



## CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

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# Coconino County, Arizona

### About the Community

Coconino County is a large county in Northern Arizona that includes Flagstaff, the Grand Canyon, parts of Sedona, and significant federal and tribal land. At 18,000 square miles, Coconino County is the second-largest county in the nation. It covers most of north-central Arizona stretching from the Sedona area to the south all the way to the Utah state line--a distance of more than 150 miles. Much of Coconino County is scenic, mountainous, and forested, and is home to Northern Arizona University. About 60% of the 130,530 residents live in the immediate vicinity of Flagstaff, the County's largest city.

The county's annual population growth rate is at 2%, below the state's own growth rate. Because the supply of available land to accommodate additional development is limited, the growth rate still puts considerable pressure on both the county and Flagstaff.

Despite its vast size, only 13% of the land in the County is privately-owned. Native American reservations account for 38% of the land area, while federal land management agencies (the Forest Service, The Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service) and the State Land Department control and manage the remainder. Both the U.S. Forest Service and the State Land Department have processes that periodically make new land available for urban development but political and market pressures limit the ability to effectively process land transfers in Coconino County and Flagstaff.

In 2003, Coconino County adopted a new Comprehensive Plan that incorporated the goals and policies of previous plans. The Comprehensive Plan adopted Urban Growth Boundaries and Rural Growth Boundaries and called for the creation of an alternative to the traditional subdivision process that would permit conservation (clustered) subdivisions. The County is now in the process of revising its codes and other planning documents to implement the Comprehensive Plan.



The Plan conforms strongly to the principles of smart growth while many of the county's previously existing codes do not. This is not unusual of a jurisdiction that is just beginning to face smart growth issues.

## State Of Smart Growth Implementation

Coconino County has embraced a smart growth agenda as evidenced by its willingness to experiment with urban growth boundaries, focused growth areas, and infill and development strategies.

Areas set aside for future urban growth were identified through a partnership with Northern Arizona University, Coconino Community College, Flagstaff United School District, the Chamber of Commerce, homebuilders, and two local environmental groups. Plans reflect the county's desire to grow soundly as many of the goals revolve around housing, quality of life, and environment.

The goals in the Plan were built upon a shared vision in consultation with private landowners, tribal interests, small business owners, environmental groups, public land managers, the real estate community, colleges and universities, construction firms, state and federal agencies, and local citizens.

The county staff has been working on a conservation subdivision ordinance, but faces opposition from rural landowners. It has proven difficult in recent years for the County to withstand the political pressure from neighbors who would rather see conventional low-density subdivisions and oppose cluster subdivisions. The Board of Supervisors is fully committed to the conservation-based policies contained in the Comprehensive Plan, but it has been politically difficult for the Board to maintain this stance on a case-by-case basis. Local developers support building at increased densities in rural areas, but have also been trumped by political opposition.

Greater Flagstaff's growth is rapid enough to consume all land available for housing by 2020. A number of outlying areas are also growing rapidly and at extremely low densities. Parcels of raw land released by the U.S. Forest Service and the State Land Department do come on stream but the agencies have limited capacities to place land on the open market, constraining even this land supply.

A variety of market and political pressures appear to prevent Flagstaff and Coconino County from using the existing land supply as efficiently as they might. Second homes represent close to 20% of the housing market and elected officials frequently feel pressure to reduce densities below the level proposed by developers.

The County's experience with subdivision development involves mostly reviewing rural subdivisions, and the present county codes reflect this. The City of Flagstaff recognizes that, the current codes feature suburban standards and prevent developers from replicating the existing, denser urban fabric.



The County's recently adopted Comprehensive Plan is an exemplary document and has won a number of awards. The plan supports sustainable development and its principles are anchored on the conservation of land. The existing codes and ordinances, however, do not conform to the vision laid out in the plan.

SGLI's Technical Assistance team audited Coconino's Comprehensive Plan and the current policies and codes, including the proposed conservation subdivision ordinance. The team also conducted a market analysis to determine the feasibility of cluster development (vs. opposed to large-lot subdivisions) and assessed what strategic and "high-leverage" steps the county and other critical players could take to move smart growth implementation forward.

