

Grow Smart but Don't Tell Me Where I Have to Live!
President's Message
By Bruce G. Boncke, President, NYSBA

The Quality Communities Report is written and the Governor is proposing legislation supporting it's recommendations. The American Planning Association is trying to secure enough public funding to complete their Smart Growth report and recommendations; a three year work in progress. Statewide, regional and localized forums on Smart Growth are occurring regularly. However, before we plow forward to save farmland, open space and undeveloped land, which represents 94% of our country's space, a few questions need to be asked. Should our suburban communities all declare development moratoriums, as some people suggest, to stop their growth so your children have no choice but to move into an urban environment with unacceptable crime and schools. Do communities put such a high priority on sterilizing their zoning codes that our children cannot find jobs or affordable housing and have to move out of the area, or even the state, to do so? Have you looked for an apartment lately for your children or active senior parents that can't afford a home or stay in the one they are in? Does your community master plan and smart growth plan include affordable housing for teachers, volunteer firemen, caregivers and community employees, or are you forcing them to live elsewhere? Their services will likely be short lived, if you can't make housing available for them. I do not believe the way to grow smart is to limit peoples choices for housing or making them feel guilty for the choices they make. In fact, the incentives to learn, grow, be successful and make choices are the roots of our country. We cannot tell people where they have to live. We need to create places where they want to live.

Over the past 50 years, or so, we have greatly reduced choices by sterilizing our zoning regulations. Over time, we have zoned out of existence mixed uses, apartments, senior living housing and affordable housing. The big band-aid is an enigma we call Planned Unit Development (PUD). So, if you want to create living environments that we zoned out of existence, you could buy a piece of land and try to get it rezoned to a district that no one can comprehend the approval regulations on!

One of the saddest examples of the problem with restricting housing choices is in a local community. It involves an "Apartment by Choice" project. This need and market is huge. It is fueled by a lack of affordable housing and lack of confidence in long term employment. It is also a needed housing choice for parents who don't need care but would like to be in proximity to their children. The architecture and quality of the units, in my example, are excellent. The monthly rental rates put the renters at a level that they would qualify for home ownership well above the level of the value of homes owned by the NIMBYS fighting the project. The developer has been bludgeoned for 2 years by neighbors, politicians living in fear of an opposition group and the inability of a planning board to make unpopular decisions. At the heart of the issue is the second-class citizen perspective of rent vs. own! I am embarrassed by the actions of these neighbors and community officials. Their payback will be looking for alternative housing for their own children, parents, and themselves some day!

Sprawl is often defined as unplanned and uncontrolled development that is using up our natural resources. So, where are all these projects and why is my hair so gray? I have never worked on an unplanned project, and we are one of the most controlled/regulated industries in the country. Approximately 75% of the time and cost in the planning stages of a project is spent on getting through the regulations. The problem is that the sterile zoning regulations have produced disappointing results. We need to put them behind us, stop the rhetoric on sprawl and move on.

It is time to take the smart growth principles developed over the past few years and move forward. They provide a great basis, in a free market environment, to get back to a mix of housing types and uses in both urban and suburban environments. Don't accuse people of being bad because they choose to live in the suburbs. Don't force our children to live in substandard conditions because of lack of availability or affordability. Don't force our children to leave the area or state because open space is more important than economy and jobs. Don't send our parents down south, giving up their state residency, because they do not have necessary living environments here. If our industry continues to work hard to emphasize these issues on an individual level, as above, we will hit home!