

How to Slow and Eventually Stop Population Growth

Part II of a Multi-Part Series

Eben Fodor, author of *Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community*, conceptualizes the moderation and restraint of population growth as a two-step process: taking one's foot off the accelerator pedal, and then applying the brake. As Fodor says, "Before seeking to discourage growth in some manner, a community should do its best to not actively encourage it."¹

Taking one's foot off the accelerator pedal

Active encouragement of growth takes two forms. First, a number of private and public organizations actively promote growth. (See "Moving in the Wrong Direction" on page 8.) Second, governments at every level offer growth-promoting inducements. Taxpayers bear the cost both directly (through the payment of taxes) and indirectly (by being subjected to the adverse effects of growth).

In the August issue of the *ASAP Update*, Part I of this series identified the local organizations that actively promote growth, such as the Thomas Jefferson Partnership for Economic Development.² This article addresses government-funded growth subsidies or, as Ed Stennett terms it, "the Growth Machine's access to taxpayer dollars."³

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¹ Eben Fodor, *Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 1999), 107.

² If you wish to receive an electronic copy of Part I, e-mail harry@harrydale.com.

³ Edwin Stennett, *In Growth We Trust: Sprawl, Smart Growth, and Rapid Population Growth* (Gaithersburg, MD: Growth Education Movement, 2002), 76.

What Does "Stop Population Growth" Mean?

ASAP has been assailed for wanting to stop growth in an allegedly *inflexible* manner. Critics have made wild charges that ASAP's agenda will require us to turn people away at Albemarle's borders and license parents to have children. One antagonistic developer even suggested that ASAP might have the County resort to euthanasia.

First, ASAP's goal is to stabilize our regional population in a way that allows for a free flow of people in and out. But, ideally, the population will remain *in equilibrium*, *in a steady state*, and *at a sustainable level*—feel free to use the phrase with which you are most comfortable. We view them as synonyms.

Second, to do so, ASAP envisions using temperate and commonplace means. These are some *hypothetical* examples:

- Electorate-approved growth constraints such as
 - Hard and permanent edges to the Growth Areas
 - Limitations on the number of building sites in the Rural Areas (using conservation easements, purchase of development rights, zoning, and other means)
- Natural limits on urban population densities, whereby designated Growth Areas would be free to expand their populations (but not their land areas) until they hit one or more constraints on population growth (like the supply of potable water)
- Redirection of the University of Virginia's growth (including its research park initiatives) to economically depressed areas of the Commonwealth that *need* it, such as Southside Virginia

ASAP believes a complementary *set* of such devices could maintain the area's population in relative equilibrium. Our goal is ambitious, but ASAP's planning horizon is measured in decades; planning that far out will tend to reduce resistance and facilitate consensus building. We will start elaborating on some of the means in Part III of the multi-part series.

Albemarle Place, Hollymead Town Center, and North Pointe

ASAP has not taken a formal stand on the three large mixed-use developments planned for Route 29 North: Albemarle Place, the Hollymead Town Center, and North Pointe. However, we do not believe we can increase our population 1.5% to 2.0% each year *ad infinitum* without doing irreparable damage to the environment and our quality of life. Since commercial development contributes directly to population growth, such development is problematic in the long run.

You may ask, don't these projects serve population growth that has *already* taken place? Don't they serve *present* needs? To some extent, yes. For example, most residents seem to want a Target store, so the demand probably already exists.

On the other hand, projects like these usually count on (population) growth that is *expected* to take place in the near-to intermediate-term. Not only do the developers rely upon the growth to help ensure the financial success of their projects, but, in many ways, the developments themselves help *assure* that growth. Let's look at just the retail components of the three developments. A recent article in *Virginia Business* used Tysons Corner Center in Fairfax County to illustrate the "benefits" of upscale shopping malls:

Tysons is a shining example of an important financial spin-off [of upscale malls]—namely more development. Once a mix of high-end retailers locates in one place, the critical mass attracts other retailers, commercial, office and sometimes hotel development. This in turn brings more people to the shopping area, sparking expansions or strip developments nearby. "It's a chicken and egg sort of thing," observes Jerry Gordon, president of Fairfax County's Economic Development Authority. "The malls came because of the business, then more business came because of the amenities provided by the mall."⁴

Is Tysons Corner Center, at 1.75 million square feet, a fair comparison? Yes. Taken together, the *retail*⁵ components of the three large developments planned for Route 29 North, plus the new Best Buy, approach 2 million square feet.⁶ Two million square feet is equal to **the sum of the space in the area's five largest shopping centers:** Fashion Square Mall, Barracks Road Shopping Center, Rio Hill Shopping Center,

⁴ Paula C. Squires, "Mall magic: Jobs, taxes and development—new upscale malls promise economic benefits," *Virginia Business* 18, no. 6 (June 2003): 26.

