in, and would do so in a manner that protects the environment we all care about.

It can be done. In fact, we have done it already. At Snoqualmie Ridge, thousands of families live in a new small town that has the best park system in the state and almost 50 percent open space crossed with trails. Residents can and do walk on their daily errands. Thirty percent of the homes are affordable. The parks, roads and utilities were paid for by the developer, not the public. Public facilities and services such as school sites and police and fire stations were built by the developer or paid for by tax revenues generated by the development. And, at a time when we are dedicated to saving Puget Sound from urban pollution, the stormwater that leaves Snoqualmie Ridge is cleaner now than before it was built.

Snoqualmie Ridge is not an anomaly. We have built several communities like it in this region. Issaquah Highlands, Redmond Ridge, Trilogy, and Northwest Landing, to name a few, are developments that were in process when GMA planning began, which developers scrambled to save. They are neither perfect nor without impacts. But they are far better than the small subdivision-based development pattern that preceded them, and also better than what is now happening in the region since we began to plan under the GMA.

Our planners insist on making our lives more difficult as we obstinately refuse to live according to their vision. Will they stop? Not unless we stop them. As C.S. Lewis observed, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive."

I can't help but think of Cool Hand Luke, the classic 1967 film starring Paul Newman. When Luke is brought back from his first prison escape, he is put in ankle chains. The captain tells him that the clanking of the chains will be a continual reminder to Luke of what the captain has been telling him for his "own good." Luke's response — "Wish you'd stop being so good to me, Captain" — leads to a savage beating followed by the famous line, "What we've got here is failure to communicate."

Our planners are telling us how we must live our lives for our own good. Our actions show that we have no intention of listening to what they say. And their refusal to take our action into account shows that they are not willing to listen to us. What we've got here is a failure to communicate. But we are not in chains and they can't keep beating us unless we let them. Our planners work for us. They are supposed to make our lives better, not worse.

There are alternatives to the dumb-growt policies we are currently living with. All we have to do is demand them.

George Kresovich is an attorney specializing in land use issues with Hills Clark Marti & Peterson in Seattle. The firm worked on land use approvals for Snoqualmie Ridge and Redmond Ridge.