

NPG Forum

Growth Management Strategies for Stopping Growth in Local Communities

By Dr. Gabor Zovanyi

Gabor Zovanyi's 1998 book, Growth Management for a Sustainable Future: Ecological Sustainability as the New Growth Management Focus for the 21st Century, exposes the growth-accommodation bias of current growth management practices and makes a case for redirecting management efforts to a no-growth end based on ecological considerations. In his 1999 NPG Forum publication The Growth Management Delusion, Dr. Zovanyi argued that growth management must abandon its support for the growth imperative, reject the false belief that management will make environmentally-benign growth possible, and accept the need for basing future growth management activity on the imperative of ecological sustainability. In this Forum, Dr. Zovanyi presents arguments for debunking traditional pro-growth mythology, techniques for stopping growth in local communities, and suggestions for countering claims that local governmental actions to stop growth are illegal.

Hyperactive Global Growth from 1950 to 2000

The last 5 decades of the 20th century represented a period of unprecedented growth in the scale of the human enterprise. Between 1950 and the year 2000 the human population increased from 2.5 billion to 6 billion. The addition of 3.5 billion people surpassed the total increase over all of human history prior to 1950. From a growth of some 42 million people a year in 1950, the annual increase jumped to around 80 million a year by 2000. In that same period the global economy expanded from some \$5 trillion to over \$30 trillion. In the first half of the 1990s it expanded by more than \$5 trillion, matching the growth from the beginning of civilization to 1950. The dramatic nature of the growth from 1950 to 2000 may also be illustrated by the striking growth of giant urban centers during that period. In the developing countries, the world went from having to contend with only 1 city of more than 5 million in 1950 to 46 cities topping 5 million by 2000.

The planet's carrying capacity has already been stressed by the hyperactive demographic,

economic, and urban growth of the past 5 decades. If one defines human carrying capacity as the maximum rate of resource consumption and waste discharge that can be maintained indefinitely without impairing the functional integrity and productivity of the planet's global ecosystem, then a case can easily be made for the claim that natural limits to growth have already been exceeded on this planet. One may, for example, argue existent limits to growth based on human biomass appropriation, global warming, and the rupture of the ozone shield; land degradation as indicated by accelerated soil erosion, salination, and desertification; and the loss of biodiversity (Goodland 1992). Current limits to growth of the human enterprise are also being revealed by the depletion of a one-time inheritance of natural capital in the form of croplands, rangelands, forests, fisheries, and groundwater.

Further evidence that we have surpassed the carrying capacity of the planet comes from research on the ecological footprint of the human enterprise (Wackernagel and Rees 1995). This method measures the area of land and water required to provide consumption-related resource flows and waste sinks for the human enterprise,

with the ecological footprint being the total area appropriated from nature to support all human activity. Ecological footprint analysis shows the area appropriated by industrialized nations, representing less than 20 percent of the world population, is larger than all the available ecologically-productive land on Earth, and that if the planet's current population were to live at present North American ecological standards it would take an additional 2 planet Earths to accommodate the increased ecological load. These ecological realities, as revealed by the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity, clearly indicate that growth of the human enterprise must cease. If the richness of life on Earth is to be preserved, the growth imperative driving current human behavior must be replaced with the imperative of ecological sustainability.

If the planet's current population were to live at present North American ecological standards, it would take an additional two planet Earths to accommodate the increased ecological load.

Runaway Growth in the United States from 1950 to 2000

By growing from 150 million people in 1950 to 275 million in 2000, the United States added 125 million Americans, far surpassing the 74 million added during the first 50 years of the past century. The census bureau predicts we will match the 100 million Americans added in the 40 years between 1950 and 1990 in the 4 decades between 1990 and 2030. If the economic growth rate of 6.5 percent for the final quarter of 1999 were to be maintained, the enormous American economy would double in just over 10 years. The magnitude of economic expansion during recent years may be illustrated by the growth rate of automobiles in America. In 1998 the number of registered vehicles topped 200 million for the first time, with 15.29 million new vehicles registered and 12.51 million used vehicles scrapped. At that annual growth rate of 2.78 million vehicles, the total number of registered cars in the country would increase to 255 million vehicles by 2020,

putting 55 million additional vehicles in 2 decades on roads that are already experiencing gridlock in many of the country's metropolitan areas. In terms of urban growth, the annual population increase of 2.5 million Americans translates into the equivalent of 25 cities of 100,000 people every 12 months.

