



Smart Growth

by Charles J. Ruma
President of the National Association of Home Builders

Predictably, when the economy is running strong for several years and demand for housing is high, anti-growth sentiment takes hold among some politicians, environmental organizations and members of the public.

That's what we're seeing now. The country has been in an economic expansion since 1992. We have strong household formations, population growth and record numbers of immigrants entering the country. New home sales reached an all-time high in 1998. Meanwhile, car trips are increasing, schools are getting crowded and privately-owned land that once sat idle is being converted into residential communities.

These factors typically combine to produce calls for stopping or slowing growth. This time around, the calls are focusing on various concepts lumped under the generic heading of "smart growth." The nation's home builders support smart growth efforts that plan for and accommodate growth in a way that provides for economic development and environmental protection.

Unfortunately, however, even smart growth has the potential to turn into slow growth or no growth. Throughout the country, opposition to growth already has resulted in a variety of measures designed to limit or manage growth, and the list is growing every day. Growth tools such as zoning restrictions, urban growth boundaries and impact fees can easily have the consequence of increasing housing prices, restricting housing choice and slowing economic development.

The nation's home builders want to grow smarter in a way that does not lead to growth restrictions. We recognize that it is important for communities to have comprehensive plans that designate where growth should occur, and allow it to happen there, and where environmentally-sensitive lands should be protected for future generations. We recognize the importance of using land more efficiently during the development process so that open space in new communities can be set aside and homes can be built more compactly. We recognize that it is vital to build new homes in existing urban neighborhoods and "infill" communities to help revitalize downtowns and older suburbs. And we support efforts to equitably and adequately fund the maintenance and improvement of the nation's infrastructure so that, for example, roads and schools are less crowded.

Perhaps most important, we recognize that the home building community must work with the public and the governing community to find solutions to the challenges facing localities across the country. After all, the nation's population is expected to grow by 32 million in the next 12 years. It's the nation's home builders who are responsible for providing Americans with housing. The smart thing to do is sit down together and figure out the best way to provide for all our nation's needs, including a decent, safe and affordable home for every family.