

Sprawl or Nothing

An increasing number of politicians embrace “smart-growth” principles, but the idea of controlling sprawl has yet to win or lose anybody an election.

BY BRADFORD MCKEE

> **POLITICS** This electoral season, the political buzz phrase “smart growth” resonates louder than ever. Most often it comes from candidates for state and local office who are trying, at least, to sound-check their concern to voters over the massive strains caused by urban sprawl. But is an antisprawl revolution afoot? Hardly. The movement to end freestyle suburban development has gathered force quickly over the past few years as suburbanites tire of traffic and smog, but the November elections may show how fragile the smart-growth movement’s hold on politics really is.

Few voters will favor a straight smart-growth ticket in the first place. “Regardless of what the polls say about people and their

attitudes toward growth management, smart growth is not a decisive issue,” says Larry Morandi, director of environment for the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver. If we wind up with a new slew of smart-growth activists in office this year, which is unlikely, it will be because they appealed to voters in coincident ways when it came to, say, education, crime, or taxes.

Occasionally growth pressures are so great that the issue becomes a litmus test for candidates, but that scenario is likeliest in local races. In 1999, the voters of Loudoun County, Virginia, replaced eight of nine members of the board of supervisors with “slow-growth” candidates, so acute were the development pressures on the

semi-rural, semi-suburban county at the time.

By now, there are smart-growth-minded public officials operating at every level of American politics. For instance, U.S. Representative Earl Blumenauer, a Democrat from Portland, Oregon, supports fellow smart-growth candidates for the U.S. Congress through his Committee for a Livable Future, a political action organization that has given away more than \$200,000 in the past three years. It does the hearts of smart-growth types good to see a developing solidarity on the issue among federal lawmakers. Like state representatives, however, they are unlikely to be judged on their smart-growth records because voters doubt that any one lawmaker can tip the scales

toward policies that encourage sustainable development. But, in fact, most substantive action to advance smart-growth policies begins with these individual delegates.

“Where the rubber hits the road with smart growth is in the state legislatures,” says Jason Jordan, government affairs manager for the American Planning Association (APA) in Washington, D.C., “but you can’t use those races as barometers on the issue.”

Executive-branch officials—governors and mayors—stand the best chance of defining themselves by their attitude toward development. Maryland’s Governor Parris Glendening, a Democrat, took office in 1995, just as many of his constituents started thinking the entire state was being sub-

In Maryland, two gubernatorial hopefuls vie to inherit the mantle of current Governor Parris Glendening, who spearheaded groundbreaking antisprawl legislation. Both Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, a Democrat (left), and Republican Bob Ehrlich (right), claim they are for smart growth. Voters may reasonably be skeptical.



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sumed by urban sprawl. In 1997, to preserve open space, Glendening pushed through the legislature and signed the Smart Growth Areas Act, which discouraged public and private investment in new large-scale development and provided incentives for reinvestment in older towns, neighborhoods, and even brownfield sites. Glendening has launched several major antisprawl initiatives in the years since to augment the Areas Act, and he has made smart growth the cornerstone of his administration. Now it remains to be seen whether the contenders for his office, the Democrat, Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, and the Republican, Bob Ehrlich, can match Glendening's record on issues that were obviously of great personal importance to him.

Glendening "really has stuck to his guns, which is unusual" on smart-growth matters, says Rose Krasnow, a senior policy analyst with the National Governors Association, in Washington, D.C. "The question now is whether his successor can be so dogged about it." Townsend has said she will be, though some observers believe she is more interested in education and crime. And Ehrlich said early in his campaign that he was a smart-growth proponent. "That was an attempt to take the issue off the table for Democrats," notes the APA's Jordan. Ehrlich has also vowed to build a controversial connector road through the central part of the state. "He won't be the smart-growth poster boy that Glendening was," Jordan says.

Several other states, like Illinois, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, will also see whether new governors assume the antisprawl bully pulpit of their predecessors. Illinois Governor George Ryan, a Republican, is retiring, having taken his state several steps toward more thoughtful growth management. In 2000, Ryan formed the "balanced-growth cabinet," a task force charged with aligning various state operations toward a new smart-growth strategy the governor called Illinois Tomorrow, which aims to cut traffic jams, protect open spaces, and redevelop neglected communities.

Of the two hopefuls in the race to succeed Governor Ryan, Democrat Rod Blagojevich has won an endorsement from the Sierra Club, but of course, he makes no comment on his take on Republican Governor Ryan's smart-growth accomplishments. The Republican gubernatorial candidate, Jim Ryan (no relation to the current Illinois governor) also declines to bring up growth management in his campaign, but does vow to maintain a "pro-business climate" in the state, which usually does not leave much room for a smart-growth mandate. ■



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