Runaway demographic, economic, and urban growth is taxing the natural carrying capacity of the U.S. in the same manner that the planet's carrying capacity is being stressed by global growth. As early as the 1980s an assessment of the carrying capacities of the 4 renewable resource systems of fisheries, forests, croplands, and rangelands concluded those systems were being exploited beyond their natural capacities of renewal in the United States (Webb and Jacobsen 1982). Topsoil, for example, is being lost at a rate approximately 20 times faster than it is being replenished. Environmental organizations report we have already lost over 50 percent of our original wetlands, more than 90 percent of our old growth forests, and fully 99 percent of the country's native prairies. Some sense of the extent of ecosystem disruption associated with ongoing growth is illustrated by a 1987 study which reported that of 23 ecosystem types that once covered about 50 percent of the coterminous United States, those ecosystems now cover only about 7 percent of the country's land area. Expansion of the human enterprise in America is eliminating natural ecosystems and killing off other life forms here as it is elsewhere on the planet. The scope of the destruction of biodiversity is revealed by a recent estimate that put at least 4,000 domestic species at risk of extinction. All of these indicators reveal that the pursuit of physical growth has now become an obsolete and lethal ideology, and that we are well past the point of having to abandon the growth imperative. Rather than seeking to maintain the unsustainable behavior of continued physical growth, current ecological realities domestically and globally demand that we proactively undertake actions to stop growth.

We have lost over 50 percent of our original wetlands, more than 90 percent of our old growth forests, and 99 percent of the country's prairies.

The Inadequate Growth Management Response to Growth

The phenomenal growth in the United States during the latter half of the 20th century produced an ideological shift in public perceptions regarding the value of further growth. During the 1960s and 1970s an increasing number of Americans began to question the merit of continued growth. Rather than automatically associating it with traditionally-assumed benefits like higher personal incomes and prospects for spreading an increasing tax burden over a growing number of residents, many started to view it as the cause of problems like overcrowded schools, traffic congestion, the loss of open space, and worsening environmental conditions. At the same time, increasing public opposition to ongoing land development surfaced as one expression of a new mindset on the phenomenon of physical growth. Land development, as one of the most obvious indicators of growth in local communities, started to be blamed for problems like the costly and destructive development pattern of urban sprawl and an inefficient provision of public facilities and services. The growth management movement that emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s was a direct response to this new ideological position on growth. Growth management suggested a relatively painless avenue for addressing any and all ills associated with future growth and its accompanying land development.

Growth management embodies the idea that growth needs to be managed, regulated, or controlled, rather than simply promoted as in the past, but it also maintains a decidedly pro-growth posture. As practiced in the United States, it assumes the possibility of accommodating ongoing growth in a responsible fashion if local communities merely manage its amount, rate, location, and quality. In reality, however, few communities have attempted to control the amount or rate of growth because of ongoing allegiance to the growth imperative, and have instead focused their attention on influencing its location and quality. The overwhelming majority of local growth management programs implemented to date clearly reflect continued growth accommodation (Zovanyi 1998). All 11 statewide growth management laws passed to date contain provisions intended to promote ongoing growth, and 8 of the 11 laws actually mandate continued growth accommodation by

local governments. Rather than conceding that growth itself represents the major problem of the current era, the growth management movement represents an institutionalized form of support for the growth imperative that pervades all aspects of our national culture.

An increasing number of Americans are contesting any expansion of their local communities.

