



## CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

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# Orange County, Florida

### About the Community

Orange County is the largest jurisdiction in Central Florida, covering 1,004 square miles and serving as the local government for more than 600,000 persons who live in the unincorporated area. The County's jurisdiction surrounds Orlando, which is small by "central city" standards (185,000 persons), and includes a wide range of urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Despite the County's past smart growth initiatives, the existing Comprehensive Policy Plan, zoning code, and development standards largely reflect and reinforce a traditional suburban and rural orientation for the County's land development. Many of the County's existing standards do not offer the County the tools to promote various types of suburban infill development with higher land use densities and intensities. Also, the County's plans, codes, and development standards have evolved over time, resulting in a mix of standards with varying purposes and uses.

In recent years, Orange County has undertaken major planning policy changes and code revisions to deal with the revitalization of the inner-city Holden Heights neighborhood; construction of Avalon Park, an 1,800-acre Traditional Neighborhood Development; and Horizon West, a 38,000-acre master-planned development in the southwestern part of the county.

### State Of Smart Growth Implementation

Leadership in smart growth came largely from the County planning staff and, to a lesser extent, from the development community. The staff was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about smart growth. Partly because of Orange County's location in a fast-growing part of



Florida, some developers had considerable knowledge and appreciation of smart growth principles. All of the above-mentioned neighborhoods and development projects had major smart growth elements.

Smart growth in Orange County was an urgent issue for several reasons, including rapid growth. But rapid growth was far from the only reason. Just as important, from the County's point of view, was a fear that the land supply would soon vanish if densities were not increased. Low-density development was already moving into adjoining counties. So, like many core counties, Orange County had a choice: Either attempt to compete with low-density development (a difficult task because land costs were higher and land supplies were more limited), or pursue alternative strategies that allowed a different development pattern.

SGLI's Technical Assistance team audited sections of the Comprehensive Plan (particularly the sections dealing with housing diversity and infill development) and the zoning ordinance, and reviewed the consistency between the plan and the code.

The team recommended that the county strengthen the policy language on mixed-use and other smart growth components in the Comprehensive Plan itself. The team also asked the county to expand the size and types of both housing units and residential lots, and strengthen the density bonus policy; and, to consolidate some of the special "smart growth" planning policies and code provisions that have been created incrementally over time.

The team advised the planning department to: narrow the range of allowable residential densities, to rule out low densities especially in urban neighborhoods; to coordinate zoning code provisions with stormwater policies; to require or provide incentives for developers to build smaller single-family lots in R-1 zones; and to encourage developers to use special smart growth zones, rather than "planning development" zoning, whose standards were more arbitrary.

## Lessons Learned

### *There is usually a disconnect between the policy and the code*

In Orange County, as in many communities, there is a disconnect between policies and codes. This is not unusual, as the policies are usually written by the planning department, whereas both developers and other agencies, such as public works departments, tend to focus more on codes.

In the case of Orange County, the resistance to implementing smart growth codes appeared mostly likely to emerge from public works department, as the revised smart growth codes (be it lot sizes, setbacks, street widths, alley access or garage door placement) conflict with the conventional and more established "engineer-friendly" standards.



Yet another factor impeding smart growth is the political nature of land use and the ability of county supervisors to arbitrarily change development standards within a Planned Development (PD) zone.

***Different development contexts require different policies and codes (especially in a county)***

The planning context varies greatly in Orange County ranging from urban to suburban and rural and it is clear that different policy contexts require different solutions. For example, strategies to deal with stormwater management for Holden Heights, a built-up inner city community candidate for infill, should be quite different from the much newer Avalon Park or Horizon West greenfield developments. In general, we found that a one-size-fits-all solution – especially for development standards – is inappropriate in pursuing smart growth policies.

***Coordinate with other agencies, especially public works and transportation***

We also found Policy and code reconciliation will not be enough to achieve smart growth objectives. In many cases, we found planning and public works were not coordinated and, at times, almost at war. In the case of Orange County, we found that coordination with transit providers was not strong enough to support a TOD strategy

***“Green” solutions should be pursued on a neighborhood level in infill or urban locations***

Smart growth policies are often in conflict with on-site stormwater solutions, particularly in the south. The most dramatic example was in Orange County.

In the inner-city neighborhood of Holden Heights, the county was building a sewer system and creating a neighborhood-wide detention basin for runoff. At the same time, the county was requiring a nonprofit housing developer (created and funded by the county) to create onsite detention basins for each high-density townhome project, often just a few lots away from the county’s own detention basin. Creating green solutions at a neighborhood level, rather than a site level, will help make smart growth work.

## Postscript

Orange County has used the SGLI report as the basis for a number of Comprehensive Plan updates. The County incorporated changes that enable the use of a Village land use designation, a new focus on activity centers, as well as the implementation of specific policies in the Housing Element, Future Land Use Element, and other portions of the Plan. The County is also taking zoning code changes in front of the Council that would authorize mixed-use standards for the Village designation within Planned Development zoning districts.



The County is also completing an accessory housing feasibility study based on the recommendations of the SGLI report. The study includes a suitability analysis and includes recommendations for code changes in implementation, similar to that of Santa Cruz's program.

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

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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 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.*