

SMART GROWTH @ 10

October 2007 ■ Conference Opening Speech

Smart Growth 10 Years Later

Former Maryland Governor Parris N. Glendening



Gov. Parris Glendening
Wednesday, October 3, 2007
Annapolis, MD

Thank you for that warm welcome. I am so happy to be back here, to celebrate — and to look back on — the last ten years of smart growth in Maryland. And most importantly, to look forward to the next ten years of smart growth in Maryland and across the nation.

I begin by extending my appreciation to Governor Martin O'Malley for his commitment to the ideals that are represented here this week. He made it clear on the campaign trail last year — and in conversations with me — that he is committed to smart growth. Even during a budget shortfall, he has committed state resources to this critical issue. He has taken a leadership role in smart growth, energy sustainability and global climate change.

Just this week, John Porcari — transportation secretary for two great Governors — announced an ambitious 25-year plan to expand MARC service and make it part of a larger regional transit system. The Governor made it clear that expanding service and increasing capacity for MARC is one of his key priorities. Imagine being able to take the MARC from Prince George's County to Baltimore for an Orioles game—on a weekend! This is what smart growth leadership and commitment are all about and we offer our thanks to Gov. O'Malley.

The challenges are many, but you can feel the excitement around the State among those who know that we cannot sustain our patterns of growth in this State and expect to have anything left in 50 years.

From the Governor, to the comptroller, to the transportation secretary, and the many key legislative leaders, we have filled Annapolis once more — with people that “get” it.

Thank you John Frece, Geritt Knapp and the other wonderful people at the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education. You put in hours of hard work to bring all of us together for this program. You are commended for your dedication to smart growth in Maryland. You do not pull any punches with your analysis, but we are so lucky to have such a resource in this state — to critically examine our efforts, and offer constructive advice on how to do it better.

And of course, we all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us — men like former Governor Harry Hughes. His groundbreaking work with Critical Areas established the principle of state involvement in land use and protection of the Bay.

I ask you to think back with me and remember the times:

I am sure that many of you join me in disbelief that ten years have passed since we first began this journey into uncharted territory. It seems like just yesterday that I first saw the many sideways looks and “he must be crazy” reactions from some in the General Assembly and elsewhere when we first broached the idea of a statewide smart growth

land use program....and the looks from county officials when we said the state was going to be more aggressive in land use matters.

Actually...it was much more than “looks”

More than a few were certainly wondering, “what is this ‘smart growth,’ anyway?” In the mid-90’s, the concept of ‘smart growth’ was unknown to most Marylanders, and certainly even less known in the rest of the country.

As we look back on the ten years of smart growth in Maryland, it is crucial to remember how different the times were back then. Think back about the climate of 1994 — the election year: Gas in Maryland hovered between one dollar and \$1.10, actually staying around \$1.10 until early 1996 when it ‘spiked’ all the way to \$1.30 for a few months.

If you tried to tell someone that we needed to invest in more transit and drive less, they would have said you were just plain weird. We were building roads at a frenetic pace across the country as we spread further and further out. People in Washington, D.C. were mostly just commuting from the immediate DC region. People who lived in West Virginia were mostly just driving to work there — in West Virginia!

While many of us were certainly concerned about the quality of the Chesapeake, or the loss of what felt like all the open spaces we knew as children, almost no one was talking about the radical idea of global warming.

Al Gore was just an overshadowed vice president, toiling away in obscurity on odd notions of climate change and sustainability, toting around an actual slideshow! A slideshow with slides! No high-tech powerpoints in those days.

The best documentary Oscar in 1994 went to a movie about Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Memorial. One of the movie’s final scenes shows Vice President Gore at the tenth anniversary of the memorial in 1992, just fifteen years before he came to Hollywood to pick up a gold statue of his own for An Inconvenient Truth—the movie that brought an understanding global warming to the masses.

Wal-Mart was in the midst of their transformation from building modest discount stores to the now ever-present Supercenters. They were plopping down mammoth stores on the edge of just about everywhere, seemingly unconcerned about running out of anything at all. Just this week, however, that same Wal-Mart joined in parts of the Clinton Global Initiative, and has even hired a vice president for sustainability.

As Thomas Friedman tells us, “Green” is the new “Red, White and Blue.” Toyota Priuses are now flying off the lot so fast that for quite a while, dealers could not keep up with demand. Ask your typical soccer mom if she’s done anything to “green” her household, or if she knows what a “carbon footprint” is, and today you are likely to get a positive answer.