Spokespersons for the growth management movement affix a number of adjectives to growth in order to justify its continuance. They speak of “inevitable, normal, reasonable, proper, realistic, sensible, responsible, and legitimate growth.” They also refer to “balanced growth,” arguing that a balance can be achieved between ongoing growth and environmental protection without compromising either. Most recently they have become advocates of “smart growth,” extending the realm of management concerns beyond containment of sprawl, efficient provision of facilities and services, conservation of resource lands, and environmental protection, to such things as affordable housing, public transit, restoration of urban cores, maintenance of open space, protection of rural lifestyles, and the creation of livable communities in efforts to counter or offset the negative effects of growth. Defenders of the movement’s current growth accommodation focus even suggest the possibility of “sustainable growth,” when growth is by definition unsustainable and showing itself to be lethal to the community of life on this planet. Rather than recognizing the idiotic nature of the oxymoronic term sustainable growth, management advocates maintain their allegiance to the growth imperative. As supporters of ongoing growth they even condemn the idea that management activity might legitimately be directed at efforts to stop growth, asserting this would represent inefficient, unjust, and irresponsible behavior. This position has not, however, stopped all efforts to remake growth management into something other than ongoing development facilitation. An increasing number of Americans are contesting any expansion of their local communities, and by doing so they are expressing opposition to the growth accommodation bias of current growth management activity. Part of their hostility to new development of any kind is based on direct attacks on the assumed merit of continued growth.

Challenging Pro-growth Myths

Those who have come to reject the wisdom of further growth have recently been afforded new arguments for challenging continued growth. An excellent overview of some of these arguments is provided in Eben Fodor's book *Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community* (Fodor 1999). In that work he provides evidence debunking the mythology associated with the assumed benefits of growth. With respect to the myth that growth provides needed tax revenues, Fodor points to research showing that new development tends to increase property taxes for existing property owners, and that communities with the most rapid growth tend to experience the greatest tax increases. As for the myth that we have to grow to provide jobs for people in the community, he cites national research indicating no statistical correlation between the growth rate and the unemployment rate across 25 of the fastest and slowest growing cities in the U.S. With regard to the myth that housing and land prices will shoot up if a community tries to limit growth, Fodor notes research showing that housing is more affordable in some growth-control cities than in comparable cities with rapid growth, and research that land prices are rising faster in some cities without growth boundaries, such as Oklahoma City, Salt Lake City, and Houston, than in a city like Portland with an urban growth boundary. Fodor's book debunks 12 such growth myths, and in the process provides sound rationales for questioning the growth accommodation practices of local governments.

Fodor's book also provides some surprisingly counterintuitive insights regarding the cost implications of land development. In contrast to the widely held assumption that development of vacant land will improve the fiscal standing of a local government, he points to studies in Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Alabama, and California showing that it would be cheaper for local governments to buy undeveloped land rather

It may be cheaper for local governments to buy undeveloped land rather than allow it to be developed and pay the increased costs of infrastructure and services.

Local governments should adopt growth-neutral policies in place of their current growth-inducing incentives.

than allow it to be developed and have to pay the increased costs of providing infrastructure and services. In his treatment of the cost of public facilities for a single new house in Oregon, he counters the conventional view that new development is a fiscally sound proposition by revealing local communities there subsidize new development to the tune of about \$25,000 for each new house. This represents off-site costs for schools, sanitary sewerage, transportation, water systems, parks and recreation, fire protection, and stormwater facilities, and does not include the local streets and utility connections that are part of a subdivision's internal development costs. These financial revelations provide further rationales for abandoning the ongoing growth accommodation of present growth management actions. For some they represent motivations for curbing the role of local governments in the urban growth machine that perpetuates growth in communities across America.

Altering the Role of Local Governance in the Urban Growth Machine

Fodor's book points out the most consistent theme in American local governance has been the pursuit of growth. As Fodor explains, local elected officials have historically been key players in a powerful pro-growth alliance that serves to maintain growth. The business and professional groups that have a common economic interest in promoting local growth fund candidates for political office who are sympathetic to a pro-growth agenda. Once elected, these officials advance land development through growth-stimulating activities that include supportive land-use regulations, investments in infrastructure required by development, economic development programs that court outside investors, new business subsidies, tax waivers, and a general subsidy of ongoing land development. If growth is to be restrained, Fodor suggests these growth incentives and subsidies will need to be

reduced or eliminated. This would require changing economic subsidies, tax subsidies, below cost services, free infrastructure provisions, favorable or relaxed land-use regulations, and other pro-growth policies practiced by local governments.

