Smart Growth Stories: Point C’s David Grannis on creating vibrant neighborhoods in downtown Los Angeles
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I’m David Grannis and I am the managing partner of Point C, a strategic consulting firm. We focus on land use and transportation, both policy and practice. Most of our clients are in the private sector, but we work a lot with government and a lot with non-governmental organizations, specifically in the environmental community.

What we try and do is come up with mechanisms where the property owner, the community planner and the community builder has a way of doing smart growth on their own by really value-capturing the value of the development itself and spinning that monetization back into infrastructure.

My biggest challenge actually is helping my clients understand that they've got to be more bold. They’ve got to look outside of that. They have to understand demographics, the trendlines in terms of the environmental world. For example, in California we have a huge new policy on carbon reduction, a policy on matching land use with transportation amenities, et cetera. Those are important but candidly they follow the market, so my biggest challenge is helping my clients understand and actually take that step to get out in front because by doing so they form a niche in the marketplace that no one else has.

So in downtown Los Angeles, if you were to visit there twenty years ago, there was very little housing in downtown. There were a number of beautiful new emergent highrises in downtown and the whole southern portion and eastern portion of downtown were either surface parking lots or they were really pretty old warehouse-type uses. That has completely transformed. So from a land use standpoint, what’s happened is that a huge amount of adaptive re-use and infill has occurred for both housing and jobs and services, which in turn has raised the population living downtown, which in turn has raised the economics of downtown. Downtown is much more economically viable than it was twenty years ago. It is a destination. It is a place to be, a place to live. I believe—and this to me is what LOCUS is really all about—that good policy follows good practice.

There has to be a confluence between both good private practice and reinvesting the bottom line, really actually upping that investment in the bottom line to get a greater return on the bottom line in things that people want. The Millennial generation and the retiring Boomers represent the biggest segment of our population in this country. They don’t want the half-acre, the quarter-acre, even the 5,000 foot lot with a yard and all that. They’re moving into the cities, into the urban areas. The Millennials want a lot more flexibility. They don’t want to be tied down, thus the growth in multi-family housing, but they want to be in a walkable area, in a bikeable area, in an accessible area. So that’s what I mean by harmonizing those things. Some of that is public infrastructure investment and I think it behooves the private sector to really invest to increase their own return.

So now we’re doing a big project in south Orange County, a place that would not be on anybody’s top ten list of smart growth, but this is the beauty of smart growth: it’s actually happening
everywhere. We’re not playing in a national economy. We’re playing in a global economy and each region of the country is playing differently. California is playing with Silicon Valley. Candidly, the Pacific Northwest is playing with medical technology. The Eastern seaboard, the corridor from Boston to New York, is playing with medical and biomedical technology, so each place is a little bit different but they’re competing globally. So those places have their own DNA and helping them really determine their own destiny is good for national growth. I think that shift could make a huge difference in what I do, which is really helping the private sector actually get out there and invest some of their own resources. It would be a huge boost to my private sector clients if there were a mechanism that was much more localized. That’s where they live and work.

We need to step back and look in more of a continuum and we really need to trust people more. This is what people want; this isn’t some kind of trendy, new product that we’re marketing on television. What we’re doing is we’re really providing the infrastructure necessary for people to pursue their lifestyle the way they want it.

Bringing people together under a LOCUS-Smart Growth America umbrella really is indicative of the fact that this is trendline what people have been trending towards in our society. So my thought on smart growth is “trust people.” They know what they want, number one, and number two, we can do a lot better for our kids and our grandkids, not just through investing tax resources, but doing things more smartly, creating that operating system that continually is dynamically updated for future generations.