

Smart Growth for Mobile: A New Alternative

Implementation Initiatives Document



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In the early 1990's, "smart growth" in its true form advanced as a planning strategy intended to offer communities and cities a mechanism to accommodate inevitable growth and development. Since this time, many cities, states and regional authorities have made tremendous progress in the movement toward smart growth. Recognizing the enormous impacts of this alternative development approach, in the spring of 2002 the City of Mobile selected the smart growth model as one means to assist in defining its vision for future growth. Critical to the overall success of this initiative thus far has been the formulation of comprehensive growth policies designed to strengthen and improve Mobile's development future.

In January 2003, the Smart Growth Steering Committee and the Mobile City Planning Commission unanimously adopted the *Smart Growth for Mobile Policy Document*. This document consists of five broad policy areas that offer realistic and valuable solutions to Mobile's unique development issues. Designed as an alternative, these policies work to attract residents back to existing neighborhoods and communities by encouraging mixed use, pedestrian-friendly developments that promote the conservation of valuable open space.

As *Smart Growth for Mobile* enters Phase II, considerable focus will now be placed on the implementation process. Because many of the smart growth objectives outlined in the Policy Document are not permitted by the City's current ordinances and regulations, the first step toward implementation is the removal of regulatory barriers that impede Smart Growth as a viable development alternative. Once these obstacles have been identified, the next step is to outline specific smart growth development practices to be incorporated into the City of Mobile's Smart Growth plan. To accomplish this task, the Implementation Initiatives Document has been formulated. Drafted by the Smart Growth Sub-Committees, this Document will outline specific measures needed to modify existing codes and ordinances to allow alternative development practices.

Methodology

To begin the initiatives formulation process, Sub-Committees were organized based on the five Smart Growth Policy areas. The policy areas include: Design Alternatives/Strengthening the Existing Community, Open Space/Transportation and Development Incentives. While focusing on a specific policy area, the Sub-Committees were given the responsibility of: 1) identifying current development practices and regulations that are in conflict with the objectives outlined in the Smart Growth Policy Document; 2) formulating strategies that promote sustainable development practices; and 3) creating incentives that promote Smart Growth as a viable development option.

Members serving on the Sub-Committees consisted of individuals from the Steering Committee, as well as representatives from outside agencies. Professionals

representing organizations such as the utility companies, the regional planning authority, the state transportation agency and the local housing board were brought in to provide input and knowledge on specific issues as they related to Mobile's development practices. Their overall knowledge and expertise has been a valuable asset to this process.

Meeting on a monthly basis for a period of six months, the Sub-Committees developed a series of implementation initiatives for the objectives outlined in the *Smart Growth Policy Document*. Recognizing the failures of mandated growth initiatives across the country, it became obvious that regulatory enforcement of Smart Growth measures would not be readily accepted in the Mobile community if perceived as yet another layer of governmental regulations. Departing from the national trend toward mandated growth plans, the initiatives outlined by the Sub-Committees were designed as alternative development strategies.

Smart Growth Initiatives

The Smart Growth Sub-Committees have reached consensus on the Implementation Initiatives and the following initiatives are designed to accomplish the goals set forth in the *Smart Growth Policy Document*. The initiatives outlined for their respective policy areas do not identify specific standards or implementation parameters. It is the intent of this document that the individual, more detailed guidelines be finalized during the implementation process in coordination with other City departments and outside agencies.

Design Alternatives

As an alternative to highly dispersed development patterns, the Smart Growth Initiative offers efficient development practices that foster reinvestment and redevelopment within the urban environment. Although typical of "urban communities", the objectives outlined for this policy area can be incorporated into any development style or type. The guidelines for the Design Alternatives policy area are as follows:

- ⌘ Allow pavement widths less than 26-feet
- ⌘ Allow lot sizes less than 7200 sq.ft. with open space
- ⌘ Allow increased density for innovative design layout
- ⌘ Allow reduced setbacks for innovative design layout
- ⌘ Allow a mixture of commercial and residential uses that are compatible in scale and design
- ⌘ Allow a mixture of housing types (i.e. density)

- ⌘ Inclusion of affordable housing units into residential development
- ⌘ Provision of trees and plantings as approved by appropriate agencies
- ⌘ Allow alternative traffic calming devices as part of the development process (narrow streets, on-street parallel parking, etc)
- ⌘ Architectural design compatibility reviewed as part of the Smart Growth Application in existing neighborhoods
- ⌘ Allow on-street parking where feasible
- ⌘ Allow gateway signage

Strengthening the Existing Community

The purpose of the Strengthening the Existing Community policy is to develop initiatives that promote growth in areas of the City that have been traditionally overlooked for development. The initiatives outlined below propose that specific areas of the City of Mobile be targeted for future development efforts. To attract revitalization and development activity, Smart Growth projects initiated within these districts will receive an incentive based development credit.

