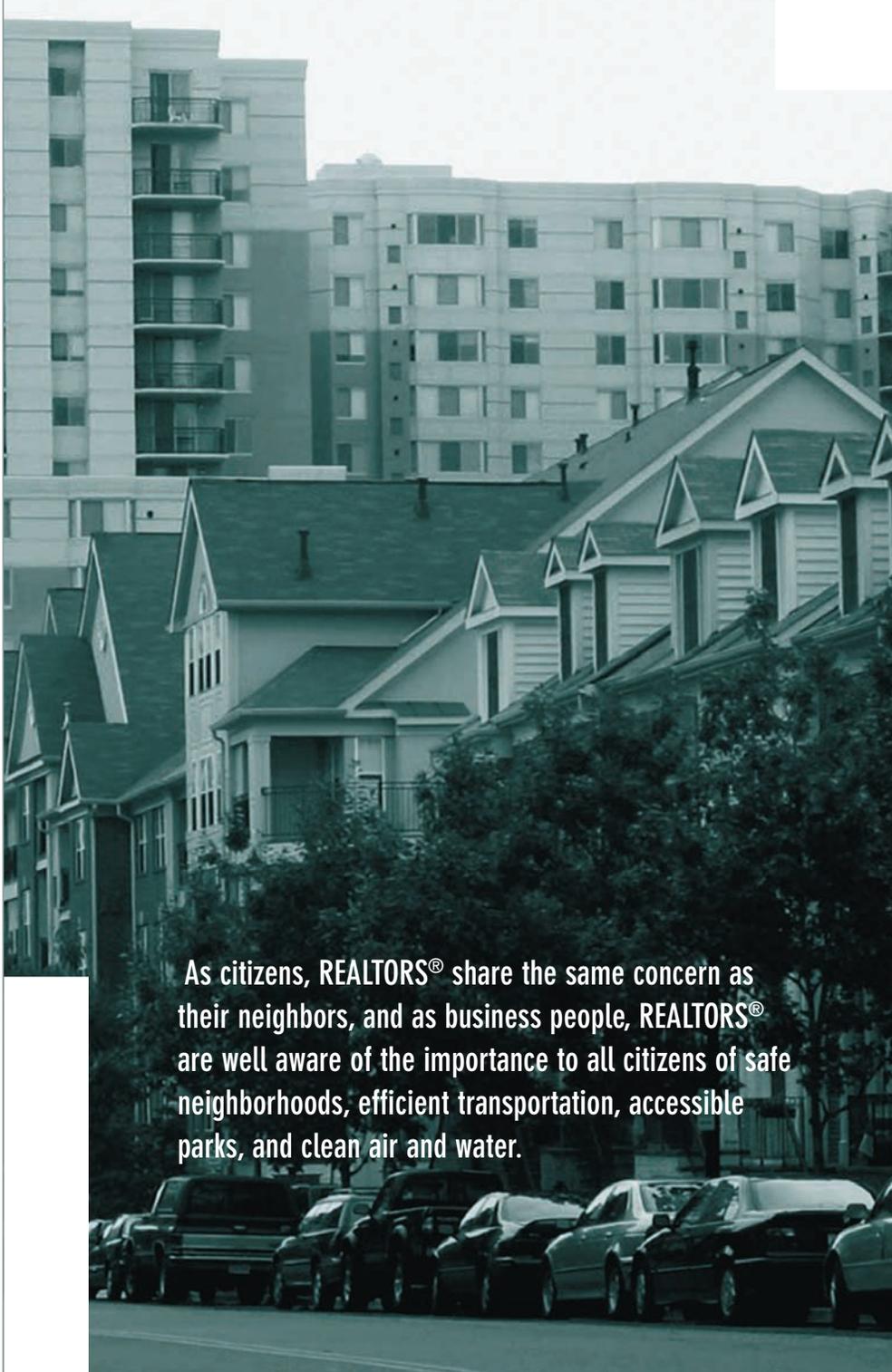




Introduction to Smart Growth



As citizens, REALTORS® share the same concern as their neighbors, and as business people, REALTORS® are well aware of the importance to all citizens of safe neighborhoods, efficient transportation, accessible parks, and clean air and water.

I. Introduction: REALTORS® and Smart Growth

Since the end of World War II, the U.S. population has doubled to 300 million people and continues to grow by three million people annually, adding a new person every 13 seconds. This rapid population growth, compounded by development patterns that encourage bigger houses and longer commutes, is forcing us to face an important question: How should our communities grow?

The constant influx of new people demands new development, but the form it takes is likely to be critical to the long-term quality of life and economic stability of our towns, cities and nation. In recent years our metro areas have sprawled outward. It has been easier for developers to gobble up fields and forests with new subdivisions while leaving older areas to languish, with declining population, decaying infrastructure and a slumping tax base. As farms surrender to big-box stores and woods give way to asphalt, there is mounting frustration over increased traffic, decreased open space, inadequate public services, overcrowded schools, lack of affordable housing and loss of community vitality. In our most economically vibrant metros, many young families face a painful choice between close-in neighborhoods that are expensive even when they are less-than-desirable, and ever more-distant subdivisions that condemn them to a life spent behind the wheel.

