

## **Evolving from Sprawl: The Way Forward**

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**By Rebecca Horan '13**

As the population continues to grow rapidly and the realities of climate change are realized, the United States cannot continue practicing suburban sprawl as it is simply unsustainable. Anthony Flint, the second Lambert Keynote speaker at Connecticut College's *Smart Growth? Environmental and Social Implications* Conference, discussed this topic as he outlined the undeniable benefits of smart growth cities and the cultural shift required to make these cities a reality. Flint credits the popularization of the private car as the liberating force of mobility out of cities to suburban areas where each family could have its own home, yard and car. Culture is gradually shifting away from this American dream of the 1950s in favor of convenient cities where people can live, work, and play within their own neighborhoods.

Anthony Flint began his presentation by recounting the struggle of activist Jane Jacobs against the formidable urban planner Robert Moses, the subject of Flint's 2009 book Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York City's Master Builder and Transformed the American City. Without realizing it, Jane Jacobs, a journalist from Greenwich Village, became one of the first proponents of smart growth. She did not approve of urban renewal that destroyed old neighborhoods for new skyscrapers; she instead believed in human scale neighborhoods and the importance of walkability in a city as well as good public transportation. Robert Moses was an influential figure with many governmental connections and the power to shape the city. Flint writes in the book, "[Moses] was responsible for 13 bridges, 2 tunnels, 637 miles of highways, 658 playgrounds, 10 giant public swimming pools, 17 state parks and dozens of new or renovated city parks". However, because of Jacobs' efforts, he was unsuccessful in implementing a four lane highway through Washington Square Park, as well as what would have

been the Lower Manhattan Expressway—a ten lane superhighway through Greenwich Village and what is now Soho. It is hard for those who know and appreciate those areas to imagine New York City without them, but maintaining them required citizen activism, by those who loved their neighborhoods and valued taking their kids to the park, to win the battle.

After detailing the effectiveness of grassroots activism through the Jane Jacobs legacy, Flint spoke about the present challenges to smart growth in the United States. He envisions smart growth cities that utilize infill development, improved public transportation, mixed-use neighborhoods, and truly walkable communities. Infill development means creating more densely populated areas by increasing the verticality of buildings to accommodate more people or building homes and businesses on vacant properties like brownfield sites. While helpful in terms of reducing sprawl, infill development faces much opposition from NIMBYs that want to leave the vacant space and do not want to embrace well-planned, dense neighborhoods. Despite some backlash, the country in general, Flint stated, is overbuilt with single family homes. This past February, he posted a piece titled *Zombie subdivisions and post-bust detritus* as part of his “This Land” blog on boston.com; he goes into further detail regarding the fact that there are too many single family homes in America and a decreasing demand. Many subdivisions in progress before the real estate crash were abandoned by developers waiting for a more favorable market. Flint and participants in the “New Partner for Smart Growth” Conference in Charlotte, NC proposed that local and state governments should buy the land for wildlife and natural resource protection. He notes that more and more aging baby boomers are looking to sell their large homes and the demand from young families simply cannot meet the supply; the movement away from suburban subdivisions is promising for smart growth in urban settings.

Zoning reform and public transportation infrastructure are the major areas for advancing the smart growth movement, according to Flint. Zoning codes are outdated and restrict mixing of residential and commercial buildings within a neighborhood; this mixed-use principle is central to smart growth communities where people cannot only walk from work to home, but also to restaurants, shopping areas, etc. Flint cited the Miami 21 initiative as victory for zoning reform as it favors new urbanism and smart growth. His blog “At Lincoln House” for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy included a post on zoning reform in Miami that utilizes form-based zoning code; the code focuses on the relationships of spaces within a city and supports pedestrian friendly mixed-use neighborhoods. The “Miami of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” encourages economic development, parks and open spaces, arts and culture, and historic preservation in addition to offering economic incentives to companies that construct affordable housing options and create open spaces.

The progress in Miami is encouraging, but another obstacle to urban growth is the cost of living in a city both in terms of financial and lifestyle sacrifices. Flint did not raise this issue during his presentation at Connecticut College, but did address the trade-offs between urban and suburban communities in a 2007 interview with *Urbanite Magazine* to discuss his book [The Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America](#). Suburban areas are categorized as sprawling given their low-density development that forces residents to drive significant distances between home, work, and other recreational activities. There are many attractive benefits to living in what Flint refers to as “exburbs” and boomburbs” including affordable housing, good schools, and safe communities. He raises the point, though, that residents should take into account all costs of living from the amount of money spent on the cost to heat or cool a large home, for gas to travel anywhere in the suburbs and the time spent on congested roads during

long commutes to and from work. At present, smart growth is still a developing concept and city living is simply not so affordable for many families, not to mention the other concessions like poor public school systems, higher crime rates, etc. Flint told *Urbanite Magazine* that the movement towards cities has irrefutable benefits in terms of creating ecologically and financially sustainable communities. The problems generated by sprawl, including traffic congestion, high gasoline costs, air and water pollution, climate change, obesity, and loss of open space, can be remedied in smart growth cities by public transportation and more densely populated neighborhoods that allow for open spaces, as well as bikable and walkable commutes.

Public transportation infrastructure in the United States is out of date and lacks efficiency, Flint stated. However, he noted that public transportation development has gained momentum with efforts to combat climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from personal vehicles. Convenient, affordable public transportation enhances livable communities, allowing people to break away from America's car culture. President Obama's proposed 2012 budget is very supportive of improving infrastructure; in particular Obama's administration and Flint agree on the point that current infrastructure should be fixed before new infrastructure is built. Flint found it encouraging that the Highway Trust Fund has been renamed the Transportation Trust Fund because the program now recognizes the need to support varied forms of transportation beyond cars. The proposed budget does make transportation funding mandatory rather than discretionary, as well as providing a competitive grant program for states or organizations that develop innovative transportation reform. The Federal Railroad Administration is to receive funding for intercity and high-speed rail in fiscal year 2012. Flint shared at the end of his presentation that he believes that high speed rail is an excellent

investment for the United States; he recognizes that it is a costly alternative, but with government subsidies could be cost competitive with air fare.

Anthony Flint is presently a fellow and director of public affairs for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy in Cambridge, MA; his other professional accolades include journalist for over twenty years primarily with the Boston Globe, a visiting scholar at Harvard Design School, policy advisor for Massachusetts state government, and author. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, founded by John C. Lincoln's Lincoln Foundation in 1974, is a prominent think tank focusing on research and education to aid policy makers on topics including urban development, the built environment, and tax policy in the United States as well as abroad. The institute's work on planning and urban form focuses on discovering new knowledge and tools to improve land policy and planning. A more recent theme in their work has been planning to combat climate change, with projects that aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the present realities of climate change.

The ultimate goal of the smart growth movement is to create environmentally sustainable communities that enhance the quality of life for citizens with numerous ecological benefits. However, Flint stressed that adopting smart growth development strategies does not imply sacrifice in the name of combatting climate change; he instead views smart growth as the future way in which Americans will want to live.

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