

**Smart Growth Conference**  
**Excerpts from a**  
**Talk given by Bruce G. Boncke, P.E.**  
**First Vice President of NYSBA**

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I was asked to speak today because I'm in the trenches, day by day, a burned out engineer, who's extremely high on New York State, both our past and our future. To that extent, I will give you a little of my background as I feel it's pertinent to the issues we're talking about.

I was born, raised, and educated in New York. Part of my family was a very active farming family in the Honeoye Lake area, south of Rochester. Twelve years ago, I decided to change from being an employee to an employer. This has been a very interesting and enlightening experience. I have spent a 30-year career implementing development in a zoning environment that I had very little say in creating, and that's been a bit of a challenge.

I chose to be a civil engineer basically because I thought it was a secure job. People will always need roads, sewers, water, and houses to live in. From an educational standpoint, what we were basically taught back in the 1960's in a civil engineering curriculum was how to build structures, how to build sewage treatment plants, and how to put fluids in pipes and send them downhill and treat them. We were taught how to build roads, and the perspective in my transportation engineering classes in the 1960's was how to get the most people from point A to point B the quickest. Thirty years ago we weren't taught to be good stewards of the environment. We were taught things such as a wetland was just wet land (something you put a pipe in and drained). We weren't taught that a wetland was something that would be regulated and protected, which has caused me quite a bit of difficulty for the last 30 years. The term "traffic calming" certainly never existed in any traffic engineering book I read in the 1960's. Now we are writing entire books on traffic calming. It has been a very interesting progression in the field of civil engineering. I'm a firm believer that we learn until the end, and if we're not learning every day, every week, every month, there is something wrong.

In the late 1960's - early 1970's, you could walk into a town and come out of there in a six-month period of time with a completely approved project along with a "thank you for developing houses in our community." In the 1960's, the neighborhoods we were creating, which are now called "sprawl", were new things, and they were exciting things, by those days' standards. Somehow I find it rather ironic that most of those people we put in houses over 30 years ago, who live on half-acre lots in the suburbs, don't consider themselves "sprawl". They consider the new people coming in "sprawl." It's not my intention to stand here and talk about blame because, quite frankly, I think that's one of the things that will and does set New York State apart. It's my experience for the last couple of years, on the issue of Smart Growth that New York State is moving ahead and I'm very happy with that. I want to thank the Governor and his people for the name "quality communities." This isn't a discussion about semantics, but I was getting a little tired of looking at a 30-year career and bringing it down to one word, "sprawl", or two words, "dumb growth". I like the term quality communities, and I feel it is exactly where we need to be in our minds.

I think we are moving tremendously ahead of the curve in quality communities from a standpoint of tools, laws, and regulations that are available for us to use. Some of these include:

- State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA);
- Comprehensive Planning Legislation;
- Incentive Zoning;
- Clustering;
- Conservation Easements;
- Transfer of Development Rights; and
- Intermunicipal Cooperation and Planning Guidelines.

Many of the states that talk about their Smart Growth initiatives, don't have half of the tools that we have. However, we are behind in the use of these tools. This is very discouraging to me. I'd like to discuss three of these tools:

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**SEQRA** is a tremendous tool, but at this point in time, I think we've lost a little bit of focus on what it was really intended to be. We've ignored the hard work that a lot of people have put into these 1996 changes to the law, making it more user-friendly, community-friendly, and less ambiguous. We need to better utilize this tool, or we will have a hard time with some of our Smart Growth objectives.

**Incentive Zoning Legislation** was put in place for towns and villages in 1991 after a tremendous amount of effort. We have helped many communities put this legislation on their local books, often in the heat of battle relative to a specific project, and often it's not as understood as it should be. We need to utilize this tool in order for the planning process and Smart Growth to be effective in this state.

**Clustering** has been on the books for many years but many communities don't realize that they can mandate the use of it. Many communities do not realize that they have the ability to use clustering in other zones besides residential.

We are way behind in the use of these available tools. They need to be put in place on the books before a crisis situation!

In closing, I want to express my excitement over the progress made in the last couple of years and the coalitions that have developed. There's a lot of positive things that we do in New York State. The Legislative Commission on Rural Resources has been in place for the past 11 years, and they have made over 30 law changes so far. The New York Planning Federation is very useful, but unfortunately suffers for volunteer help and memberships. I've left to the last the reason why we are here. It's the coalition that has been formed by the Smart Growth Working Group - a very important part of our culture and the moving forth with our mission. When I got out of college 30 years ago, I didn't think I'd be sitting side by side with the National Audubon Society since the culture of civil engineering was to build, not necessarily to conserve or at least co-habitate. Humans are also a species and while we're not necessarily endangered, we are a species that needs to be dealt with. We have the highest level of intelligence relative to any species out there, so we have ourselves to blame one way or the other as to how we handle our environment for our own species and how we relate that environment to others!