⁵ "Retail" as used here includes stores selling GAFO (General merchandise, Apparel, Furniture, and Other—i.e., traditional department store merchandise), food stores, restaurants, and movie theaters.

⁶ Albemarle County Department of Planning and Community Development.

Albemarle Square, and Seminole Square. In addition, more retail may be built in the planned redevelopment of the Comdial property (260,000 square feet); in Coran Capshaw's mixed-use development just north of I-64; and in rumored developments in several other locations. It seems reasonable to conclude that, as the *Virginia Business* article suggests, the three huge developments planned for Route 29 **will** lead to additional growth.

Besides fostering more growth, the proposed developments pose other problems. The traffic that Hollymead is expected to generate has recently received a lot of press coverage. But the fact that a similarly sized development—North Pointe—will be opening close by, further exacerbating traffic congestion in the area, has not received as much publicity. Approval of these developments will extend the Route 29 commercial congestion from the bypass to well north of Airport Road.⁷

Adding all of this retail space may also have serious deleterious effects on the area's *existing* retail.

- To the extent the new retail succeeds and the old retail located in the City of Charlottesville suffers, the County's tax base will increase while the City's declines.
- Albemarle Place was partially modeled after Easton Town Center in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus is a model of what sprawling development can do to a marketplace. The new shopping complexes built on the periphery of that city have decimated its downtown and inner suburban retail. Northland Mall, metro Columbus' premier shopping center 20 years ago, is now closed.
- The new cinema complex planned for Albemarle Place and the one that might be built in North Pointe will siphon many customers from the downtown mall's Regal Cinemas, possible leading to that theater's closure. Just as Regal helped resurrect the downtown mall, the theater's demise could portend the mall's decline.

Retail life parallels nature. Under capitalistic rules of survival of the fittest, retail "species" come and go. But the huge amount of retail space that the developers plan to build raises some troubling questions. **Isn't somebody overseeing this whole development process? Doesn't someone make sure that "they" build only as much new retail as "we" need? Surely, the developers are conferring with one another and developing on a rational basis—aren't they?** The short answer to all three questions is—**not really.**

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⁷ However, ASAP must acknowledge that the developers of the Hollymead Town Center and the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors have agreed upon proffers that appear to mitigate the traffic problems created by the Town Center. Both should be congratulated. We only hope that the developer of North Pointe demonstrates the same pragmatism and civic responsibility.

ASAP's Oct. 2nd General Membership Meeting

Perspectives on “Smart” Growth: Too Much, Just Right, or Not Enough?

Presenters:

- **Tony Vanderwarker**, a member of the Board of Directors of the Piedmont Environmental Council and co-chairman of the Albemarle Smart Growth Initiative⁸
- **Bill Lucy**, Ph.D., Professor of Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia and co-author of *Confronting Suburban Decline*⁹
- **Jack Marshall**, Ph.D., President of ASAP

Mr. Vanderwarker believes that growth is going to take place, especially given the power of the business lobby. But he thinks we should *direct* growth so that it doesn't ruin our rural areas. He said that Smart Growth has *practical validity* and *political utility*. For example, if we do not grow in a smart way, taxes increase. He noted that when Loudoun County adopted its new growth management plan, its bond rating went **up!** (Last month's issue of the *ASAP Update* explored Loudoun's growth management plan in some depth.) He believes that voters support Smart Growth. He cited the voters' rejection of the northern Virginia and Tidewater area tax referendums designed to pay for more roads (that can promote sprawl).

Professor Lucy is an expert on suburban sprawl. He believes that in the 1980s the United States entered a “post-suburban” period characterized by deterioration of suburban communities. People desire to live in communities with urban amenities: stores, restaurants, libraries, and parks, all within walking distance or otherwise easily accessible. They may purchase “starter” homes in suburban tracks, but they abandon them as soon as they can afford better housing in higher quality natural and built environments. He provided a number of examples supporting his belief that the obstacles to Smart Growth may be more perceptual than real.

