Smart growth, speaking from the perspective of a mayor, to me means efficiency, making the best use of available services, whether it’s infrastructure or safety needs, such as fire, police, so forth, but it’s also efficiency for those residents, the citizens themselves. Is it smart to develop an area that’s going to be a 30 or 45 minute commute? For the city of Billings, that’s a considerable time whereas we should concentrate development more in areas that’s going to get you to your destination in half that amount of time, so we like to look out not only for our city, but we also like to look out for the citizens and help them as best we can also.

One of the projects that I’ve been very fond of has been infill. So when we talk about neighborhoods, what’s good for a neighborhood? Density. Be it that people living close together have the ability to get to know each other, communicate, support the local businesses, obviously take advantage of the transportation that’s provided and so forth, so density is very important, not that we wish to discourage growth, but in a very smart fashion.

When you speak of growth and you talk about developments, there is a payoff. You’re talking about expansion of tax base; you’re talking about the need possibly of more schools, new schools, and all of these things provide jobs and certainly more revenue to the city. However, there’s also an offset: what it cost the city to provide those services so speaking of smart growth, the idea is to infill, use the existing services, use the existing facilities, schools and so forth first to the best of their ability, then to look at outside areas.

Infill may be just restructuring the parking to allow more bike lanes if you wish. It may be the restructuring of the traffic flow to get the traffic flowing smoother so that the transportation system is more easily accessible and this type of thing. We’ve tried to extend the fact that we have rental bicycles in the downtown area for in-town city commuters, saving them time from walking, so it doesn’t necessarily mean you need to look at new development, spending more money. Sometimes just making the best use of what you have existing in a cost-effective way and things that are visible to the citizens that they can see and experience and can appreciate on a personal basis, with that you’re going to get their buy-in and then when the time comes that we have new development, new streets, or what have you and we want to incorporate biking lanes within those streets or incorporate proper parking for safety, visibility, and so forth, they’re going to be more apt to agree with you and more apt to spend an extra dollar to make it work.

I think what’s needed is you need to look at the overall economy, nation-wide, where are we headed, what can we do to help each other, what can individual cities, communities do to help just to sustain and so consequently there again, that’s where it starts and pulling these people in and explaining to them that we cannot continue to grow in the manner that we have, we need to look
at things very carefully and make the best use of their tax dollars. I think it helps me because I have, as a retired city employee, I have a very good understanding of city government. I worked for the city for many, many years; I’m also a real estate broker, have been for many years now also and so when you tie all these together along with my mayor experience, I think it helps me to have a very good understanding of what’s best for our city but by taking that experience and sharing it with others and bringing them in and asking for their input and their involvement has helped us to succeed. That’s why I’m here at this conference, to show that I am concerned, that I’m interested and that I want to learn more and work with others in the field, planners and so forth, and not just in Billings, Montana, but throughout the country, sharing information, what may work in one area, taking those ideas back home and sharing them with my constituents, sharing with the other elected officials. But along with that simply a lot of cooperation with those back home, the developers, the business people, so forth. We’re fortunate; we’ve got a very strong chamber of commerce that is on board with smart growth; they’re on board with the development of trails and so forth and we’ve been very lucky that we’ve been able to secure financing to succeed in that area, but along with that we have other private organizations, many that we meet with frequently and try to share the information as much as possible to keep them involved, to keep them in the loop and I think that’s the key and that’s communication.