But ten years ago, it was much different.

While people back then were starting to pick up on what sprawl looks like, fewer people were connecting the dots between sprawl and a better alternative. Most of us in Maryland and the rest of the country were missing the big picture of how it all connected. When I was on the campaign trail in 1994, there was a sense that people were concerned with the spread of sprawl across an already densely populated state. After my inauguration in 1995, I had vague ideas about what needed to change, but we were far from figuring out the specifics.

Much of my personal impetus for the smart growth program was born out of a deep passion for the environment. I knew that I wanted to protect sensitive areas, ensure a healthy Bay, and make sure that we preserved open space, but we certainly had no clear plan for making it happen.

I did realize early on, however, that we had to figure out how to get investment going in our core cities and communities if we were to have any hope of stemming the tide of sprawl at their edges. I always think back to my days on the Hyattsville City Council, and I wondered why we had used car lots and abandoned buildings along U.S. 1, just 6 short miles from the nation's capitol. Developer after developer told me that it was just much cheaper to 'out there somewhere,' buy some open land, clear off the trees, and build anew.

It was clear we needed strategies for encouraging investment in our older communities – where there was often plenty of available land to redevelop, or old buildings to restore.

I knew it would not be easy, but those first few years were definitely a battle. The opposition was instantaneous. The tradition of home rule in the State, combined with a comfortable status quo, made simple conversation about any sort of reform in the land use system quite contentious. It was hard to even bring it up without members of the Maryland Association of Counties seeing any change as an erosion of their local control.

While we worked with MACO on convincing them that smart growth wasn't "no-growth", we started building our own coalition with groups like the Maryland Municipal League. They certainly were not in complete agreement, but most of the state's 154 municipalities were experiencing firsthand the pain of disinvestment while sprawl occurred all around them.

Finally, in 1997, we signed the Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Initiative. I know it is not a sexy title, but through that initiative, a seed was planted that grew into a movement—all across the country. But, more about that later...

So what worked? While we will consider what must be improved or strengthened for the next ten years, it is important to remember the things that did work. Let's focus on just four areas that worked well.

First, to me, one of the most important contributions of the program is how embedded smart growth has become in the political values of the State—(despite the adverse efforts of my successor!)

It is not the easiest thing to measure, but candidates from our new Governor all the way down to local officials have taken stances for smart growth, and are asking themselves if there isn't a better way to grow.

Many of those who opposed the program early on were swept out of office in 1998 and subsequent elections. Even if they have not wholly embraced smart growth, many are asking questions that were not even on the radar screen ten years ago.

People now understand. They connect the dots themselves — they understand how growth affects congestion, air quality, health, economic development, and climate change among others.

Much of the framework that we were able to establish is embedded in state code and law, part of Maryland's structure of governing growth. More work remains to be done, though, so that no one reaches the Governor's mansion or the State House without knowing that the voters care about smart growth.

Never again should a good program be mothballed for four years. Marylanders care about smart growth and the future of the State.

Second, while it has been pointed out that sprawl has still continued outside of our priority funding areas, we have experienced investment and smarter growth inside our targeted redevelopment areas. Hyattsville, Hagerstown, Silver Spring, Baltimore, Easton, and countless other cities and municipalities have encouraging success stories of how the smart growth program helped make their city a better place.

[Governor tells story of University of Maryland building campus in Hagerstown]

I mentioned Route 1 through Hyattsville earlier. Today, that downtown that was once begging for investment is home to \$125 million dollars of new condos and retail from EYA Urban developers, as well as new investment around the town. There are almost \$200 million dollars of new investment and construction under way right now.

The Historic Preservation Tax Credit was unquestionably one of the most valuable parts of the program — something that had significant impact around the state. There were 37 projects that utilized the credit in 1997, its first year — jumping to 291 projects in just four years, totaling more than \$200 million in private investment.

Extending the credit to income taxes from only property taxes had a very positive effect on its utilization. Harriet Tregoning, my former director of the smart growth office, testified before the Ohio legislature about the positive effects of the credit in Maryland on steering investment to our neglected downtowns, something of which Ohio has many. I am very pleased to report they passed a historic tax credit bill just last year, modeled on our own law in Maryland.

Third, through the Rural Legacy program and the other open space initiatives, we were able to permanently preserve over 400,000 acres during the eight years of my tenure. This represents one quarter of all the land ever preserved in our small state.

