I’m Elaine Clegg, I’m a City Councilmember in the City of Boise, Idaho.

I’ve been involved with smart growth for a long time. For me it’s just creating great places for people to live. Places where they can get to the things that they need easily and conveniently, and live in a way that’s affordable for them.

Boise is a western town that has this mantra of being the rugged individualist. At the same time, though, it’s actually the mercantile center of a really isolated region, always has been. So we’ve always had actually a much more cooperative spirit. We’ve got an opera, a philharmonic, a ballet company, a Shakespeare company, we’ve had those for many years. A great art museum. And so we’re kind of the cultural center of a big region. We also have a lot of outdoor recreation. We have a wonderful, beautiful big parks right along our river and there’s 52 miles of walking and biking paths on those. We have 10,000 acres in our foothills that we’ve preserved. So that becomes the backdrop for what we think is becoming a real thriving high tech center, university center, creative class place if you want to use those terms, although I think those are overused. To me it’s just a place where people who have good ideas can come and see if those good ideas work.

We have some regional issues. Boise is relatively dense, and the center of a really sprawling region. About 600,000 people in region, many of whom commute by car 25 to 30 miles every day. So we’re trying to develop a master plan, a regional long-range transportation master plan that will take advantage of some of the natural transportation corridors that we have. We have a rail corridor that connects the valley right now, but is not used for passenger [rail]. We’d like to protect that and hopefully introduce – or reintroduce – either passenger rail or some kind of transit on that corridor. So we’re trying to concentrate that long range transportation plan in making sure that whatever employment nodes and higher density residential nodes that develop are placed in such a way that they can take advantage of the natural transportation that hopefully will be there in the future.

We talk a lot, nationally, about transit being the big idea for smart growth but I think, at least at our level and the size of community that Boise has, it’s really about walking and biking. So for me the end vision is a community where every neighborhood has destinations within walking and biking distance so that they can take at least half the trips they need to take each day by foot or by bike rather than by getting in a car.

We’ve often looked at “pay as you grow” as “If we just exact enough impact fees out of the developers then we’ll be fine.” But we fail to look at the bigger picture. And I’ve done a lot of work in my other profession on school siting, for instance. And when we site schools we don’t look at the total cost of the school. The school district often looks at the cost of the land, they may look at the cost of making site improvements that would allow kids to walk and bike around the site, but
they don’t look at: Is there already water there? Is the other infrastructure in good shape? Are there already walking and biking paths? Where do the students live? Are they within walking and biking distance? Those kinds of things. And it’s not just schools that we should look at that with – it’s everything that gets sited in the neighborhood, look at all of those elements. That’s really the way we’re going to make growth pay as it goes. Because you can exact all the upfront capital money that you want to from a developer, and if you’ve just then committed to maintain miles and miles of new roads and new sewer pipe, and all the rest of it that goes along with it, at the end of the day you’re not going to come out ahead. So for me “pay as you go” is much more than about getting those upfront capital costs right. It’s about making sure that what you build over the long term can be maintained with the money that you know it’s going to generate.

We have a really interesting initiative going on right now where we’re investing in the river to replace an irrigation diversion with a wave shaper, and create a whitewater area on the river where it used to be just kind of a trashy area where nobody wanted to go. At the same time there’s gravel pits along the edge of the water there and that’s going to become a stillwater course and 55 acres of green space park. And so in concert with that we’ve done a full-on area master plan for the area around it, recognizing that that’s going to attract a lot of people and hopefully development. So what we’re trying to do is invest in things that we think the people who, those young creative people who are looking for new opportunities, would find attractive and want to come live near.