Jack Marshall's opening comments are printed verbatim in the next article.

Following their presentations, a lively discussion ensued. Mr. Vanderwarker opined that, viewed in the long-term, ASAP's arguments are sound, but at present, they are not politically viable. He would like to see the citizenry engage in a discussion about an optimum population size based on resource availability. Professor Lucy posited that, locally, potable water is *the* limiting factor; nationally, fertility and

⁸ The Albemarle Smart Growth Initiative is a political action committee organized to help “steer growth and development in Albemarle County in a way that will sustain economic vitality while preserving the County's rural character and small town ambiance.”

⁹ William H. Lucy and David L. Phillips, *Confronting Suburban Decline: Strategic Planning for Metropolitan Renewal* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000).

immigration are the keys to population stabilization. He is concerned that Albemarle County is not taking substantive action to truly implement Smart Growth, e.g., the Neighborhood Model. All three presenters seemed to agree that ASAP and Smart Growth complement one another, with the former focusing on the long-term and the latter concentrating on the near-term.

Smart Growth: Necessary but Not Sufficient

By Jack Marshall

It's my understanding that some 30 years ago the concept of “smart” growth represented cutting edge thinking among community planners. Twenty years ago it was still innovative and provocative. And by about 10 years ago it had become conventional wisdom among most progressive planners.

So what is smart growth today? I'm going to argue that smart growth should be considered a valuable component of a larger, more comprehensive, and visionary view of growth management. By itself, though, smart growth is not enough. When done right, it offers short-term solutions to sprawl, but it simply does not guide us over the long haul toward sustainable communities.

The goals of smart growth are admirable, and, as Annie Faulkner observes, the benefits – actual and potential – are substantial:

Primary among [the benefits of smart growth] may be the improvement of human settlement patterns in ways that will foster a sense of community, reduce the need to drive, facilitate public transportation, and put farms, forests, and open space in reach of urban populations. By concentrating growth in already developed areas and slowing human expansion into natural areas, smart growth can help minimize additional ecological impacts as some growth continues.¹⁰

Let me also point out that the mechanisms ASAP advocates to control local growth, summarized in Eben Fodor's 1999 book *Better Not Bigger*, are – without exception – nothing more than the mechanisms developed by the smart growth folks.

But Faulkner's reference to concentrating growth in already developed areas brings us to the shortcomings of smart growth.

Infill development in already developed areas will be limited, as Faulkner observes, “by people's tolerance for increased

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¹⁰ Annie Faulkner, “Solutions to Sprawl: The Limits of Smart Growth,” *Population Press* 7, no. 1 (January/February 2001): 8.

Smart Growth: Necessary but Not Sufficient

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residential, commercial, and industrial density.”¹¹ Charlottesville’s efforts to increase the number of residents and businesses through infill is meeting stiff resistance from some existing residents who don’t want to see remaining pockets of open green space disappear.

More importantly, even if people learn to accept higher density, there is a physical limit to how dense we can get – at least in two dimensions.¹² (The City of Charlottesville is talking about upward development since it cannot annex land for outward expansion). Keep in mind that for over 30 years Albemarle County has been growing at 2.1% or more each year – a rate that **doubles** in 33 years. Whatever the rate – even if it were 1% or lower – continuous growth will, at some point, fill up designated growth areas and metastasize into open space.

The point is that the “smart” growth approach is shortsighted. If the world were to end in 10 or 20 years – as our County’s comprehensive plan seems to assume – the “smart” growth strategy would be fine. Only so much damage can be done in two decades. But the world will probably not end in 20 years, and growth (unless we do something about it) will continue. Smart growth will not stop sprawl into open spaces or degradation of the environment – it can only delay it.

Some use the “smart growth” label cynically as a fig leaf to justify whatever development brings them profit. A Washington, DC-based legal group called “Defenders of Property Rights” is supporting a local proposal to build 28 large homes on land currently in Agricultural-Forestry Districts, a plan vigorously opposed by neighbors and the Piedmont Environmental Council. The Defenders of Property Rights website states that the proposal “truly is smarter growth for Albemarle County and the Commonwealth of Virginia.”

Most advocates of smart growth, though, genuinely believe it is *the* answer to communities’ growth problems. Indeed, the corporate culture of most local Planning Departments includes well-rooted beliefs about the inherent value of smart growth – and they hold these beliefs because they’ve been socialized by university Schools of Architecture and Planning that also maintain the credo of smart growth.

