



## CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

---

# Davis, California

### About the Community

Davis, a city covering 10 square miles with approximately 65,000 people, is located in California's Central Valley in the predominantly agricultural Yolo County, some 15 miles west of Sacramento.

To protect agricultural land, most urban development has been channeled into Davis and the other three cities in the county. Relatively little development has occurred in unincorporated territory though Davis and the other cities have occasionally annexed agricultural land to accommodate new growth. The downtown is economically strong and alternative transportation systems are well established though much of the community is built to standard suburban models.

Davis is best known as the home of the University of California, Davis and city's population includes a large percentage of students. About 70% of the total population has a college or graduate degree.

Davis is currently experiencing a series of growth-related changes that have increased interest in smart growth. Developers are interested in constructing new projects in the downtown, which is dominated by single-story development. Although most neighborhood centers in Davis have continued to thrive, a few older neighborhood shopping centers are suffering market declines. These older shopping centers in residential areas must compete against supermarkets in higher-traffic locations. A few new greenfield projects are being proposed, but smart growth and mixed-use principles are also being promoted for infill projects located at existing centers.



## State Of Smart Growth Implementation

The University of California, Davis—as all UC branch campuses—is planning for considerable growth in the future. UC Davis owns tens of thousands of acres adjacent to town and is exempt from the land use system guiding development in Davis and Yolo County. UCD is moving forward with plans to engage in considerable development, especially to provide faculty/staff/student housing, on its own property.

The city has undertaken an aggressive effort to increase its affordable housing program. They have adopted a local preference system and also improved existing inclusionary requirements including a requirement to provide for those in the 120-160% of median income segment.

The City Council has traditionally had both smart-growth advocates and slow-growth advocates, and the city's relationship with the University has been uneven. On some growth issues, the two have worked well together; on others they have clashed.

Older neighborhood shopping centers in Davis are experiencing high occupant turnover and overall economic decline. Davis already has a mixed-use ordinance for the downtown, but does not have a specific mixed-used ordinance for other parts of the city, including older neighborhood shopping centers. Developers have shown interest in infill development in older existing centers as well as greenfield projects in other parts of the city. These growth-related changes have spurred interest in experimenting with smart growth principles and mixed-use development, but there is currently no ordinance that permits such development in these locations.

SGLI Technical Assistance team reviewed the the Davis Comprehensive Plan and other city documents; applied the Smart Growth Project Scorecard to two neighborhood shopping centers; and, recommended standards for writing a mixed-use ordinance for similar locations.

The Technical Team recommended that Davis:

- *Craft an ordinance with strict standards, rather than negotiating each project through the Planned Development approach.*
- *Incorporate a number of design standards including by-right authorization of horizontal mixed-use in neighborhood shopping centers and reduced parking ratios.*
- *Implement policies that would result in developments that fit the character and scale of the neighborhood—through the inclusion a variety of housing types and densities, insisting on a strong residential component, and removing the grocery store requirement.*



## Lessons Learned

### *You can't mandate a neighborhood grocery store*

In the 1970s, a neighborhood shopping center was mandated in basically all large new developments in Davis. These shopping centers were required to have grocery stores, and the grocery stores were required to be no more than 25,000 square feet. This was typical of a small but viable grocery store at the time and probably represented an attempt to keep chain supermarkets out of Davis.

Over time, this approach eroded as supermarkets got bigger. The two struggling neighborhood shopping centers that the Technical Assistance team studied (Westgate and Davis Manor) are embedded in neighborhoods rather than located on large arterial streets.

The biggest impediments to recycling these shopping centers are the old neighborhood grocery requirements.

The Davis code from the 1970s essentially mandates a use that is not viable in the current marketplace. This raises important questions about how best to balance use and form in the current land-recycling environment. A full-service shopping center may not be possible in every neighborhood, especially if it is not connected to an arterial street.

Good intentions for development don't always result in good outcomes on the ground especially for what gets built in the future.

### *Don't depend on a single tool for redevelopment*

Recent changes in both the real estate market and municipal management practices in California have caused many cities to rethink the role they play in encouraging recycling of properties such as neighborhood shopping centers.

The issue here, as is witnessed in many other communities—and in most cases in California—is basically weaning one's self off of a focus on redevelopment. California jurisdictions are accustomed to using redevelopment as the one and only land recycling tool. There is rarely a backup plan if it is economically or politically infeasible to conduct redevelopment.

The City of Davis has made a good start by creating an outstanding vacant land information center on the city web site. But in the absence of redevelopment, Davis and other communities facing the similar issues must do much more, including:

- Conducting economic feasibility analyses to ensure that projects permitted under the new mixed-use ordinance actually make economic sense for developers.
- Marketing and promoting the new mixed-use ordinance to attract high-quality infill developers.



- Consider waiving or subsidizing traffic mitigating fees or other associated impact fees for mixed-use projects.
- Consider providing city financial assistance for affordable or workforce housing.
- Once strong, clear, consistent standards have been created for mixed-use zones, fast tracking permit approvals to encourage developers to move forward with actual mixed-use proposals.

-end-

Written by: *William Fulton and Jessica Daniels*

Tools used: *Smart Growth Policy Audit  
Smart Growth Code and Zoning Audit  
Smart Growth Project Scorecard*

Technical Assistance Team: *William Fulton, Senior Scholar, School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California and Deepak Bahl, Associate Director at the USC Center for Economic Development.*

---

### 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](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.*