Changing the growth-promotion focus that represents the essence of local government, according to Fodor, will require that local governments adopt growth-neutral policies in place of their current growth-inducing incentives and subsidies that stimulate growth. As examples of growth-neutral policies he proposes impact fees to recover the full cost of public infrastructure, fees that recover the full cost of all development services, requiring that development pay for growth-related planning activities, and the application of local land-use regulations in a manner that does not promote growth. Fodor concedes, however, that these policies would only get local governments out of the business of stimulating growth, and would not necessarily guarantee growth would actually slow or stop. To achieve a sustainable state of nongrowth, local governments would have to execute a number of specific strategies.

Strategies for Stopping Growth in Local Communities

For those communities willing to go beyond the use of rate controls to slow growth, a number of strategies would have to be implemented to stop growth.

Strategy #1:

Eliminate the growth-promotion focus of local government by election or initiative.

The best way to eliminate the growth-promotion focus of a local community would be to elect local officials willing to support a no-growth agenda. Where the strength of the local urban growth machine makes this impossible, an alternative approach would be to force a no-growth agenda on reluctant or unwilling local officials with a public initiative. The initiative could require local elected officials to fund research to determine the natural limits to growth in an area. Once that research identifies limits based on considerations like sustainable water yield from an aquifer or the ability to maintain

biodiversity in local habitats, programs to cap growth within established ecological limits could be implemented. The initiative could also require the establishment of growth threshold standards (Fodor 1999: 117) that would preserve or improve an existing quality of life in a local setting, and thereby serve to stop growth in many communities. These standards would prohibit any deterioration, or require improvements, in things like environmental quality (e.g., air or water quality), community service (e.g., police or fire protection, library capacity), or travel times on a community's road network (e.g., congestion levels). In many local settings the cost of overcoming constraints established by these standards would effectively serve to shut down further growth. Under inevitable legal challenges to capping growth in a local community these documented natural limits or growth threshold standards would be extremely important, because courts would insist on justifiable rationales for stopping growth. For example, an appellate court in Florida showed a willingness to accept a cap on growth in the community of Hollywood, where studies showed the cap was warranted to protect public health, safety, and general welfare, as opposed to invalidating a cap set by public vote without supportive studies in the city of Boca Raton (Zovanyi 1998: 129-30). Once a community established a cap on further growth based on ecological limits or growth threshold standards it would have to implement the cap, which would require executing a number of other specific strategies.

Strategy #2:

Establish a moratorium on processing development permits until the community's comprehensive land-use plan and land-use regulations are amended to reflect the research-based cap on growth.

In the absence of a moratorium, land developers would be able to impose considerable additional growth on a community by vesting their right to develop under existing lax land-use regulations that typically embody tremendous potential for growth. Courts have allowed moratoria to block development during the time required to amend plans or regulations, when ongoing development would defeat the stated intent of revising these public documents in response to an emergency consisting of threats to a community's health, safety, and general welfare.

Seven Strategies for Stopping Growth

- Strategy #1:** Eliminate the growth-promotion focus of local government by election or initiative.
- Strategy #2:** Establish a moratorium on processing development permits until the community's comprehensive land-use plan and land-use regulations are amended to reflect the research-based cap on growth.
- Strategy #3:** Amend the community's comprehensive plan and land-use regulations so as to close out options for further growth.
- Strategy #4:** Terminate public investments in capital facility programs that make ongoing growth possible.
- Strategy #5:** Create a permanent urban growth boundary to physically limit further growth in the form of sprawl.
- Strategy #6:** Take private land out of development by acquiring it and holding it in public trust.
- Strategy #7:** Stop the job formation that fuels further growth.

Strategy #3:

Amend the community's comprehensive plan and land-use regulations so as to close out options for further growth.

During the period of the moratorium the comprehensive plan and land-use regulations would be changed to eliminate prospects for continued growth. Traditional comprehensive land-use plans for local communities reflect a decidedly pro-growth bias. In a growing number of states, local communities would have to change these comprehensive land-use plans in a fashion that eliminates options for growth before modifying their land-use regulations, because many states now require regulatory changes in permitted uses of land to be consistent with previous planning reflected in comprehensive plans. In these states, comprehensive land-use plans will have to be changed to reflect the studies justifying a cap on growth before regu-

Most of America's cities and counties are vastly overzoned and overplatted.

latory actions, like downzoning and plat vacations that eliminate existing subdivisions of land, can be legally undertaken to curb land development. Once comprehensive plans have been changed to reflect a no-growth end, a community could legally change the zoning and subdivision ordinances that currently ensure ongoing growth.

