

O P I N I O N

Defining growth and sustainability

Thousands of American communities are torn by controversy surrounding growth. Whether it's spiteful letters to the editor, schismatic public hearings, or screaming matches at the post office, the debate over growth is painful and divisive.

One reason for the controversy is the word itself. "Growth" refers to different things among different people. We can help cool the arguments and focus on solutions by understanding this difference and saying what we actually mean. For example "development" can be used to describe the things that make a community better: living-wage jobs, increased income and commerce, more savings and excellent quality of life. In contrast, the word "expansion," can be used to refer to things that make a community bigger (e.g., more people, infrastructure, buildings, subdivisions, malls, etc.).

What advocates on both sides of the growth debate often miss is that there are many development options that require little or no expansion. Those sustainable development options create businesses, jobs, income, and wealth without damaging quality of life. In fact, many of these options have positive effects on both the community and its environment. But before exploring sustainable development, let's review "smart growth," community responses to problematic expansion:

- Design expansion correctly by mixing land-uses, clustering development, infilling not sprawling, and by using traditional community design, multiple transportation modes and natural infrastructure.

- Ensure that expansion pays its way: Tax revenues collected from subdivisions in previously undeveloped areas are virtually never sufficient to pay for the public services demanded by those subdivisions. As a result, taxpayers unknowingly subsidize sprawl unless impact or user fees are charged to those newly developing areas. Local governments that don't know the full cost of expansion are rolling the fiscal dice.

- Build affordable housing through private, public, and nonprofit means and by requiring it as a large portion of every expansion proposal.

- Restrict expansion through such measures as meaningful zoning, urban growth boundaries, subdivision allotment systems (that control growth rate), and community land trusts.

Smart growth is incomplete and unbalanced when it is not linked to sustainable economic development, which is a route to increased living-wage jobs, income, commerce, savings, and community well being that can proceed independent of increases in the size of a community. Some sustainable alternatives to rapid expansion are listed below. Many are well known, others innovative. Each community must seek its own innovation, using some of the following and inventing its own. These opportunities distribute benefits widely across the community.

- Energy efficiency is now understood, even by the federal government, as a powerful way to create local jobs and save

millions of dollars in any community. Sacramento invested \$59 million to save electricity, which created 880 direct jobs, and increased regional income by \$124 million. A smart community, for example, rethinks its perception of its buildings: Instead of cost burdens, they are opportunities for predicable, low-risk investments that create local jobs, especially in the building trades. As a bonus these measures reduce the emissions that are causing the climate crisis.

- Local ownership of business increases the wealth-creating power of each local transaction. Land trusts, co-ops, and employee stock ownership can ensure permanent local ownership of many businesses by buying local buildings and renting only to residents (at cost).

- Import substitution replaces some "imports" with local products and services.

- Local sourcing links local-business buyers with local suppliers. An early program in Eugene, Oregon created 100 jobs in its first year without

any physical expansion of the city.

- Downtown revitalization reduces economic leakage, builds pride, encourages infill, preserves culture, celebrates history, reuses resources, and reduces traffic.

- Entrepreneurial training.

- Community supported agriculture: local CSA farms sell high-quality crops direct to consumers and restaurants.

- Business mentoring.

- Microcredit loans are too small for conventional banks but vital to many small start-up businesses.

- Building salvage: Rather than demolish a building, dismantle and reuse its components, employing more people, and reducing waste and emissions.

- Advanced business retention and expansion programs.

- Flexible business networks: partnering on contracts too big for one local business.

- Eco-tourism.

- Jackson Hole's next innovation.

A local economy might be compared to a bucket, which is strong when full of water. Community expansion is an attempt to pour more money into the bucket. While this strategy may have once succeeded, today it often fails or generates more costs than benefits to the community.

Focusing entirely on more ways to fill the bucket ignores opportunities for "plugging leaks." Economic buckets invariably have holes through which dollars leak every time local resources are used inefficiently. Smart communities seek profitable ways to keep the bucket full by plugging unnecessary leaks through the kinds of techniques mentioned above. As a result, their economies are more resilient and less vulnerable to the global economy.



Michael Kinsley

Michael Kinsley, Senior Consultant for Sustainable Communities with the Rocky Mountain Institute will be the featured guest speaker at the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance's annual meeting today. He will speak to growth related issues.