



CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Camden County, North Carolina

About the Community

Despite its small population (6,885 in 2000), Camden County, North Carolina ranked as the 8th fastest growing county in the country (by percentage growth) in 2004.

Camden County was once, and in a large part still is, a small rural farming community tucked in the northeast corner of the state just south of the Virginia state line from the Hampton Roads metropolitan area (2000 MSA population, 1.6 million).

The topography is flat "ranging from at sea level at the southern point to an elevation of 24 feet at the Virginia state line." Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the county is located in a flood-hazard area. About a third of the land in the county is currently devoted to agriculture.

In the late 1990's the county began growing into a bedroom community for Hampton Roads. The county's population leapt by 23% from 2000 to 2004, a percentage growth that matched the total percentage growth of the prior three decades.

Its proximity and relative lack of density makes the county attractive to workers from Hampton Roads. Currently, about 22% of the county's workforce commutes to the metropolitan area while another 41% commute to nearby Pasquotank County.

Camden has no large concentrations of population (no cities or towns) and has very few commercial or business establishments. The growth that has occurred so far is completely residential although development pressures from Hampton Roads has made the northern part of the country attractive to retail developers.

With the exception of Elizabeth City to the west of Camden, development in the surrounding counties generally consists of low-density single-family residences and strip commercial centers on land that was previously used for agricultural purposes. Currituck County on the



Outer Banks, Camden's neighbor to the east, has seen a rapid growth and decline in large vacation homes with nearly 35% of its housing units counting as vacant in 2005 (vs. 10.5% in Camden).

State Of Smart Growth Implementation

Three old townships in Camden have the potential for developing into denser communities: 1) Camden Courthouse, 2) South Mills, and 3) Shiloh. These areas have a slightly higher concentration of houses or are at historical crossroads and have some small commercial establishments.

The county wants to accommodate the growth by creating "villages" and town centers in the old townships, increasing the density enough to attract retail and commercial investments.

The county suffers from a lack of infrastructure, particularly sewer and wastewater services that allow for denser development. As things stand, the county is forced by health regulations to limit lot sizes to a maximum of 40,000 sq.ft. to accommodate septic fields. The county received a grant to install a main sewer line and wastewater treatment package to serve existing residents along the main artery. The grant prohibits the county from using the infrastructure investment to provide excess capacity for new growth but the provision of the sewer will at least give the community a future base for expanding the service.

Camden prides itself in its school system and its schools continually outperform the schools in the region making the community even more attractive to families.

Because the county has very little commercial development (the growth is almost entirely residential) and without new businesses and associated sales taxes, the cost of providing services (schools, etc.) is outstripping the county's revenues.

In November 2003 the county enacted a moratorium on residential subdivision development. The county justified the moratorium on the protecting the schools system from the severe demands that further growth would impose.

In 2006, Ordinance No. 2006-06-02 created a unified government for Camden County, placing all development and planning decisions (with the exception of road construction and maintenance) under the jurisdiction of the County Board of Commissioners.

The support for the moratorium and the unified government were anchored on: 1) the concern for the quality of schools; 2) a defensive posture against annexation by a neighboring jurisdiction (Elizabeth City); and, 3) a shared dismay at the quality and pattern of development showcased in the neighboring counties.

Despite the moratorium, the County's growth rate continued to grow by an average 7% from 2003 to 2007.



In 2007, Camden passed an Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance specifically outlining the county's land use authority premised on the provision of high quality education. (The ordinance does contemplate further expansion to cover other facilities as needed.)

The real estate boom early in the decade caused land prices to skyrocket but the moratorium held back development. The recent downturn in the market has eased pressure off somewhat but demand for housing in the greater Hampton Roads area continues to grow.

The strength of Camden County's political will was clearly exhibited in its ability to keep the moratorium in place for over three and a half years despite the pressures of development amplified by the real estate boom early this century. Having held back the doors of runaway development, the county may have skillfully (and fortunately) dodged the bullet of speculative real estate. It may have also spared its current and would-be citizens of the meltdown of sub-prime mortgages and the attendant foreclosures.

Camden still faces the pressure of development. Growth is coming and will still come to the region, though at least it will probably be led by real housing demand rather than speculative investment.

The breathing space given by the moratorium could have been a great opportunity to build the community vision for the future but the county took no significant efforts to create a shared vision.