The approach to planning and development that has come to be known as smart growth grew out of an effort by policy makers, real estate professionals, planners and urban designers, environmentalists, key employers and many ordinary citizens to find ways to ease these tensions. It is an attempt to find a middle way between growth-at-any-cost and the “no-growth” reaction to it. The idea is to involve citizens, public officials and myriad stakeholders in working together to plan

ahead for development according to a set of common-sense principles. The vision is that communities get better as they grow, while remaining both economically viable and environmentally responsible.

The Urban Land Institute describes smart-growth principles as a way “to identify a common ground where developers, environmentalists, public officials, citizens, and others can all find acceptable ways to accommodate growth.” Usually this means working to steer development to the most suitable places and organize it into better-connected, more compact forms. With excellent design and forethought, people can live well on less land. In fact, they can live better, because their communities will be more walkable and generally more convenient, and their environment will be less degraded by miles of strip malls and parking lots. And these well-planned neighborhoods hold their value, rather than becoming almost disposable, as so many post-war suburbs have become.

Though they may be applied differently in various communities, smart-growth concepts generally involve:

- Using land more efficiently;
- Preserving open space and the environment;
- Creating more transportation options, including rail and bus transit and sidewalks, to ease traffic;

- ▶ Building more attractive, well-designed neighborhoods that allow for walking and community interaction;
- ▶ Increasing density where appropriate to make better use of infrastructure;
- ▶ Expanding housing choices as well as affordable housing opportunities;
- ▶ Mixing housing, retail and employment uses in order to create complete neighborhoods where daily needs are close at hand.

While few people disagree with the intent of these principles, a host of ingrained policies and practices stand in the way of putting them to work. This includes everything from conventional zoning to road design to retailers' inertia. We'll address these and other challenges in this toolkit.

REALTORS® and Smart Growth

REALTORS® appreciate the increasing interest in preserving and improving communities' quality of life and addressing the challenges of growth. As members of the community, we share the same concerns as our neighbors. And as business people, we are well aware of the importance to homebuyers and all citizens of safe neighborhoods, efficient transportation, accessible parks and open space and clean air and water.

"Under the Code of Ethics, all REALTORS® have an obligation to improve their communities and sell quality of life," says Tim Calnen, who has spent more than 25 years with the Connecticut Association of REALTORS®. He cites the Code's Preamble:

Under all is the land. Upon its wise utilization and widely allocated ownership depend the survival and growth of free institutions and of our civilization. REALTORS® should recognize that the interests of the nation and its citizens require the highest and best use of the land and widest distribution of land ownership. They require the creation of adequate housing, the building of functioning cities, the development

The goals of smarter growth

Smart Growth America, a national coalition of organizations supporting smart-growth principles, identifies several key outcomes that good planning and development should produce:

- ▶ A seat at the table for everyone with a stake in the community.
- ▶ Broad choices among safe, convenient and attractive neighborhoods.
- ▶ Ready access to jobs, daily necessities and fun, with less time in traffic.
- ▶ Thriving cities, suburbs and towns.
- ▶ Protection for what's best about the places we live.
- ▶ Lower personal costs and efficient use of our tax money.
- ▶ A shot at the American dream of opportunity for all.

of productive industries and farms, and the preservation of a healthful environment.

Noting that the Code dates to 1913, Calnen says, "Even then, they were thinking about balanced and divergent uses of land."

Beyond the Code of Ethics, there are specific reasons REALTORS® may want to advocate for smart-growth planning and development:

- 1 **Quality of life.** REALTORS® care about the quality of their own communities, as well as the quality of the community in which their clients are buying and selling homes.
- 2 **Problems of excessive regulations.** Too many regulations can distort the real estate market and make homes less affordable, reducing choice in the housing marketplace.
- 3 **Opportunities for new housing markets.** Tastes in housing types and locations

is diversifying rapidly, but meeting this demand will require new thinking in planning, zoning, designing and marketing for compact, walkable communities.

- 4 **Future inventory of homes.** What gets built today determines what REALTORS® will be selling tomorrow.

How state and local governments meet the challenge of rapid growth affects the very livelihood of REALTORS® and the vital interests of our customers – America’s homeowners, property owners and tenants. The final sections of this toolkit demonstrate how REALTORS® are already making a difference – by educating their communities about growth, by promoting revitalized neighborhoods, by working for better schools and streets and the policies needed to create them.

REALTORS® are a positive force in our communities because we understand neighborhoods inside and out. We know the housing markets and the impact local conditions will have on housing values, choice, and affordability. As REALTORS® become vocal advocates for forward-looking planning and development, we position ourselves as leaders in our communities, helping to foster educated discussions and creative solutions. This toolkit will provide the information necessary for REALTORS® to become involved. It details how smart growth is implemented and provides tools for increasing public participation. It shares smart-growth success stories of individual REALTORS® and associations all across the country. NAR’s goal in creating this resource is to ensure that REALTORS® have the knowledge they need in order to work on behalf of the quality of life in their communities.