Most of America's cities and counties are vastly overzoned and overplatted. Their existing zoning districts and previously approved subdivisions of land represent enormous unrealized capacity for future land development. The absurdity of the growth potential embodied in existing community plans and land-use regulations was illustrated by a 1999 report in Florida. That report revealed city and county plans and associated zoning would permit the state to grow from its current 15 million to over 100 million under development based on the highest density permitted by those documents (Howard 1999). In order to stop growth, local communities must downzone land and vacate previously approved subdivisions, because overzoning and overplating of land guarantee ongoing land development. Downzoning rural land from 5 acre hobby farms to viable large agricultural parcels is legally defensible if the land can be viably farmed.

Similarly, downzoning residential land holdings from 1 acre lots to 40 acre parcels is legal if the action is required to protect a community's aquifer or other environmentally-sensitive lands. An existing subdivision of land that permits 20 single-acre lots on a 20 acre land holding, with associated zoning that allows densities ranging from 1 to 20 housing units per 20 acres, may in a like fashion be vacated to allow only a single house on the 20 acre land holding if the action is based on justifiable health, safety, and general welfare rationales embodied in a community's comprehensive plan. While these reductions in permitted intensities of use on undeveloped land, and the associated reductions in land value accompanying downzoning and plat vacation actions, will be opposed by defenders of the urban growth machine and by private property rights advocates, both actions are clearly legal if they can be justified based on a need to protect and promote the health, safety, and general welfare of a community (Zovanyi 1998: 112-3). However, in most cities and counties in America, changes in comprehensive plans and regulatory changes, like downzoning and plat vacations, will represent insufficient acts to completely shut down further growth. Local communities will need to reinforce these changes in their local plans and land-use regulations with other strategies.

Purchasing open space outside urban growth boundaries can close out development options and create a permanent greenbelt around a community.

Strategy #4:

Terminate public investments in capital facility programs that make ongoing growth possible.

Without public investments in roads, sewers, and other public infrastructure, land development could not continue to sprawl across America's local landscapes. Historically, local governments have extended these capital facilities in support of the urban growth machine. If local officials change the way they use a community's spending power for infrastructure so as to reduce development options on the landscape, further progress will be made toward the end of stopping growth. At the

same time a community changes its capital improvements program in order to stop supporting outward expansion of the community, it can also reinforce its objective of blocking further extension of its built environment by executing a related containment strategy.

Strategy #5:

Create a permanent urban growth boundary to physically limit further growth in the form of sprawl.

While downzoning to lower densities can block upward expansion within a community, a permanent urban growth boundary would eliminate prospects for growing outward. The permanence of the boundary could in turn be furthered by establishing a greenbelt of protected land around the community. This greenbelt could be created by regulatory techniques like exclusive agricultural zones, large parcel zoning with associated clustering of any limited development, and land-use regulations used in conjunction with techniques such as conservation easements. In many communities regulatory actions alone will not suffice to stop growth, and communities will have to supplement changes in land-use regulations with the strategy of public land acquisition.

Strategy #6:

Take private land out of development by acquiring it and holding it in public trust.

With recent research showing land purchases may save a community money over the cost of providing infrastructure and ongoing services to new development, these purchases appear to represent a fiscally sound option for local communities in the present era. Purchasing open space outside of urban growth boundaries represents a vehicle for closing out development options within a permanently designated greenbelt surrounding a community. Purchasing private land holdings may also provide the only feasible way of stopping the development of certain commercial and industrial properties where the character of surrounding land uses makes downzoning to less intensive uses difficult to justify. In these instances public acquisition would prevent more commercial and industrial development where downzoning of these properties was not practical and thereby advance yet another strategy for stopping growth.

Strategy #7:

Stop the job formation that fuels further growth.

Growth management experts have long conceded that control of future growth requires management actions that go beyond controlling new residential starts to managing the creation of new employment. In order to stop the job creation that fuels ongoing growth, communities must close out development options for new commercial and industrial enterprises. At some locations, communities may be able to eliminate commercial and industrial developments by downzoning properties to uses that do not generate new jobs. In other instances the only practical recourse would be to purchase these properties and thereby stop the new job formation that drives growth.