Nevertheless, the moratorium gave Camden space to evaluate not only its codes and zoning but also the broad outlines of its jurisdiction and authority. It would be hard to imagine Camden citizens approving the Unified Government if rapid development was already disproportionately distributed across the county. Doubtless increasing tax and sales receipts would have precipitated arguments over which jurisdictions (county vs. township) would benefit from the fruits of development.

The county's agriculture based economy is facing the twin challenges of declining farm incomes and increasing land costs. Very little policy and regulatory attention has been given to preservation of farmland and open space, or environmental quality issues. This is particularly evident as many life long farmers succumb to rapidly increasing land values caused by speculative developers. From 1997 to 2003 the number of active farms fell from 87 to 61.

The moratorium was lifted in April 2007.

To prepare for the "lifting of the gates," Camden County invited SGLI to develop a Smart Growth Scorecard for proposed development projects, smart growth design parameters (guidelines) for the proposed commercial areas in the identified "village" zones, and a Strategic assessment to identify the critical next steps for implementing smart growth in the county.



The county manager, the county planner and the county planning staff are the primary boosters for smart growth. The local staff as well as the county's planning board are strongly committed to smart growth and have deftly navigated the process of introducing changes in ordinances and policies that would support a more sustainable pattern of development.

There are no other outspoken proponents of smart growth in the community and the elected leaders have been non-committal, agreeing to the principles of smart growth but shying away from passing clear policies.

What is sorely lacking is any public discussion of the future of the county though there are many opportunities to bring awareness to the forefront.

Camden's strengths in the traditional centers of community life: schools, churches and heritage are counterbalanced by a near dearth of civilian-led organizations in its civic life. There are no strong Kiwanis or Lion's or Rotary Clubs, no strong horticultural or naturalist societies or the like.

As such, though the fear of runaway development is shared, there is little space and opportunity to discuss the future of the community outside government sponsored hearings.

Lessons Learned

You can't talk about smart growth until you start talking about the future

Discussing smart growth will only be fruitful if it is forward looking. Talking about smart growth only in the context of what has gone wrong or what you are trying to avoid may succeed but it is also likely to raise resistance from developers who put up the projects that you cite as "wrong" examples and from residents who might feel slighted because they choose to live in large lot, low density subdivisions.

Communities must discuss the future and come to a shared vision of what they want for the future if smart growth implementation is to move forward.

Capture the frame and define the terms

In too many communities, the term "smart growth" has effectively been co-opted by NIMBY¹ groups. In these communities, smart growth carries the baggage of damaging debates and has gained a connotation.

In communities where the concept is new, the most important task is to frame smart growth as the best answer to the community's aspirations.

¹ "Not in my backyard"



If the advocacy efforts are handled well, then smart growth could enjoy an enhanced reputation that would be beneficial to the implementation process. If the concepts of smart growth are not framed correctly, or it was defined as merely a set of regulatory prescriptions, then the implementation could suffer serious setbacks.

Use the breathing space to get ready

Moratoriums on development are never a panacea for unsustainable patterns of growth and should only be undertaken if the community requires adequate preparations for the coming growth.

Communities that do enact moratoriums must show that there is necessary work that must be done during the period, otherwise the measure will be viewed by the development community as simply evasive action. If handled correctly, a moratorium on development can be used as a "strategic pause" to give the community time to realign its policies and codes towards smart growth.

The caveat is that the pause also allows the opponents of smart growth to better organize to push a counter agenda.

It takes a village to attain smart growth in rural areas

Designating a village where higher density housing and commercial zoning can be clustered supports several smart growth principles.

First, designating a center for commercial development and permitting higher density is key to forming the critical mass needed to finance expanded provision of a sanitary sewer system, which helps preserve both natural and agricultural resources while expanding opportunities for economic development.

Second, focusing commercial development in a village center could reduce vehicle miles traveled by offering stores that are closer to each other so that patrons can park and walk rather than having to necessarily drive between shops.

Third, a building village establishes a place on the map, literally and figuratively. It establishes a "there there," as Getrude Stein put it. Well planned and built, a village offers dispersed neighbors a place to meet to discuss issues of the commons which define, build and sustain their community.

Fourth, accommodating life-cycle and workforce housing in a village works to keep the greater community strong by allowing elders who can no longer maintain their own homes to remain in their community, and by affording people who serve the community options to live close by.

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Smart Growth Strategy Builder

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About the Case Studies

Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.

The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with its implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.

Visit www.sgli.org for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.

Visit www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.