We’ve got to recognize some new truths. One is that the future doesn’t end in 10 or 20 years. Community planning must be undertaken in the context of much longer horizons than the brief glimpse into the future that now characterizes our Comprehensive Plans. This doesn’t mean we must struggle for accurate projections of Albemarle County’s vehicular traffic 100 years from now. But we should recognize that, in all likelihood, there **will be** an Albemarle County 100 years from now, and whatever we do over the

next 10 or 20 years will set the stage for the county in 100 years.

Another truth is that population growth cannot continue endlessly in any finite space, even in the 750 square miles of Albemarle County. Growth will stop – for one of three reasons:

- We will run out of an essential resource. (In our area, it will probably be water.)
- We will become so crowded and unattractive that no one wants to live here.
- We will plan ahead and stop before we reach one of these other limitations.

Part of planning ahead involves asking currently unasked questions about an optimal population size for our communities. How large should we get? Or are we already past the optimal population level? How do we go about figuring what an optimal population size should be? How should we slow growth and, in equitable and constitutional ways, ultimately achieve population equilibrium? How can we ensure that the less advantaged can live in our community, with jobs and affordable housing? When should our growth curve reach a plateau?

It is only by ending growth that we can have genuinely sustainable communities. We delude ourselves if we believe there is such a thing as sustainable growth – even though few dare to question the goodness of growth.

Before I end, I want you to imagine a campaign for “smart smoking”. This campaign, recognizing that smoking is bad for us and irritates many others, urges us to always go outdoors to light up. It teaches us to brush our teeth and rinse our mouths so we don’t smell bad. It exhorts smokers to get lots of personal health insurance so the medical costs of smokers’ cancer and emphysema aren’t borne by taxpayers at public clinics. The campaign helps us purchase low-nicotine cigarettes, and it tells us where to get them cheap. But, remarkably, in this “smart smoking” campaign, the NO-smoking option doesn’t even make it to the table. Doesn’t that seem odd?

Then it should also seem odd that, in the “smart growth” movement, the NO-growth option doesn’t even make it to the table. But we accept it. Few of our planners, politicians, or citizens have the courage to say that we cannot grow endlessly.

Smart growth, as it stands now, is essentially an accommodation to growth. By asking where and how growth should occur, it helps ensure that growth in the short term is done well. As such it is necessary, but it is simply **not** sufficient. Until a more comprehensive view of growth management is adopted – an approach that asks not only where and how growth should occur, but **whether** it should occur – “smart” growth may be lulling us into a false, and very dangerous, sense of security.

¹¹ Faulkner, “Solutions to Sprawl,” 8.

¹² Ibid.

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Government-funded growth subsidies

Stennett writes,

It is difficult to reconcile the practice of spending tax dollars to attract new business at the same time we are spending tax dollars to mitigate the congestion and loss of open space caused by the addition of new businesses to the area. Yet economic-development agencies are an integral part of all our local governments, and their budgets are in the millions of dollars per year. ... Their prime mission is attracting new companies, and consequently more residents, solely for the sake of aggregate economic growth. In counties suffering from congestion and other ills of excessive growth, business recruitment *not specifically targeted for economically distressed areas* has outlived its usefulness.¹³

Nonetheless, as Fodor documents, “Urban growth is publicly subsidized in at least ten different ways in cities throughout the U.S. The result of this subsidization is that we have the growth accelerator pedal pushed firmly to the floor.”¹⁴

Among Fodor’s “ten common growth subsidies” are the following:¹⁵

1. The use of public funds to build infrastructure that serves development. Infrastructure includes new or expanded roads, water and sewer systems, schools, fire stations, and libraries. From the developer’s perspective, this infrastructure is either “free” or subsidized by the public.
2. Federally subsidized road construction
3. Economic development programs, such as tax subsidies and grants to new and expanding businesses, free employee training, and free consulting services
4. Incentives given to developers, such as selling publicly-owned land to them at below-market prices and creating public-private development partnerships that favor the private parties
5. The significant amount of time that local government spends on urban land use and transportation planning—at least when that time is part of the *process* of planning for and accommodating growth
6. The waiver of environmental and land use regulations or the failure to enforce them
7. Rezoning land to allow developers to profit from their speculative investments

Fodor also describes “*private sector* growth inducements, among which speculative development is chief.”¹⁶ Developers try to predict future demand and invest substantial sums in their projects—shopping centers, residential complexes, mixed-use developments, etc. Assisted by local economic development agencies and the local chamber of commerce, the

developers, the banks that finance them, and others with an economic interest go to great lengths to promote the success of the projects. The net effect is more growth.