The first district designation, *Desired Development Zones*, establish land use criteria which will be used to determine a district's eligibility for designation as a targeted growth area. The second district, *Focused Public Improvement Areas*, identify areas of the city that should be prioritized for infrastructure improvements to be funded by the City of Mobile's capital improvements plan.

Desired Development Zones (DDZ) are areas within the City where development is focused to support future growth, redevelopment and infill projects. The following elements have been identified as criteria to designate an area as a DDZ.

Areas containing:

- ⌘ Parcels of vacant or underutilized land (brownfields, greyfields, dilapidated property), which either currently exists or may readily be assembled into areas of sufficient size to accommodate a mix of land uses
- ⌘ Areas that are strategically located in proximity to existing infrastructure, including improved collector or arterial streets, various necessary utility sources, major sewer lines and adequate water sources
- ⌘ Areas that offer opportunities for higher intensity development based on proximity to adequate transportation options and utility infrastructure

- ∞ Areas that incorporate preservation of open space and natural resources, and provide community amenities such as parks and recreational facilities
- ∞ Declining Residential Areas
- ∞ Areas lacking convenient commercial services to support neighborhoods
- ∞ Limited Affordable Housing options
- ∞ Limited housing choices

One of the attractions of infill sites is the general availability of existing infrastructure. However, infrastructure may be deteriorated and require replacement, particularly for a large infill project. Under such circumstances, infill development becomes increasingly troublesome and expensive relative to greenfield development. To contend with this problem Focused Public Improvement Areas were established.

Focused Public Improvement Areas (FPIAs) are areas within the existing community where there is substantial existing development and the major public facilities are already in place. Different from a Capital Improvement Plan, a FPIA identifies specific areas where improvements will be directed. The idea is to coordinate and concentrate investments for urban services such as water, sewer, drainage, streets, parks and schools, to provide fully serviced land for development. Such focused public investment can fill the gaps where basic infrastructure is either missing or needs upgrading. Within these FPIAs, local government and public utility agencies will be responsible for providing off-site improvements within the FPIA boundary. Below are the criteria identified to establish an area as a FPIA.

Areas in need of repairs or upgrades to:

- ∞ Sidewalks
- ∞ Public Utilities (Water, Sewer)
- ∞ Stormwater Drainage Systems
- ∞ Streets
- ∞ Parks

Based upon the criteria listed for Desired Development Zones and Focused Public Improvement Areas, segments of the City qualifying for these designations will be identified by the City of Mobile planning staff, and approved by the Smart Growth for Mobile Steering Committee, the Mobile Planning Commission and the City Council. Upon adoption, these districts will be advertised to the local development community.

Open Space

The conservation criteria listed below will be used to evaluate a developments overall environmental sensitivity. The outlined criteria are intended to promote the areas environmental resources by preserving natural and recreational open spaces, reducing

the total impervious cover created on site, and encouraging the use of non-structural treatment measures to treat storm water runoff.

Open Space Standards

- ⌘ Land to remain as undeveloped open space
 - ⌘ Open undeveloped land
 - ⌘ All wetlands (whether regulated or not)
 - ⌘ Creeks, Streams, ponds or lakes
 - ⌘ Habitats of unique or endangered species
 - ⌘ Woodlands wherein which at least 30% of the trees measure at least 10 inches in diameter

- ⌘ Allowable uses of open space
 - ⌘ Active outdoor recreation areas
 - ⌘ Passive green spaces
 - ⌘ Drainage Systems
 - ⌘ Accessory structures related to open space

- ⌘ Prohibitive uses of open space
 - ⌘ Paved roads
 - ⌘ Non-permeable parking lots
 - ⌘ Structures unrelated to open space
 - ⌘ City rights-of-way

- ⌘ Ownership and management of the open space will be the responsibility of the:
 - ⌘ Individual Property Owner
 - ⌘ Homeowners Association
 - ⌘ Private Land Trust

Open Space Criteria

Residential

- ⌘ A minimum of 25% of the site area preserved as open space with a sliding scale

Commercial

- ⌘ A minimum of 15% of the site area preserved as open space with a sliding scale

- ⌘ Perpetual restrictions on open space prohibiting development

- ⌘ Total impervious coverage (structures, parking lots, roads, but not limited to) no greater than 75% of the total land area

