The Contradictions of Smart Growth: Transit-Oriented Development, Affordable Housing, and Community Vision in Austin, TX

TOPIC AND RELEVANCE
Smart Growth is a comprehensive approach to planning and the urban form endorsed by the American Planning Association. It seeks to refine growth and create cities that are more livable, sustainable, and resilient; as a framework for planning it presents a preferred alternative to the “sprawling, single-use, car-oriented projects” (Porter, Douglas and Cuddy 2006) that dominate the growth patterns in the United States. The Smart Growth principles provide cities with a guide to transform cities and influence how and where cities grow. There are seven principles that guide smart growth:

- Compact, mixed-use forms of development that create distinctive places and encourage neighborliness; enable convenient travel by foot, bike, and transit as well as automobiles; allow efficient provisions of infrastructure; and provide for conservation of open lands
- Expand choices of living and working environments that meet the needs of America’s increasingly diverse households, including housing for all income levels with convenient access to employment and basic services
- Re-use, adaptation, and redevelopment of unused and underused properties that afford opportunities for revitalizing existing neighborhoods, commercial centers, and employment nodes
- Conversion of open lands that support productive natural resources (such as farming and forests), provide recreational opportunities, and maintain natural landscapes, wildlife, and hydrologic systems
- Increased access to a variety of travel choices that provide for convenient and efficient movement of people and goods
- Efficient use and expansion of infrastructure systems that support urban development and provide civic amenities for pleasant living
- Application of these principles through participatory decision-making processes that recognize regional concerns. (Porter, Douglas and Cuddy 2006)

Cities are encouraged to utilize the smart growth principles to achieve more sustainable, livable and responsible communities. The malleable nature of the principles enable cities to build localized plans and solutions to achieve their own development goals.

Such a comprehensive approach has been missing from planning, which has led to the auto-dependent communities that dominate the urban and suburban landscape today. On the other hand, this comprehensive approach in some cases can obscure potential, internal conflicts between the smart growth principles. Miller and Hoel argue that the tensions between smart growth principles are exposed when a specific initiative or property is proposed to a community, and the community is brought into the planning conversation (2002). The tensions between smart growth principles are exposed because, in some cases, the parties involved in the planning process rank the principles differently. In particular, there are possible tensions surrounding transit-oriented development (TOD) in affluent
areas where mixed-income housing is proposed, since such development may be in conflict with current residents’ interests. In order to understand the friction surrounding these debates, one must examine the vision that residents have for their community’s future versus the vision that smart growth presents for the city and region as a whole. Comprehending the differences between visions for the future land-uses is critical to developing a shared vision that negotiates the differences between the smart growth principles.

In my professional report, I will examine such a conflict associated with Smart Growth development in Austin, Texas. The principles of smart growth were recently embraced by Austin in the city’s 2012 master plan Imagine Austin. The Imagine Austin Plan embraces the Smart Growth tenet of compact and connected growth as a measure to reduce sprawl, increase transportation choices, protect natural resources, increase prosperity for all residents and maintain its existing mix of amenities (2012). The purpose of this professional report is to examine the case of the City’s proposed redevelopment of a specific parcel on Ryan Drive as a part of the Lamar/Justin Lane transit-oriented development project.

The City suggests that this would be an ideal spot to locate affordable or mixed-income housing due to its location in a designated activity center and its close proximity to transit (both rail and bus; in 2014 bus rapid transit will also be available) (City of Austin 2013). However, community members in the surrounding area express explicit interest that the whole parcel be transformed to parkland (MacLaurin 2013). The parcel is owned by Austin Energy and due to the fact that it is a city owned property, the city’s Neighborhood Housing & Community Development has the option to purchase the property before private developers to increase affordable or mixed-income housing in the TOD zone (City of Austin 2013). Currently the City of Austin is in dialogue with the community regarding how the parcel should be developed.

