

DUANY PLATER-ZYBERK & COMPANY
ARCHITECTS AND TOWN PLANNERS

LETTER TO THE GOVERNOR

With you as governor, the state would be due for a thorough review of state planning policy. It would be justified, as the past decade has not gone well. Sprawl is still the common form of development and municipal income cannot keep up with the fiscal needs of traffic, schools and services that sprawl exacerbates.

As governor you should keep local planning decisions with local government. We know that detailed state-level oversight is not effective. But you cannot begin to affect improvement unless you confront the general situation that the codes now in place statewide legalize suburban sprawl and preclude smart growth. The development of mixed-use, mixed-income, walkable and compact communities is just not permitted under the current system. However smart the local officials, the codes and standards which are the means of implementation do not correspond to their good intentions. One need only attempt to process a traditional neighborhood, as we have, to confirm the degree of adversity built into the system.

These provisions may seem natural and benevolent, except that they inadvertently forbid the building of places like your most admired and characteristic historic communities. These are respectively a city, a town and a village that are models second to none. They should be possible, particularly because there is a market for them.

Despite that, it is not worth the effort to modify the existing codes. In fact, it is virtually impossible to do so, because their very basis is the creation of sprawl. The current codes administer only the segregation of land uses and their buffering, the limiting of density, the assurance of sufficient parking, the protection of traffic flow, the provision of quantities of undifferentiated "open space," and a ruralized conception of environmental responsibility. Removing all these counterproductive provisions would not leave very much behind.

Besides, the modification of any code is intrinsically controversial. The slightest change implies that some landowners are made wealthier and others poorer; and then, there are consultants by the hundreds (planners, environmentalists, engineers, attorneys and architects) who are invested in the existing system. Their expertise as navigators through the system is their livelihood. They will oppose change by warning their clients of a "loss of flexibility." The ensuing legal actions would slow the pace of reform beyond your political horizon. Only compromise would be possible and it would be so extensive that the modified codes would not be worth administering. The results would be no more than a slightly improved version of sprawl.

There is another possible strategy: adopting an entirely new code that assures authentic smart growth, while leaving the current code in place. Such "parallel codes" are politically viable, as long as their use is optional. Not being mandatory, the new codes need not be compromised in the process leading to their enactment. Calls for dilution could be rejected by

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pointing out that, “You can continue business as usual, if you wish.” By not weakening standards, whatever projects are built under the new provisions would be effective, rather than being more of the hybrid projects which we are constantly deluding ourselves. Well-coded traditional neighborhoods and villages would be palpably different. And as their market performance tends to be superior, they would encourage other developers to emulate them (studies have shown that they sell better than conventional suburban development).

Such a system would merely level the playing field to let the market freely operate. It can be presented to Republicans as expanding the range of consumer-driven choice, and to Democrats as a vehicle for environmental reform. And the influential planning professionals would understand that this system would not affect their current livelihood, but would in fact expand their field of expertise.

The strategy for the state is to reinforce local oversight under one condition: that Traditional Neighborhood Developments be a legal option. The state government would need only provide technical assistance, including the provision of model codes. With this, it is possible to affect large scale, immediate reform. A parallel code in every municipality would allow each local market to respond exactly to the ratio of the population that prefers one or another lifestyle, so long as both tracks could be made available through an equivalently efficient permitting process.

Local government could then choose to encourage the smart growth option with incentives. For example, the existing sprawl-producing code could remain available under the current slow and difficult permitting process – no change to the system – while the new one option could be processed proactively. The incentive of time-certain entitlements is of great value to developers. Further along, state government may choose to make further incentives available, including the funding of infrastructure for TND projects.

But even without incentives, under this system a substantial amount of smart growth development would occur. Market studies have shown that, depending where, between 30 and 70 percent of Americans would prefer to live in such compact, walkable, mixed-use communities. If the free market is allowed to operate you could confidently look forward to a great number of places like Ion and Newpoint. South Carolina would recover its original promise of being a wonderful place to live.