Part III of this series will begin to discuss mechanisms for slowing growth (“applying the brake”). The sidebar on page 1—“What Does ‘Stop Population Growth’ Mean?”—lists some of the possible tactics.

In 2000, Oregon spent \$1.14 billion on growth subsidies, or \$18,000 for each *new* resident. The largest subsidies were the provision of infrastructure to serve new development (65%) and economic development (22%).

Fodor & Associates, *Assessment of Statewide Growth Subsidies in Oregon* (Portland, OR: Alternatives to Growth Oregon, February 2002), 115-117.

Albemarle Place, Hollymead Town Center, and North Pointe

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Albemarle County’s Department of Planning has expressed concern.¹⁷ But the Board of Supervisors is examining each development on its own merits. “Market forces”—or, more precisely, developers—are dictating the *total* amount of space that is built and—as long as it is within the Growth Areas—*where* it is built. The developers of Albemarle Place, Hollymead Town Center, and North Pointe have apparently concluded that, even after all three have been built, there will still be unmet demand for retail space in the year 2010. Of course, if these projections are wrong—and many knowledgeable individuals believe they are—older retail stores, not newer ones, are likely to be the victims of this marketplace competition.

Businesses act in their own self-interest that usually—but not always—coincides with the best interests of the community. In fact, our competitive economic system *requires* businesses to act in their own self-interest. But the *community* must decide what is best for it, especially when its interests may clash with those of business.

What do *you* think? Twenty-five years from now, will we look back and conclude that these three developments were good for Albemarle County? Or were they a tipping point leading to something less than desirable?

¹⁷ In the August 2003 Department of Planning staff report on North Pointe, Principal Planner Elaine K. Echols wrote, “Staff believes that the amount of commercial square footage proposed [for North Pointe] is excessive. ... Staff questions the advisability of approving so much more commercial space in this corridor with the existing commercial space available and the proposed projects closer to Charlottesville with substantial amounts of commercial square footage [Albemarle Place and Hollymead Town Center]. ... [All of this commercial space] seems well in excess of what the County can reasonably absorb.”

¹³ Stennett, *In Growth We Trust*, 77.

¹⁴ Fodor, *Better Not Bigger*, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107, 110.

Upcoming ASAP Meetings

November 6 – General membership meeting, 7:30 p.m., Westminster Presbyterian Church Library, 190 Rugby Road. Topic: **The Overbuilding of Albemarle: Retail and Residential Developments in the Pipeline** (including some you have not heard of yet). Speakers: **Cliff Fox** (a local developer focusing on urban green properties) and **Jeff Werner** (a Field Officer for the Piedmont Environmental Council). See the article on Albemarle Place, Hollymead Town Center, and North Pointe on page 2.

December 4 – General membership meeting, 7:30 p.m., Westminster Presbyterian Church Library, 190 Rugby Road

November 20 and December 11 – Board meetings, 8:00 a.m., Room 235, Albemarle County Office Building – members welcome

Advocates for a Sustainable Albemarle Population (ASAP)

ASAP is a non-profit corporation organized under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Its **mission** is to increase knowledge and awareness about the effects of net population growth on our natural environment and quality of life, and to advocate appropriate policies and mechanisms that will enable our region to reach a sustainable population size. To achieve this, ASAP will engage in research, community education, policy development, and advocacy.

ASAP publishes this **newsletter** monthly except for combined June-July and December-January issues. Submit editorial comments to the newsletter's editor, **Harry Levins**, at harry@harrydale.com. Articles may be reprinted or excerpted with attribution. To become a member of ASAP and/or to receive this newsletter and a notice of ASAP events, contact crijack@cville.net.

Moving in the Wrong Direction: Plans to Market the Charlottesville Area

The Thomas Jefferson Partnership for Economic Development's Marketing Committee recently met with a consultant to help it "become more aggressive in [identifying] prospective businesses that might be interested in the Charlottesville and Central Virginia Region."

The Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce intends to publish a high-quality, four-color annual magazine, *Images of Charlottesville*. With original photography and professionally written stories, *Images* "is designed to promote our region's assets to ... prospective businesses and residents." The Chamber will circulate 10,000 copies.



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