

Basics and Benefits of Smart Growth Development Patterns

Authors: Co-authored by Shawn Gustafson, Vice President and Community Development Division Manager, and Jeff Hosea, Planner, LEED AP, for WLC Engineering, Surveying and Planning

Economic vitality, quality of life, and a safe environment are components which encourage community stability and growth. But how do you decide what strategies to utilize to make these characteristics realities? One method you can turn to is Smart Growth. Smart Growth is an urban planning and transportation industry term referring to towns and cities that invest time, attention and resources in restoring community and vitality to center cities and older suburbs.

Often these towns and cities examine three aspects when utilizing Smart Growth: the region, the community, and the block and the building. These three components are always inter-related but have significantly different areas of focus. Each Smart Growth pattern falls into one or more of these categories.

According to the National Association of Home Builders' Web site, the core principle of Smart Growth is compact development in order to decrease the amount of land used. For most areas, patterns also include restoration to buildings and older areas, town centered revitalization, transit and pedestrian oriented designs, greater mix of housing, commercial and retail uses, and a focus on preserving open space and other environmental amenities.

"Creating a mix of uses at the core of the community that allows residents and visitors to access a variety of services is a key component of smart growth development. You're not only supporting the heart of your community by promoting infill but you're also providing access to essential services within a close range of where citizens reside" said Leah Reeb, MPO Supervisor, Casper Urbanized Area for the City of Casper.

Factors driving Smart Growth are demographic shifts in areas, increased fiscal concerns and new views on growth. As an area's needs change based on its residents and their fiscal and growth concerns, new ideas and strategies must be developed to continue to appeal to both prospective and current residents.

Communities and residents benefit from Smart Growth through environmental, economic, quality of life and aesthetic elements. The availability of natural, usable outdoor areas and residential, commercial and retail space encourage people to live, work and play in this convenient and comfortable environment. Additionally, mixed-use space expands employment and housing options, ultimately affecting economic vitality. The result is a distinctive, attractive neighborhood which draws and retains residents.

Smart Growth also addresses a growing concern for how the environment affects our health and communities. A focus on transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly design endorses easy access to public transportation and increases physical activity such as walking and biking. The United States Environmental Protection Agency suggests and encourages Smart Growth to reduce air pollution.

Larger cities encourage strategic and purposeful development in order to preserve and maximize space. Older cities utilize Smart Growth to revitalize aged districts or areas with some aspect of interest such as a historical element.

In the Casper community, we can look to the Old Yellowstone District to see components of Smart Growth. The area, home to several long-time, successful businesses, has more recently seen deteriorating streets and vacant buildings. The City of Casper has taken a proactive approach and is on target to establish a new pattern of land uses with supportive transportation and infrastructure improvements targeted to achieve the goals of the 2000 Casper Area Comprehensive Plan and 2002 Urban Renewal Plan. The city is working with property owners on reinvestment in the area, encouraging infill and mixed-use developments, revitalizing historic buildings and recruiting complimentary commercial and residential businesses to fill the needs of target customers in the area.

"We have moved to the principles of smart growth to revitalize the area and encourage its development as an extension of a successful downtown," said April Getchius, AICP, and directory of the City of Casper Community Development Department.

Although this is a new concept for our state, the opportunity and benefits exist for Wyoming communities. By revitalizing older cities and towns we can provide additional areas of interests for our prospective and current residents. These opportunities, among others, encourage residents to stay in Wyoming resulting in a healthier economic system.

There are many ways for people to get involved in Smart Growth. City, town and county representatives can commit to revitalizing Wyoming communities; planners, engineers, and developers can provide professional services to ensure the expertise is available to implementers; and citizens can participate in steering committees and user group sessions to provide input on what they value. Whatever your role, there is an opportunity to influence and create an impact on Wyoming's future.