Austin’s current dialogue regarding the Ryan Drive parcel offers the opportunity to examine the tensions that exist between perhaps incommensurable aspects of Smart Growth. The pertinent question to the smart growth dialogue in Austin is, how will the potential positive goals of TOD be weighed against the desires of the neighborhood, which also comply with the principles of Smart Growth?

QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED

1. How are the principles of smart growth incorporated into and made operational through the city of Austin’s master plan, and how specifically are these applied to the case of the parcel on Ryan Drive?
   a. What is the economic development history, land uses, and proposed uses for the Ryan Drive parcel and surrounding areas?
2. What are the goals of the ‘community’ and any supporters that ‘have a stake’ in the parcel, and how are these goals expressed and justified?
3. What does this case tell us about addressing the possible internal tensions in smart growth planning?
METHODOLOGY

I. Literature Review: To examine what internal tensions of Smart Growth are brought to light through community involvement, I will conduct a literature review on smart growth, transit, parklands, and lower/mixed-income housing to identify best practices in mitigating these tensions. In addition, I will review materials from the City of Austin: transit-oriented development ordinances, the Imagine Austin Plan, the Lamar/Justin Lane Station Area Plan, and Compact and Connected training information to better understand the city’s intent and vision of growth in the city, and specifically in the Lamar/Justin Lane TOD zone.

II. Interviews/Correspondence with city staff and potentially Capital Metro representatives for the City’s perspective of the project’s/development potential. In my interviews I will explore the following topics:
   a. Perspectives on the project’s potential
   b. The City’s ideal/perceived levels of community input that will shape the development
   c. City’s ideal development of the parcel and its part in the region as a whole
   d. City’s perspectives on priorities expressed by community members

III. Visual Documentation
   a. Photographs of the site and its current conditions
   b. Potential community vision illustrations forthcoming from public meetings

IV. Observations:
   a. In person observations will be made of community meetings and open houses to discern resident’s thoughts and feelings concerning the Ryan Dr. property
   b. The city’s virtual open house will also be observed for submissions from community members to provide more insight into its thoughts and feelings regarding the Ryan Dr. property

V. GIS mapping to provide an understanding of the community’s demographic makeup and built environment.

CHAPTER OUTLINE
Introduction (approx. 8-10 pages)
- Topic of Smart Growth
- Problem Statement: potential internal conflicts of Smart Growth Principles
- The Case: Lamar/Justin Lane TOD
- How I did the research
- Questions I asked
- Chapter outline

Chapter 1: Smart Growth (approx. 10-15 pages)
- Background/History of Smart Growth
- Smart Growth Principles

Chapter 2: Conflicts Between Smart Growth Principles (approx. 15 pages)
- Transit Oriented Development as a Principle
• TOD, Affordability housing, Parks, and Community v. City/Regional vision
• Review of similar cases

Chapter 3: Austin (approx. 10 pages)
• History and current trends of growth in Austin
• Recent history of Austin planning to manage growth
• The Imagine Austin Plan and planning process
• How the city is embracing smart growth; including justification

Chapter 4: Case Study (approx. 20-25 pages)
• Description of the study area
• The Lamar/Justine Lane TOD/Station Area Plan
• The Ryan Lane Parcel
• Presentation and analysis of personal interviews and public meetings (residents’ perspectives)
• Perspectives of city staff

Discussion/conclusion (approx. 5-10 pages)
• Summary of major findings
• Discussion of how this case sheds light on inherent tensions within the Smart Growth principles
• Implications for future research
• Implications for planning practice (in Austin and beyond)

RESEARCH PLAN AND TIMELINE
Outline Due: Jan. 25
Chapter 1 Due: Feb. 10
Chapter 2 Due: Feb. 25
Chapter 3 Due: March 5
Chapter 4 Due: March 15
First Draft Due: April 1
Revised (second) Draft Due: April 15
Revised (third) Draft Due: April 28

BIBLIOGRAPHY:


