



CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee

About the Community

Nashville-Davidson County is a combined city-county (metropolitan) government that includes urban, suburban, and rural areas. The combined municipality covers 500 square miles and has a population of 600,000 people. Nashville's geography includes a wide range of environmental features and terrains.

The character of Nashville's unique settings is being gradually eroded by development trends of the last several decades, influenced primarily by the county's one-size-fits-all subdivision regulations. Most of Nashville's subdivision development standards reflect the conventional wisdom of the 1960s and 1970s, facilitating sprawling development patterns while inhibiting cost-effective development of urban and rural-character projects.

In recent years, Nashville-Davidson County has undertaken major planning policy changes and code revisions to expand choices for development that reflect the county's diverse natural and built environments. The Planning Department reformed its subdivision regulations around a continuum of contextual *transect zones*,¹ or development patterns ranging from rural to urban. These revisions include Conservation Subdivision and Walkable Subdivision ordinances.

An applicant may continue to develop a subdivision using the conventional suburban subdivision method or may opt to use the rural or urban regulations in specific locations. Developers must, however, still meet the requirements for conventional subdivisions in addition to context-specific requirements for alternative subdivisions, belaboring the project approval process.

¹ *As made popular by proponents of the New Urbanism*



In order to move toward community-specific development guidelines, the Metro Planning Department has updated the *Downtown Community Plan*. The 2007 update provides a number of guidelines that conform to widely-accepted smart growth principles such as mixed-use development, transportation and mobility, neighborhood design and housing choices.

State Of Smart Growth Implementation

Smart growth leadership in Nashville-Davidson County came largely from the county planners who were deeply engaged in and knowledgeable about local planning and development processes. Staff members from the Metro Planning Department understand the issues surrounding implementation of smart growth principles throughout the region. Rick Bernhardt, executive director of the Metro Planning Department supports the adoption of regulations, review processes, and design standards that forward the smart growth agenda in the county.

Both public works and stormwater engineers were beginning to be involved in the process. Some developers had considerable knowledge and appreciation of smart growth principles. All of the sub-area and neighborhood plans had major smart growth elements.

The Nashville-Davidson County Subdivision Regulations are just one part of a larger planning and land use regulatory system administered by the Metropolitan Planning Commission, the Department of Public Works, and the Department of Water Services. Development standards are also contained in the Metro zoning code. The Metro zoning code also creates a set of standards meant to be applied countywide. However, the zoning code contains some flexible alternatives to the “one-size-fits-all” approach such as the Urban Zoning Overlay (UZO), the Planned Unit Development (PUD) alternative, and the Urban Design Overlay (UDO).

Overall, planning and development in Nashville-Davidson County is governed by the Metro General Plan. Pending update of the General Plan, the three relevant county departments have agreed to move toward consensus on a consistent policy approach toward development. To further that approach, changes to policy and implementation are guided by the adopted sub-area and neighborhood plans. These plans are more frequently updated to reflect each community’s development goals but do not provide complete resolution of public works and stormwater issues prior to Planning Commission approval. These successful but temporary approaches needed to be codified to ensure timely coordination surrounding the the subdivision approval process.

Through the sub-area planning process, citizens expressed interest in the full range of development typologies from very urban to very rural. The feasibility of this context-specific solution was at the heart of the the Metro Planning Department’s request for SGLI’s assessment of the county’s subdivision regulations.



The SGLI Technical Assistance team audited the subdivision regulations, the underlying zoning ordinance, and other development standards. The team also reviewed the project approval process.

The team recommended that Nashville-Davidson reorganize the Subdivision Regulations around the transect zones; create several sets of subdivision standards for different contextual situations in the county; and, use the flexible zoning classifications (such as PUD or UDO) as a “learning experience” to amend the Subdivision Regulations in the future

The team also called for the amendment of the stormwater regulations, to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach

The team advised that the planning department revise the development review process to require or encourage complete resolution of public works and stormwater issues prior to Planning Commission approval. The metro should also make the entire transect-based set of standards optional, but use the pre-application process to provide “fast-track” permitting for those who choose it, allowing applicants who subscribe to the transect model to “jump ahead of the line” and move to the Planning Commission review and approval faster.

Lessons Learned

A one size-fits approach won't get you to smart growth

Communities cannot accomplish smart growth goals by using a “one-size-fits-all” set of subdivision regulations. Communities using a transect approach in their area and master plans should mirror this in their regulations.

In Nashville, like other areas with a combined city-county government, this approach is particularly important because development contexts range from extremely urban in downtown areas to extremely rural. Aspects of Nashville’s subdivision ordinance were not flexible enough to accommodate different development contexts. Street design, parking, and lot division standards were geared toward suburban or semi-rural development, making it almost impossible for high-quality infill projects in the urban core to be constructed.

Time is money for developers so pay attention to the process

The project approval process of new subdivisions in Nashville-Davidson County ultimately requires the cooperation of three different departments: the Metro Planning Department, which processes the land use application; the Metro Public Works Department, which focuses mostly on the design of streets, roads, and other public infrastructure; and the Metro Department of Water Services, which is responsible for implementing regulations to minimize stormwater runoff.

The Public Works Department and the Department of Water Services do not enter into discussions with applicants about street design and stormwater retention issues until after the



Planning Commission has approved the subdivision. Both requirements may trigger another round of Planning Commission approval.

In Nashville, as elsewhere, agencies sometimes work together but often they work at cross-purposes. The SGLI team suggested a faster-track permitting option that might favor infill and smart growth development and diffuse discrete ownership over the multi-layered approval process.

Postscript

On March 9, 2006, the Planning Commission of the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County (Metro) adopted an expanded set of Subdivision Regulations and repealed the prior 1991 Subdivision Regulations. The expanded Subdivision Regulations offer greater options for subdividing land across Davidson County. Illustrations have been added to provide options of how the new development patterns might be laid out. Requirements for connectivity have been strengthened and requirements designed to promote infill developments have been added. In addition to adding greater flexibility to promote smart growth, a chapter promoting conservation of natural, agricultural, historical and cultural resources through Conservation Subdivisions has been added.

The new Subdivision Regulations came into effect on April 27, 2006. To fully implement the new regulations, two accompanying zoning text amendments were prepared by planning staff for approval by Metro Council. The first zoning text amendment reduces or waives lot sizes in multi-family zoning districts to allow sufficiently small lots to promote fee simple ownership of units in cottage subdivisions and townhouse developments. The second zoning text amendment will enable Conservation Subdivisions. In order to conserve at least 50 percent of a tract, it is necessary to reduce or waive lot sizes in large-lot zoning districts to permit more compact developed areas. The Metro Council is still considering this amendment to the zoning code. While awaiting approval of this zoning text change, developers interested in Conservation Subdivisions may use the flexible Specific Plan zoning district to achieve their objectives.

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Written by: *William Fulton and Jessica Daniels*

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

Technical Assistance Team: *William Fulton, Senior Scholar, School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California; Harriet Tregoning, Executive Director, and Jessica Cogan Millman, Deputy Director, of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.*



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.