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CITYSPACE

Get Smarter



A new development alliance aims to keep the environment in mind.

by Jonas Raab

Forward-thinking: Some say the wise approach to future development is building on existing infrastructure, as it keeps environmental impact to a minimum. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

After two years of planning, the Delaware Valley Smart Growth Alliance was officially launched at a Delaware Valley Planning Commission event on Oct. 13. The DVSGA, a nonprofit group sponsored by the Urban Land Institute, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation and other organizations in New Jersey and Delaware, will help local developers meet smart-growth standards and act as a liaison between developers and local governments.

Smart growth has no hard and fast definition, but the term applies to development that conserves open space and is environmentally sound.

"What smart growth is trying to accomplish is to take resources, and those vary from location to location, and make those resources more appropriately benefit the land and those who use the land," said Marc Brookman, president of the DVSGA, which is modeled after a similar organization that's seen success in Washington, D.C.

To qualify as smart growth, a project must be in an area that is appropriate for growth or revitalization. It should take advantage of already existing public water and sewer service and should be accessible to existing public transportation. There should not be a need to build many new roads. Part of the idea is to keep suburban sprawl to a minimum.

The project must also adhere to what the DVSGA calls the three Ds: Design, Density and Diversity of uses. In their words, "a project or an area must have sufficient density and scale to support a mix of uses, walkability and public transit. The project should be designed so that it is integrated into the existing community fabric."

In many ways, it's about conservation. The DVSGA mandates that projects "should effectively protect, conserve or mitigate damage to open space, water, and air quality and important ecosystem components."

The idea is to create communities that use land efficiently while preserving the environment by leaving green space.

"We want to be there to assist in fostering smart growth, so we need projects in the conceptual stage," said Brookman. If they meet smart-growth criteria, "we lend our input and our support."

The DVSGA is fielding proposals from developers who, if their proposals are accepted, will get the guidance and support of the nearly 100 government, private sector and nonprofit organizations that currently make up the group's membership, as well as their backing in dealing with local municipalities. No money changes hands and membership in the DVSGA is free.

"Smart growth at its core is about density," said Jason Duckworth, DVSGA member and vice president of Arcadia Land Company, which aims to build traditional neighborhood developments by merging traditional design with new development. "The conventional pattern is for large lot/low density, so you have houses on one to two acre lots, which is land consumptive, and those houses are built in isolation from shopping, employment, schools.

"You end up building a lot of roads and we end up spending much more to serve those types of communities than with communities where the houses are clustered and located near nonresidential uses."

However, there are some flies in the ointment. Duckworth and others have encountered resistance when proposing smart-growth developments to local municipalities.



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of development," he said. "Building a new Narberth would be illegal in
ected residents to develop new ordinances that permit this type of
ble period of time."

ears, he added.

"Most local governments are going to say no thank you," said Brookman, citing fear of change as the main reason. "The issue is "what does this do to property values in my neighborhood?"

Brookman said that's an ill-advised stance.

Among the biggest opportunities for smart growth in the near future is the impending development of gaming parlors across the commonwealth. In addition, Brookman said, with their arrival comes the opportunity to improve mass transit.

Now with their official launch behind them, DVSGA is aiming to educate local government officials and the public about the benefits of smart growth. They know that when developers go to local governments for approval, they may be entering a hostile environment, said Brookman. What the DVSGA plans to do is explain the benefits of the proposal to the municipality where the development project is being proposed so they can in turn explain the benefits to the people that they represent, he said. But, as was seen recently in a nearby municipality where many in the community opposed smart-growth initiatives, education alone might not be enough to get their message out.



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