- ⌘ The incorporation of stream buffers into the site design on both perennial and intermittent streams. The minimum buffer will be 25 feet from the stream shoreline.
- ⌘ Site clearing restricted only to areas where clearing is absolutely necessary for construction access, buildings, roads and utilities
- ⌘ Reforestation of cleared forest areas with native trees selected from a list of approved species of an appropriate size
- ⌘ On-lot storm water treatment practices in the form of rain gardens, grassed swales and filter strips in residential and commercial areas
- ⌘ Use of alternative paving materials (e.g. porous asphalt, pervious concrete, pavers) replacing asphalt and concrete for the construction of driveways, parking lots and walkways in new developments and redevelopment projects
- ⌘ Use of alternative paving materials in overflow parking areas in excess of predefined ratios for a specific land use category
- ⌘ Dedication of open space to the City of Mobile in areas designated by the Green Spaces Master Plan to expand the development of the greenways plan
- ⌘ In lieu of open space, a trail can be constructed to an existing park, school or community facility, or used to purchase playground equipment or furniture
- ⌘ Access to open space by a strip of land suitable for a footpath, from one or more streets in the development
- ⌘ The use of vegetated swales along roadways in lieu of traditional curb and gutter
 - ⌘ Consideration given to restrictions on property adjacent to floodplains having steeper slopes and poorer soils
 - ⌘ The use of gray water cisterns
 - ⌘ Shared Driveways
 - ⌘ Other Category

Transportation

With respect to Transportation, the Smart Growth Sub-Committee has identified a series of alternatives to current transportation issues. The aim of the Sub-Committee was to

integrate multi-modal transportation options into the overall development program. The objectives for the Transportation policy are as follows:

- ∞ Allow increased density for innovative design
- ∞ Encourage development in close proximity to current and expanding transit lines
- ∞ To make walking a realistic transportation option, allow a mixture of commercial and residential uses that are compatible in scale
- ∞ The provision of sidewalks in new developments
- ∞ The use of innovative street designs and crossing paths to provide safe and discernible access points which enhance the overall development and streetscape.

Development Incentives

In order to encourage Smart Growth projects, the Development Incentives Sub-Committee was established to develop a process by which incentives could be awarded. The first step for the Sub-Committee was to rank each of the implementation initiatives in order of importance. Once the ranking was accomplished, a scoring method was needed. Consideration was given to the fact that certain initiatives that may be very important in one area may be less important in others.

Ultimately, a matrix was developed using a weight (w) and value (v) method for scoring (See Appendix B). Each initiative has been assigned a value; and then, based upon the ranking of the initiative, a weight assigned. Partial scores may be applied to the value for partial compliance with the initiative. The total score for each initiative is determined by $(w) \times (v)$.

A baseline score is to be established which a project must achieve to be considered a Smart Growth Project. Once that baseline score has been achieved, the project may become eligible for incentive packages dependant upon its total matrix score.

While the Development Incentives Sub-Committee discussed various possibilities for incentive packages, it was determined that given the current economic trends, the actual incentive packages would be more appropriately set by the City administration after adoption of the Policy and Implementation Documents by the City Council.

However, to further advance this Initiative, the City executive staff has already begun preliminary discussions with local development interests. Representatives from various segments of the development community, ranging from the Mobile Board of Realtors to the Mobile Water and Sewer Service, have been working with the City of Mobile to evaluate a series of potential development incentives. Development incentives currently being explored by this body include:

- ∞ Modification to existing permit fee schedules;
- ∞ Modification of application fees designated by the City of Mobile as well as other necessary boards and commissions;
- ∞ Educational efforts focusing toward local development stakeholders informing them of existing financial assistance opportunities (i.e. payment schedule for Water and Sewer fees, Tax Increment Financing, etc.)

Once the details of the incentives packages have been finalized, this information will then be forwarded to the Steering Committee to determine how incentives will be awarded.

Implementation and Monitoring Processes

Unanimously adopted by all three Smart Growth Sub-Committees, the Implementation Initiatives Document will be forwarded to the Mobile Planning Commission and City Council for consideration. The necessary departments or agencies (Mobile Area Water and Sewer Service, Metropolitan Planning Organization, Mobile County Public School System, etc.) will then review the Implementation Initiatives document to modify their respective agency regulations or plans.

It is the intent of this document that City of Mobile code and ordinance amendments be a collaborative effort. Although, many of the initiatives appear extremely straightforward, there are numerous considerations and codes section that will need amending. Moreover, the first step toward Smart Growth is the removal of regulatory barriers impeding viable alternatives. Due to the intricate detail required for comprehensive and cohesive amendments, it is essential that the committee studying and drafting these amendments be small and consist of staff and a limited number of outside experts. Committee meetings will be open meetings.

The Steering Committee will meet quarterly to monitor implementation initiatives and the results thereof. During these meetings, the Steering Committee will review the status of smart growth initiatives, and as necessary, consider amendments to the Smart Growth plan.

Appendix B