If local communities pursue these 7 strategies they can quickly move a community to a state of nongrowth. However, even consideration of these growth-termination strategies is certain to illicit a strong response from defenders of the ur-

ban growth machine and private property rights advocates. That response will, in turn, undoubtedly contain claims that governmental actions to stop growth are illegal. Proponents of the no-growth agenda will therefore bear the burden of countering such claims.

Countering Claims That Governmental Actions to Stop Growth Are Illegal

Claims of the illegality of stopping growth can be expected to reference a few principal arguments (Zovanyi 1998: 124-29).

Argument #1:

No-growth programs would impose unconstitutional regulatory restrictions on private property.

Advocates of private property rights would certainly claim the dramatic reductions in use and value associated with no-growth regulations represent illegal “regulatory takings.” However, as long as implemented regulations allow some remaining economically viable use of a private land holding, the courts will tolerate extreme reductions in use and value if the regulations are reasonably related to important health, safety, and general welfare considerations. A 40-acre parcel subdivided into 1-acre lots can, for example, be legally returned to a single parcel allowing only 1 residence by changing land-use regulations, if the action can be justified on legitimate grounds such as protecting a community’s sole-source aquifer.

Regulatory takings assessments also involve the “whole parcel rule,” which examines the impact of a regulation on an entire landholding, and which permits the denial of all use to a portion of an owner’s land as long as some reasonable use remains for the entire property. This rule allows regulators to prohibit development of environmentally-sensitive portions of individual landholdings even when these constitute the majority of the whole private parcel. If 75% of a property holding is comprised of wetlands, for example, a community can legally use its land-use regulations to deny all use of that portion of the property, as long as the owner is left with some economically viable use of the remaining 25%.

Arguments Used to Claim That Government Actions to Stop Growth Are Illegal

Argument #1

No-growth programs would impose unconstitutional regulatory restrictions on private property.

Argument #2

No-growth programs would impose unconstitutional restrictions on the fundamental right to travel.

Argument #3

No-growth programs would violate statewide growth management statutes.

Furthermore, communities interested in implementing a no-growth program could still allow economically viable uses of land other than the commercial and industrial uses that generate growth through expanding employment opportunities or the residential uses that serve to house a growing population. There are, for example, a number of income-producing agricultural and recreational uses that are capable of representing economically viable uses without forcing endless growth on a community. While Supreme Court standards for deciding regulatory taking claims do not allow a denial of “all use,” “economically viable use,” or “all economically beneficial or productive use,” there are allowable uses that may be permitted with less potential for generating further growth. Most regulatory taking claims are resolved by focusing on the remaining uses that regulations permit. Communities must therefore devise no-growth programs that still permit economically viable uses of private land, but they have no legal obligation to allow the most profitable use of any particular property. Where the desired use restrictions on individual properties could only be achieved by land-use regulations that deny economically viable uses, a community would have to abandon the regulatory approach and acquire these properties to advance its end of stopping growth.

Communities have no legal obligation to allow the most profitable use of any particular property.

Argument #2:

No-growth programs would impose unconstitutional restrictions on the fundamental right to travel.

Opponents of no-growth strategies would also be apt to claim these actions would violate Americans’ fundamental right to travel and settle in communities of their choice. This argument may be countered by pointing out that this right is not absolute, and that courts will tolerate interference with fundamental rights if the regulatory body can justify the interference based on compelling state interests. One might assume that certain environmental rationales, such as an inability to provide

sustainable groundwater supplies for a growing population, would be accepted as compelling grounds for stopping in-migration to a local community.

Argument #3:

No-growth programs would violate statewide growth management statutes.

In states with statewide growth management laws that mandate ongoing growth accommodation, defenders of the growth imperative would certainly argue no-growth strategies were precluded by state law. However, this claim is complicated by the existence of other state laws that may require local actions quite different from, and potentially in conflict with, continued growth accommodation. Many state environmental laws, for example, direct local governments to protect the environment. When environmental protection is compromised by ongoing growth the courts would have to resolve the conflict between state laws, and one can hope they would exempt specific local settings from further growth if it could be shown to harm the community’s health, safety, and general welfare. In the end, local governments have a right and an obligation to protect and promote the health, safety, and general welfare of their residents. If these ends cannot be achieved under continued growth, local communities must be assumed to have the legal right to stop growth within their political jurisdictions.

