Smart Growth Checklist

April, 2016

The following check list was developed to assist communities to perform a self-assessment of how they are addressing smart growth objectives for an existing village area or proposed compact mixed use development. The checklist is adapted from *A Project Selection Tool for the State of Rhode Island: Leveraging State Transportation, Housing, and Infrastructure Investments*. US EPA Office of Sustainable Communities, Smart Growth Program, August 2012. It also uses information from *Rebuilding Downtown: A Guidebook for Revitalization*, Smart Growth America 2015 and *Village Guidance: Tools and Techniques for Rhode Island Communities*. RI DEM 2015.

1. Transportation Choice & Accessibility

Providing more transportation choices such as public transit, walking, or bicycling can provide access to more destinations, decrease household transportation costs, reduce energy costs and promote public health. Traditional neighborhoods with smaller blocks, a connected grid of streets, shaded sidewalks, safe street crossings, and moderate density can be serviced well by transit. Locating housing and commerce closer together and adjacent to transit has been shown to increase walking and transit usage. Increasing transportation choice and multimodal mobility is especially critical for residents (typically 1/3 in most communities) who may not have full access to driving – young, old, disabled, or economically challenged.

**Proximity to Scheduled Transit Service:** Locating a compact mixture of uses within walking distance of scheduled transit services makes it more likely that people will use transit for a portion of their trips.

1.1 How close is a stop or station for scheduled public transit? Walking distance to the nearest transit stop can be calculated using Google Maps.

   A. Less than a quarter mile is best
   B. Between a quarter and a third of a mile is good
   C. Half mile to a mile is fair
   D. Greater than a mile is too far

**Complete Streets:** Complete streets are those that adequately provide for all roadway users, including bicyclists, pedestrians, transit riders, and motorists, to the extent appropriate to the function and context of the street. For example, to facilitate walking and bicycling where
appropriate, a village should include sidewalks and well-marked crosswalks, bicycle lanes, and street trees.

1.2 Does the village include or is planning to create complete streets?

**Connectivity and Choice:** An interconnected street network like those found in traditional downtowns and neighborhoods supports walking, biking, and transit access, and can make all trips shorter. A connected grid of streets can also allow more streets to have fewer lanes making them easier to cross and more pleasant to walk or live on.

1.3 Does the village have an interconnected road, sidewalk, and trail system or will it be located on an existing network that is interconnected?

**Placement of Parking:** Parking lots can serve as obstacles between pedestrians and their destinations; excess parking can also increase stormwater runoff. The amount of parking needed can be reduced through means such as sharing parking for land uses that have different patterns of parking demand and establishing parking maximums to avoid unnecessary pavement.

1.4A Is parking situated where it does not visually dominate the village from the street and where it allows easy pedestrian access to buildings? If not, is parking minimized through means such as shared use?

1.4B Does the village have parking maximums as well as minimums to avoid excessive parking?

1.4C Do parking requirements reflect other means of transportation that don’t require automobiles?

2. **Housing Choice & Affordability**

Developments that provide only single family homes prevent a true mix of housing within a neighborhood for differing ages, incomes, family size and types and for family members to stay in as they grow up, move out, start their own families, or grow older. Providing a variety of lot and unit sizes, building types, prices, and rents creates opportunities for younger families, singles, seniors and a greater variety of incomes to be within the same neighborhood. Smaller lot sizes and mixed use, compact development like that in traditional neighborhoods can improve housing choice, affordability, walkability, and water quality. Creating Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) on existing lots a converted garage or basement, or new cottage can give homeowners extra income, provide well-managed rentals, and allow homeowners to age in
place when they choose to downsize. When considering affordability, it is also important to consider the combined cost of housing and transportation.

**Mix of Housing Types:** Providing a range of housing that includes ownership and rental choices allows people of all ages and stages of life to find a niche in a community.

2.1 Does the village offer a mix of housing types?

**Range of Housing Prices:** Providing a range of housing prices provides people of all income levels the opportunity to live in or near the communities in which they work, which lowers household transportation costs. Diversity of housing prices is defined as including both affordable and market rate homes.

2.2 Does the village provide a range of housing prices accessible to different income levels?

**Compact Residential Development:** Compact development provides cost savings for localities, because it is cheaper on a per-unit basis to provide and maintain services like water, sewer, and roads in more compact neighborhoods. When development is concentrated in suitable areas without increasing density on a watershed scale, compact development can protect more undeveloped open space, absorb rain water, reduce flooding and reduce the amount of pollution washing into our streams, rivers, and lakes. Compact development is also critical to establishing viable transit service. Generally accepted principles are that 6 to 7 dwelling units per acre is the minimum needed to support scheduled bus service, and 12 to 13 units per acre is preferable for more frequent bus service.