The made a series of code, procedural and implementation recommendations, among them:

- *Create truncated review for conservation subdivisions at the staff level by making the rules as standardized as possible.*
- *Incorporate a by-right process to reduce political opposition in the case of individual subdivisions.*
- *Adopt Area Plans that deal not only with environmental constraints and infrastructure, but clearly articulate smart growth goals at the neighborhood level.*
- *Adopt design standards for both public infrastructure and private development that will readily permit the smart growth goals to be accomplished.*
- *Create a project or subdivision-level review process that conforms to the Area Plans and design standards.*
- *Expand the role of an onstaff development planner in the County Community Development Department and build expertise in suburban- and urban-density development.*
- *Establish a sense of urgency for implementation by emphasizing dwindling land supply and threat of low-density sprawling buildout in rural areas.*
- *Create or revive a broad guiding coalition that would oversee implementation.*
- *Develop a vision and strategy for implementation and communicate effectively.*
- *Build on the success of Area Plans and short-term accomplishments.*



## Lessons Learned

### ***What does “rural character” mean? --Understand the local semantics***

Many county residents are opposed to clustered development or conservation subdivisions and would rather see remaining undeveloped land subdivided into large lot development. When explaining their reason for opposing cluster subdivisions, low-density homeowners claim the need to preserve the “*rural character*” even if the large lot subdivision actually eat up more of the rural land and contribute to sprawl.

This causes a significant disconnect between the conservation principles articulated in the County Comprehensive Plan and the actual on-the-ground implementation particularly in rural subdivisions. We suspect that the call to preserve "rural character" but accepts sprawl is rooted in more NIMBY attitudes.

In Coconino, as elsewhere, it is important that the leaders understand the attitudes of rural homeowners, and if necessary conduct an education effort.

### ***Time and ease trump the promise of future profits***

The subdivision/parcelization laws in Arizona make it more difficult for Coconino County to hold landowners to strong minimum and maximum lot size standards.

The law allows landowners to subdivide their property into five lots and sell these without much county oversight. The permit process for subdividing a parcel of land into five lots takes about a month while the conventional subdivision process takes about a year to complete. This engenders a system where large properties are methodically subdivided by five lots, sold, then each lot is subdivided again into five lots, and then resold, so and so forth until the lots are small enough for residential development.

The irony is that the initial landowners are not the primary financial beneficiaries of this quick, iterative five-lot parcelization process. The land increases in value most when the final five-lot cut creates 2.5-acre parcels, but the original landowner is far removed by the time the parcels get to this size.

Landowners could capture more of this increase in value if they take the conventional subdivision route and cut up their large properties directly into the 2.5-acre lots. Yet most rural landowners in Coconino County choose the five-lot parcel route because it allows money to change hands more quickly. The conventional subdivision process is also viewed as onerous or unpredictable.



Such regulatory workarounds exist nationwide in areas harboring outdated codes and ordinances. Better information about the best way to maximize one's profit, and a smaller time differential between processes, might alter what gets built.

### ***You can be urban even if your unincorporated***

Coconino County, like other predominantly rural counties, focuses on land conservation and rural development. Meanwhile, the city of Flagstaff focuses on urban and infill development.

The County does not provide urban services and has experienced limited urban development except for within unincorporated communities such as Bellemont, Fort Valley, and Doney Park. But there is no question that the County will have to deal with many more urban development proposals in the future. Growth will continue to occur in pockets along the main corridor (Interstate 40) as well in the form of leapfrog development in the unincorporated donut-shaped area surrounding Flagstaff.

The county needs to identify where new urban development is likely to occur and to prepare for it. This lesson applies to other counties nationwide that experience patchwork landownership patterns and similar development pressures.

### ***Engage major institutions***

Northern Arizona University (NAU) is the most important institution in Greater Flagstaff. As a big landowner in the region, a growing research and education campus, and a leader in green building practices, NAU's human capital and real estate assets make it a prime candidate for promoting smart growth in the county.

If NAU's real estate development efforts were coordinated with regional infill and compact development needs, a dent could be made in the regional problems. The University's focus on sustainability might present another opportunity to model good practices in the county, perhaps with a project that is university-owned or sponsored.

Major institutions or employers in any community also have a stake in protecting and enhancing the local quality of life. These local economic anchors might possess the resources necessary to introduce amenities or different development or land use models to local residents.

### **Postscript**

As of the end of 2007, Coconino County was well on its way to implementing a number of the team's recommendations. The proposed Conservation Subdivision Ordinance, however, had not been adopted and the Zoning Ordinance had not been updated to reflect proposed changes to design standards.



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Tools used: *Smart Growth Policy Audit  
Smart Growth Code and Zoning Audit  
Smart Growth Strategy Builder*

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### About the Case Studies

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*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 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](http://www.sgli.org) for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.*

*Visit [www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net](http://www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net) for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.*