Transforming Growth Management for No-growth Ends

Growth management as practiced in the United States seeks to accommodate growth in ways that minimize its negative effects. The practice assumes ongoing growth is possible if the land development that occurs represents “smart growth.” However, “smart growth” will eventually produce the same intolerable conditions as dumb growth. Physical growth of human populations, their economies, or their settlements

“Smart growth” will eventually produce the same intolerable conditions as dumb growth.

represents unsustainable behavior in the current era. To pretend that growth can be made sustainable by planning it well represents as false a belief as the traditional view that there is nothing wrong with the dumb and unsustainable growth of past decades. Instead of “smart growth” many communities desperately need to reach a state of no growth if they are to move toward sustainable behavior. In fact, stopping growth represents the top priority among a long list of necessary actions required to make the transition to sustainable behavior. Local governments are in the unique position of being able to initiate this critical societal transition to a state of no growth by stopping the growth of local communities and beginning the process of transforming all our cities and counties into sustainable, nongrowing communities. A limited number of progressive communities must establish the precedent and begin the inevitable process of reinventing growth management to serve no-growth ends. For if communities do not stop growth by deliberate governmental actions, growth will certainly be stopped over time by intolerable environmental conditions.

The Requisite Growth Management Agenda for America

The transition to a state of nongrowth in America will clearly require changes beyond implementation of the 7 noted strategies for stopping growth in local communities. If growth is to be stopped in the United States, the federal and state governments will have to change numerous laws that currently serve to perpetuate growth. At the federal level, an example of a critically needed statutory revision would be a shift in current immigration laws. In 1986 the federal government initiated a series of changes to immigration laws that increased the annual number of legal immigrants from 400,000 a year to over 800,000 a year,

Up to 70% of the 100 million people expected to be added to the United States between 1990 and 2030 will be immigrants and their descendants.

and during a few years of the early 1990s the annual number permitted entry exceeded 1 million. The implications for future population growth have been noted by demographers, who point out that up to 70% of the 100 million people expected to be added to the United States between 1990 and 2030 will be immigrants and their descendants (Bouvier 1998). While stopping population growth nationally will also require policy changes directed at nonimmigrants, the role of immigrants in fueling future growth makes revisions to existing immigration laws a vital component of any national strategy for halting growth in America.

Eleven states have passed statewide growth management enactments that promote or mandate growth.

At the level of the states, one urgently needed revision in existing laws would be changes to statewide growth management enactments that mandate ongoing growth accommodation by all local governments. To date, 11 states have passed statewide growth management enactments that promote growth, and in 8 of the states the statutes actually mandate continued growth accommodation by all cities and counties (Zovanyi 1999). In order to stop growth, these laws will have to be revised to allow local communities to opt out of further growth accommodation if local health, safety, or general welfare considerations warrant shutting down additional expansion. Part of the associated strategy for stopping growth through state actions would require opposing the adoption of further accommodative growth management laws in states that enact statewide growth management statutes in the future.

While federal and state governments would obviously have to become participants in any meaningful effort to achieve a national state of nongrowth, the short-term prospects for such participation are not good. The federal government continues to endorse ongoing growth and its adherence to the growth imperative makes it an unlikely advocate of any growth management actions to impede growth in the foreseeable future. The states that have enacted growth management laws to date have evidenced their commitment to continued growth by passing acts that either pro-

In the end, “smart growth” is just as unsustainable as dumb growth.

mote or mandate future growth. It is only at the local level that serious questioning of the merit of further growth has occurred. In local communities the negative effects of growth are causing increasing opposition to growth, and it is in these settings that one can hope for experimentation with implementing no growth strategies. The focus on local strategies for stopping growth presented here is based on the view that local governments represent the best route for initiating a societal transition to a state of nongrowth. If a growing number of progressive communities implement strategies to stop growth in their locales over time, it will inevitably force a response by the federal and state governments that will bring about the needed rejection of growth as a viable policy option or survival strategy.

