

Commission on Sustainable Development & Smart Growth: Midterm Report

August 15, 2008

SUMMARY

The Commission on Sustainable Development and Smart Growth has met monthly since its initiation this April. During the first few meetings, the Commission began brainstorming about issues that the City faces related to smart growth and sustainability and ways in which these issues could be remedied. In addition, the Commission developed a definition for sustainable development and smart growth principles in order to have a common vision to guide the Commission's work (see Appendix A). After having developed these definitions, subcommittees were formed to begin developing recommendations on the areas of: 1) stormwater related codes (parking, landscaping, etc), 2) sustainable building (historic preservation and green building), and 3) land use (beyond stormwater issues). As mentioned, the definition of sustainable development and the smart growth principles are intended to be a guide for the Commission's work, and each subcommittee is tasked with finding policies related to their topic area that will advance the principles and promote sustainable development. The subcommittees have begun compiling preliminary recommendations (see Appendix B) and will continue to meet until the recommendations for their subject area are fully developed. The Commission has been utilizing Base Camp to share documents and ideas and to post the minutes from its meeting.

While the preliminary recommendations give a good overview of the focus of the Commission to date, the Commission felt it was essential to also highlight in this midterm report the importance of the need for regional cooperation to address issues of sustainability and smart growth. The final report from this Commission will elaborate on this need and ways in which regional cooperation may be achieved. In the meantime, however, some members of the Commission have expressed an interest in finding a way to involve regional players in our discussions of sustainability and smart growth in the immediate term. The Commission would appreciate input from the Mayor on this subject.

CONCLUSIONS

The Commission intends to develop a document that 1) outlines recommendations to the Mayor for addressing the Commission objectives both in the short and long term and 2) provides justifications for such recommendations with narratives that summarize the Commission's best practice research. Immediate priorities will be highlighted in the document, and an implementation matrix will also be included to help outline the recommendations.

Though the current subcommittees do not address the entire range of objectives tasked to the Commission, the remaining objective of exploring the creation of a sustainable development plan for economic stimulation will be addressed once the current subcommittees complete their work.

Appendix A

Working Definitions

After much research and deliberation, the Commission on Sustainable Development and Smart Growth has developed the following definition for sustainable development and smart growth principles in order to have a common vision to guide the Commission's work.

Sustainable Development

There are over 100 definitions of sustainability and sustainable development, but the best known and most often used definition comes from the United Nations Brundtland Commission, formerly known as the World Commission on Environment and Development. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission stated that sustainable development is development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need". Sustainability is further defined by governmental agencies, learning institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and others in terms of the interconnectedness of environmental, economic and social systems. This is also referred to as the "triple bottom line of environmental health, economic prosperity, and social well being" (RIO Earth Summit, 1992). It is also widely recognized that personal and collective actions affect the sustainability of local and global environmental, economic and social systems. Considering existing definitions, the Commission has developed and adopted the following definition for sustainable development:

"Development which meets the needs of the present at the same time as safeguarding and improving economic, social and environmental resources and the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Smart Growth Principles

1. Mix land uses.
2. Take advantage of compact building design.
3. Provide for housing that meets the needs of a diversity of social and income groups.
4. Create walkable neighborhoods.
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
6. Protect and preserve environmental quality and important natural and historic features of the area, including natural areas, water resources, air quality, farmland, scenic resources, and historic sites and districts.
7. Provide the public with access to formal and informal open spaces, including parks, playgrounds, community gardens, spaces for urban agriculture, water bodies, forests and hills.
8. Strengthen and direct development to currently developed areas to take advantage of existing community assets.
9. Enable choice in the mode of transportation available and insure that transportation options are integrated and consistent with land use objectives.

10. Make development decisions predictable, transparent, fair, and cost effective.
11. Accomplish goals and strategies for smart growth through coalitions with stakeholders and the public to ensure accountability.
12. Maximize infill potential on vacant land and re-development opportunities on brownfield and grayfield sites.
13. Promote equity amongst all people and support ethnic and cultural diversity.
14. Support a diversity of viable business enterprises in downtowns, other neighborhood business districts, and the region, while promoting locally-owned businesses and disadvantaged business enterprises.
15. Encourage and strengthen regional cooperation.
16. Promote economic development in ways that produce livable jobs, strengthen low and moderate-income communities, and protect the natural environment.

