

## NPG Booknote

# Better Not Bigger: *How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community*

by Eben Fodor

*Better Not Bigger*

New Society Publishers, 1999 (\$14.95)

Reviewed by NPG Executive Director Sharon McCloe Stein

American attitudes toward growth reflect a great deal of ambivalence. Many see economic and population growth as good business, more consumers, more workers, more prosperity — a rising tide that lifts all boats. For those who directly profit, growth is an engine of expanding wealth and power, with many politicians seeing it as the ticket to re-election and just as importantly a well-funded war chest. For most others, growth is a fact of life, something to be endured, the inevitable price of progress. For most ordinary American families living in sprawl ravaged communities, however, growth has a dark underside that has, until recently, received far too little exposure.

Now, Eben Fodor, who describes himself as a “public interest community planning consultant (i.e., not a development planner),” has written a book for those who want realistic alternatives to the prospect of never-ending growth. *Bigger Not Better* is a thoroughly accessible, information-filled, action guide that definitively exposes the myth that growth is an unalloyed good. His analysis of the money, economic forces, and political alliances that drive growth clearly delineates who are the real winners and losers. As Fodor follows the money, we find that it is not the long-term well being of American communities but an unwritten and too often unexamined mantra “In Growth We Trust” that drives the local politics of growth. Whether it is community activists or the increasing number of local decision-makers who are looking to battle the powerful and well-funded development interests, this is a book that provides the answers and arguments necessary to be an effective advocate for rejecting the growth

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imperative and moving toward truly sustainable communities.

Just as growth consumes communities piece by piece, Fodor meticulously takes apart the growth machine and exposes its inner workings. At the heart of this machine are what he describes as the “The Twelve Big Myths of Growth.” One by one, he addresses and carefully provides a detailed refutation of growth’s core ideology, myths such as: “growth provides needed tax revenues, we have to grow to provide good jobs, we have to ‘grow or die’.”

Fodor pays special attention to one of today’s most prevalent myths — that “smart” growth is the answer. If only we do a better job at planning, create some green space, revitalize the urban cores, “smart growth” can provide it all, good jobs, affordable housing, an increased quality of life and a healthy environment. He calls this “The Catch 22 of Growth: the better you make your community, the more people will want to live there, until it is no better than any other community.” Far too many communities have been seduced by the belief that they can have their cake and eat it too,



that they can somehow manage growth, mitigate the worst impacts of sprawl and still preserve quality of life and the environment. This book is a powerful exposition of the fundamental contradictions that underlie the rhetoric and often self-serving promises of smart growth apologists.

Much of the hard-hitting analysis on the costs of growth came from a groundbreaking study that Fodor did on the infrastructure costs to local communities of single family homes in Oregon. In what is perhaps the best in depth examination of the costs of growth to local communities available, Fodor's detailed analysis is a virtual activist primer on determining the costs of growth to any community across the country.

This book is far more than just a critique of growth. Its greatest value is to grassroots organizers, environmentalists, and other activists who want to get involved and do something to help their local communities put the brakes on growth. Much of the latter half of the book is a detailed nuts and bolts look at what local communities can do to control and in many cases stop growth on the local level. Unlike the growth accommodation masquerading as smart growth so fashionable among some national and state political leaders, Fodor recognizes that simply making the best of a bad situation is not enough. He is keenly aware that the main battles over growth are won and lost in thousands of local communities across the nation. This book also provides the analysis, information and resources to successfully take on the growth machine.

This emphasis on the local is both a strength and weakness in the book's approach to growth issues. If there is a shortcoming, it is in a failure to put local growth control efforts in the larger

context of national economic and population growth. While he details effective strategies and tactics for controlling or stopping growth on the local level, Fodor never quite comes to grips with the extent that national population growth drives both economic expansion and ultimately growth on the local level. As long as the national population keeps growing, the additional people will need jobs, houses, transportation and resources to consume. Populations may grow nationally, but the impact is most acute in the local community. No matter how well you manage, mitigate or minimize, additional humans means additional impacts on quality of life and on the environment be it locally, nationally or globally.

Likewise, Fodor never really examines how much more effective the measures he advocates would be if population growth pressures were alleviated. Good planning and design, economic and tax incentives, effective and innovative land use regulation, preserving undeveloped land, and citizen involvement are all important parts of controlling growth and moving toward sustainability. But, no matter how effective these measures are they are not by themselves sufficient for lasting gain. From a long-term perspective, the only sound foundation for ending growth is a stable and stationary national population, ideally at an optimum level much smaller than today's. *Better Not Bigger* gives much needed insights, analysis, practical tools and activist resources for those working for "smart" growth. Were these efforts combined with national efforts to lower immigration and eventually stop national population growth, the approaches presented in this book could be the basis for achieving truly livable and sustainable communities.



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