Once local communities stop growth they will be able to redirect their attention from coping with the negative effects of growth to creating livable and sustainable communities. However, this new focus will undoubtedly introduce challenges beyond those represented by the barriers to implementing strategies to stop growth. In many community settings, historic violations of local carrying capacities will require achieving and then maintaining a period of negative growth until populations and their associated economies reach a level that can be maintained indefinitely (sustained) without impairing the functional integrity and productivity of local ecosystems (Bartlett

1994). This new focus on downsizing and redesigning local communities to an ecologically sustainable level and form will represent an even more daunting task than stopping growth, but the alternative of maintaining growth is not a sustainable option.

Growth of the human enterprise does not represent sustainable behavior. No amount of wishful thinking or elaborate management will serve to make it sustainable. In the end, “smart growth” is just as unsustainable as dumb growth. America’s current population growth rate of about 1% per year represents a doubling time of approximately 70 years, and if that rate were maintained for 312 years the country’s present population of 275 million would match the current global population of some 6 billion before it doubled for the 5th time. The country’s economic growth rate of almost 7% during the final quarter of 1999 represents a doubling time of about 10 years, and 10 such doublings over a century would produce a national economy 1000 times larger than its current level. Another 10 doublings over the course of a second century would expand the current economy to 1 million times its present size. These examples clearly illustrate the unsustainable nature of demographic and economic growth. As an alternative to such unsustainable activity, communities in the United States can take the first step toward the inevitable process of moving the country to a state of sustainable behavior by implementing strategies to stop growth. Rather than pursue the false end of “smart growth,” local jurisdictions must act to stop growth before they can hope to attain and then maintain livable and sustainable communities.



About the author Gabor Zovanyi is Professor of Urban Planning, Eastern Washington University. He has taught growth management courses at Eastern Washington University, California Polytechnic University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and the University of Washington. His experience with growth management also includes years of employment as an urban planner with city, county, and federal agencies, as well as work as a private consultant on growth management projects. Dr. Zovanyi’s current interest and research focus on assisting local governments in overcoming the obstacles to using growth management to stop growth. His book *Growth Management for a Sustainable Future* identifies the legal obstacles to stopping growth in local communities, but argues that these obstacles are not insurmountable. He can be reached by e-mail at gzovanyi@ewu.edu.

Notes

1. Bartlett, A.A. 1994. "Reflections on Sustainability, Population Growth, and the Environment." In *The Carrying Capacity Briefing Book*. Washington, DC: Carrying Capacity Network.
2. Bouvier, Leon F. 1998. "The Impact of Immigration on United States' Population Size: 1950 to 2050." *NPG Forum*. Washington, DC: Negative Population Growth, Inc.
3. Fodor, Eben. 1999. *Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
4. Goodland, Robert. 1992. "The Case That the World Has Reached Limits: More Precisely That Current Throughput Growth in the Global Economy Cannot be Sustained." *Population and Environment*. 13,3: 167-82.
5. Howard, Peter E. 1999. "Report Warns of State Growth to 101 Million." *The Tampa Tribune*. Friday, April 2: A2.
6. Wackernagel, Mathis, and William E. Rees. 1995. *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
7. Webb, Maryla, and Judith Jacobsen. 1982. *U.S. Carrying Capacity: An Introduction*. Washington, DC: Carrying Capacity, Inc.
8. Zovanyi, Gabor. 1999. "The Growth Management Delusion." *NPG Forum*. Washington, DC: Negative Population Growth, Inc.
9. Zovanyi, Gabor. 1998. *Growth Management for a Sustainable Future: Ecological Sustainability as the New Growth Management Focus for the 21st Century*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.



© 2000 by NPG. Permission to reprint is granted in advance. Please acknowledge source and author and notify NPG. The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of NPG.

NPG is a national membership organization founded in 1972. Annual dues are \$30 and are tax-deductible to the extent the law allows. Please write or call for a list of available publications or visit our website at www.npg.org.

Negative Population Growth

1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Suite 101

Washington, DC 20036

voice: 202-667-8950

fax: 202-667-8953

internet: www.npg.org

e-mail: npg@npg.org