Appendix B

Subcommittee Reports and Preliminary Recommendations

I. Sustainable Building Subcommittee

Members: Dave Chadwick, Caroline Quidort, Amelia LoDolce, Joel Boyd

Below is a summary of recommendations being considered by the committee:

Historic Preservation

- 1) Increase and strengthen the role of the Commission on Architecture and Urban Design (CAUD)
 - Spell out what the requirements are for applications (a detailed plan)
 - Strengthen CAUD's role in the review of applications
 - Set up deadlines for applications to be submitted for review at CAUD meetings
 - Develop a CAUD pamphlet
- 2) Expand Binghamton's Historic Districts and increase the number of registered landmarks
- 3) Increase fines for violating the review process in Historic Districts
- 4) Strengthen enforcement of historic preservation regulations
 - Have an additional vacant property officer in Code Enforcement
 - Have training for code officers on historic buildings
 - Send out annual/or biannual reminder letters to owners of all properties within historic districts
- 5) Develop design standards for historic districts
 - Pursue a grant to develop these standards
- 6) Put up signs marking the entrance of Historic Districts and use brown street signs within the districts

Green Building

- 1) Offer incentives for LEED certified buildings
 - Density bonuses

- Fee reductions/waivers
- Tax breaks
- 2) Adopt LEED requirements for City renovations and new construction of buildings
- 3) Require LEED certification or specific 'green' standards for buildings over a certain number of square feet
- 4) Require recipients of City building contracts to be Building Performance Institute (BPI) certified
 - Phase in by first giving BPI certified contractors preference in contract awards
 - Potentially require all contractors to be BPI certified by a certain date

Deconstruction

- 1) Adopt and gradually increase requirements for debris from demolition to be diverted from the landfill
- 2) Work with Broome County to find ways to support the development of local deconstruction material handlers

Other

- 1) Allow mixed use by right
- 2) Strengthen allowance for shared parking (especially downtown)

II. Stormwater Related Codes Subcommittee

Members: Brenda Longstreet, Madeleine Cotts, Tom Costello

The group discussed our understanding of the Sustainability Commission's charge, the stormwater-related problems of which we were aware, their regional nature, the need to involve surrounding communities in addressing stormwater problems, and how they might be addressed.

We discussed the task of our subcommittee, and agreed that we would work toward delivering the following items to the mayor and the City Council to assist in the fulfillment of the Sustainability Commission's charge:

1. **A summary report of the stormwater-related problems** the City faces, and some ways existing regulations may be contributing to them. Both current, acute problems, and longer-term, developing issues will be described. A watershed map will be included, showing all areas contributing stormwater runoff to the City of Binghamton.

2. **A suggested approach and scope of work** needed for the City to address the problems. The City would need to:
- a. Commission a survey of existing rules and codes affecting land use and development in the City, and the creation of a comprehensive guide to local development rules that can be given to prospective developers, concerned citizens, and design professionals. These may be found at both City and state levels, in the zoning ordinances, overlay districts, subdivision codes, fire codes and standards, building code, floodplain regulations, and other environmental regulations.
 - b. Commission a comparison of the City of Binghamton's existing regulations to model stormwater regulations from other municipalities, from NYSDEC, from the EPA, and others, and a list of proposed modifications to Binghamton's code.
 - c. Undertake a roundtable process for changing local development rules with the involvement of City officials, local developers, realtors, planners, design professionals, health professionals, fire officials, land use lawyers, floodplain managers, and others.

III. Land Use Committee

Members: Merry Harris, Bob Pompei, Dave Chadwick, Zack McKenna

The sub-committee met on August 8th and proposes the following recommendations for the Commission's interim report.

General discussion topics:

- Consider how planning and zoning standards can promote healthy neighborhoods and create welcoming destinations
- Support the evaluation of storm water management methods and opportunities for improvement

Short Term measures to support a more attractive and walkable city:

- Expand the boundaries of the "core city" so that redevelopment, including new construction, takes advantage of existing/public parking rather than requiring significant new parking.
- Support the more vigorous role of CAUD in reviewing projects for aesthetic qualities & increasing the flexibility for staff to involve the Planning Board in the review of commercial projects.

Longer term topics for additional research and consideration:

- The current housing code is a minimum standard. To assure attractive, well maintained neighborhoods, consider standards that address aesthetics and support historic preservation.
- Incorporate infrastructure that supports a sustainable economy, such as installation of high speed, high capacity data transmittal lines.
- Evaluate how form based code could impact the city and support smart growth and sustainable development.
- Longer term to look into the option of “special use permits” rather than zoning variances.