



## Smart Growth America

Making Neighborhoods Great Together

### **Smart Growth Stories: Mayor John Engen on Missoula, Montana's 'sense of place'**

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I'm John Engen, I'm the Mayor of Missoula, Montana.

We're a mountain town in the West with a 15,000 student liberal arts university. We have pretty remarkable natural environmental gifts. We are feet away from a wilderness area but we have urban amenities. So really it's the best of both worlds in many ways. We've undergone a transition over the course of the last 25 or 30 years from a really resource-intensive environment – timber, in particular – to an economy that relies largely on service. That's been a difficult transition but an interesting one. And the product is a community that really values its sense of place.

We don't have much going for us if we don't have a decent place to live. I'm pretty old fashioned: I'm all about the middle class. And to me the middle class represents an opportunity for folks to fully participate in their communities. If you're a middle class citizen in Missoula, Montana, you're not making difficult choices every day between food and shelter, between transportation and medicine. And because you're not making those sort of emergent choices every day, the choices you get to make are how you engage in your community. How you participate in your kids school, what non-profit you volunteer or contribute money to, how you engage in politics, how you engage in community affairs, the list goes on.

We have some middle class neighborhoods, and I want more people to be able participate in all of that. So neighborhoods are important because I think they're the breeding ground for community. When people know one another, when they have things in common and can appreciate their differences, there are all sorts of opportunities for communities to thrive.

I don't think any kid grows up thinking, "Wow, I want to grow up to be the guy who rewrites our zoning code." If, as I think I mentioned to you last night, it's among one of the least sexy things a person can do. But it's utterly necessary and the reason for that is growth and change are always difficult. If it happens in a chaotic, unpredictable environment nobody wins. Our zoning code produced neighborhood tensions, caused folks to distrust one another, caused them to distrust their government. It caused developers to distrust neighbors, to distrust government and to distrust one another. And if you were looking at our community from the outside, the answer was "These folks don't have their act together." So we spent considerable funds and a lot of human capital in rewriting that zoning code. It took a couple of years, one lawsuit and a whole lot of listening but we got it done. And today we have a code that reflects community interest and vision, provides some consistent predictability to everyone who's involved in the community, and shows folks who may want to invest in Missoula that we know what we're doing.

So what we do in local government is, or can be, largely a product of what we've always done in local government. We build structures and institutions, and create roles and relationships that sometimes reflect a reality that's as old as that zoning code was. So we have a system for doing development review and process that's divided. We have folks who should be working together,

complementing one another's talents and disciplines, bringing new ideas and more effectiveness and creativity to the table. But we put them in different departments, we give them different bosses, and we separate them by walls or cubicles. My job today is to tear down those walls, bring those people together, and ensure that they have a working environment and a structure in which they can do the best work they can do. It's just not good enough to pass pieces of paper through City Hall any more. It's just not. It doesn't serve anyone and we need to fix it.

My vision I think is a shared vision, and that's how do we maintain a sense of place, a sense of comfort, a sense of safety? How do folks find comfort and success? How do we continue to enjoy a pretty fantastic quality of life? My job is to keep up marching down the right path, to make sure we're using our resources appropriately, to make sure that other folks understand what those resources are and how to deploy those resources in a way that's meaningful. It's really all about working together, and figuring out new ways to work together in a national environment that's been challenging. So we create models on the local level for doing things well and doing things collaboratively. In the end, when I'm done I hope folks will say, "We worked to keep Missoula a place."