For critical resource areas, such as drinking water supply watersheds, groundwater supply areas, nitrogen sensitive coastal watersheds, areas where groundwater nitrogen concentrations area elevated due to wastewater effluent or fertilizers, increased density may not be feasible unless transfer of development rights or other creative methods are used to offset impacts of increased density.

2.3 For non-critical areas, do the number of dwelling units per acre meet the relevant threshold below?

   A. With public water and sewer: 24 dwelling units per acre.
   B. With public water: 12 dwelling units per acre.

**Housing for High-Priority Populations:** In Rhode Island, there is a critical need for rental housing that serves extremely low-income households and persons with special needs.

2.4 Does the village include apartments serving extremely low-income households or those with special needs (Contact RI Housing for more information)?
3. Economic Development

Incorporating smart growth into economic development strategies can enhance economic competitiveness by encouraging reliable and timely access to employment centers, educational opportunities, services, and other basic needs by workers, as well as giving business expanded access to markets and customers. More transportation choices and well-located housing can reduce employee transportation and housing costs and reduce business parking costs. Recent Rhode Island studies have determined that village development can be successful in the marketplace as well as having a positive fiscal impact on town finances. Single family homes on large lots typically cost a town more in services than they pay in taxes. However, village residential with smaller cottage and multifamily units typically generate surplus tax revenue after factoring in town service costs. Village density provides businesses with the steady customers they need to thrive.

**Improve Town Regulations and Processes:** Make sure town regulations and processes encourage the type of development wanted within a mixed use village.

3.1A Does your town zoning allow mixed use development in the village by right?

3.1B Does your town allow a mixture of uses within the same building?

3.1C Are the uses that are desired by the town in the village allowed by right?

3.1D Is the process of reviewing site plans, issuing approvals, and inspections user friendly and predictable for small businesses?

**Enhance Public Spaces:** Attractive public spaces give visitors and residents a place to sit, relax, and enjoy the neighborhood, which is an effective way to encourage people to spend more time in the village.

3.2A Does the village have a business improvement district or main street program to keep streets clean, safe and beautify public spaces?

3.2B Does the village encourage seasonal events such as farmers markets to attract more visitors?

**Promote Employment:** Jobs are the engine of villages. Workers are typically the majority of customers for local businesses. Towns should do as much as possible to help encourage village job growth.

3.3A Is there a town office, library, or other facility in the village?

3.3B Does the town encourage small businesses in the village by helping to create co-working spaces or shared offices?

3.3C Are there any policies or programs to provide for the retention or relocation of any businesses that may be displaced by the renovation of a building or neighborhood?
4. Community Character & Resource Protection

Community character is usually reflected in values and goals that are built into local plans. A clear set of principles, developed in a broad community process and incorporated into locally adopted plans and policies, can provide a framework for determining whether existing and proposed development are achieving goals that will fit in with desired community character. This can include natural, historic and cultural resources.

**Use of Historic and Other Existing Buildings:** Preservation or adaptive reuse of historic and other existing buildings can be more resource-efficient than new construction, in part because such buildings are already tied into public infrastructure. Historic buildings also make a unique contribution to community character.

4.1 Does the village reuse or encourage rehabilitation of historic or other existing buildings in a manner that preserves their scale, materials, and character?

**Community Gathering Spaces:** Community spaces contribute to the vitality of a community by providing opportunities for social interaction, physical activity, and entertainment. Such gathering spaces include plazas, squares, parks, and greenways, as well as museums, theaters, and community centers.

4.2 Does the village have plans to create or enhance community gathering spaces that are open to the public?

**Brownfields:** Brownfields are formerly used sites (Typically industrial) that may have (or may be perceived to have) contamination issues. By cleaning up and reusing a brownfield, a project avoids the use of previously undeveloped land.

4.3 Does the town encourage the clean-up and reuse of brownfields?

**Preservation of Agriculture & Forest Land:** Farms and forests contribute to the town’s economic development and provide local food, wood products, recreation, preserve community character and wildlife habitat.

4.4 Does the village encourage more density to reduce development pressure for farms and forests such as in a Transfer of Development Rights or other program?

**Stormwater Management:** Reducing existing and more effectively preventing subsequent impacts from stormwater runoff through low impact development design and management techniques, reduces the amount of pollutants from entering surface waters and wetlands.

4.5A Does the town require or encourage the use of green infrastructure to manage existing stormwater runoff impacts to receiving waters and wetlands?

4.5B Does the town require new development within the village to comply with low impact development standards?