These programs will be crucial in turning development back towards our existing areas, but also in ensuring that we have parks, open space, and buffers around our sensitive areas to protect them for generations to come.

Fourth, perhaps the greatest impact that our program had was felt outside our State. Even before we had fully implemented the Smart Growth program, we were lauded for our innovation, with recognition and awards from Harvard, the Ford Foundation, and many others. But I take much more pride in the fact that parts of the program were copied and repeated in other states.

This demonstrates much more than just the visionary work with this program: it shows the nationwide interest in slowing sprawl and investing in growth patterns with a future.

How extensive is that interest? *[Governor tells story about traveling 10,000 miles in June, speaking on topics ranging from public health to transit and regional planning.]*

Other states have taken the framework we created, adapted it to their state, and made major improvements upon the program. *[Mentions Massachusetts, Arizona, California]*

Over half of the 50 states have some form of smart growth policy or program.

Googling “smart growth” returns more than 26 million hits today — quite an achievement considering it was an unknown term just a few short years ago. By comparison, “sprawl” returns only 7 million.

As an academician for most of my life, I can describe where we stand best in the words of Charles Dickens: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

It is impossible to quantify or measure the impact that our program has had for the entire country. We have the distinct honor of having kickstarted a movement that is now nationwide, with others copying our efforts — and in many cases—doing it better.

It is the best of times:

Our gospel has spread to other states (and countries!) as the movement has grown by leaps and bounds. Here in Maryland, we have lost our status as the leader and innovator in smart growth as others have forged ahead without us. Certainly the last four years of lost momentum had a large role to play in the state of smart growth today in Maryland. Not to mention the last 7 years of hostility at the federal level to transit, energy sustainability, smart growth policies in general, and global climate change.

The perspective of hindsight gives us a unique opportunity to look back and see what we could have done differently — and show us what we need to do to reclaim the mantle of leadership and innovation.

The effectiveness of the program is certainly up for debate, and has been in the news lately as we reach the ten-year mark. It makes me want to ask the question, though, “how successful was the alternative?” In my mind, however, whether our model of smart growth was a ringing success or not, “sprawl” has been an abject failure.

Sprawl is a system that makes a successful present possible at the expense of a prosperous future.

It is inherently unsustainable, and results in higher infrastructure costs, longer commutes, disconnected communities, abandoned downtowns, poor health, and countless other negative effects.

So as we examine the effectiveness of smart growth, I will begin by saying that the hope for Maryland lies not with poorly planned automobile-centric growth, but with something much “smarter.”

So what went wrong?

You really have to go back and think of the times. Instituting major changes were difficult when we had to work so hard just to raise awareness that we had a problem. We just could not muster the political support to construct the “ideal” program. It was hard work to influence the culture of the state. We had to expend much effort just to convince the people of Maryland and the leaders in the state government that there was a problem.

[Mentions story: ‘Whenever two or more people are gathered together, Parris Glendening will talk about smart growth’]

I know there are more effective regulatory models — models that lean on heavy regulation and growth boundaries as major tools. As I am fond of saying, I would favor a more regulatory approach any day. If I could wave a fairy’s magic wand, in which my five-year-old daughter believes, I would have the regulatory approach any day. It’s much more effective at reaching the desired outcomes, but the regulatory approach of some west coast cities is not politically viable in Maryland, nor in much of the country.

As many of you know or remember, we had a tremendously difficult time selling our program, especially at the county level, and the climate has really changed now in a post-Kelo world.

The first thing that went wrong was certainly the election of 2002. We lost a lot of momentum during Gov. Ehrlich’s tenure. Which is ironic considering that his first speech as a candidate was in support of smart growth. Even that, however, highlights the power of the idea.

People who cared about smart growth and providing leadership at the state level were all of a sudden out of government. And their pleas to continue the program fell on deaf ears. It is so refreshing to see so many of those people now in leadership roles elsewhere (Harriet Tregoning, Roy Knitz) — and here in this administration. (John Porcari, Shari Wilson, Richard Hall)

One of the great strengths of our State — the budgetary authority of the Governor — was also a great weakness during the last four years — as crucial programs were zeroed out, or watered down to irrelevancy.

Second, our program had little authority over local decision-making. Unfortunately, if a proposed project was not using state funding, local authorities could approve a project that was inconsistent with our state goals. *[Quote from Florida Director of Community Affairs Tom Pelham: “Local officials must learn how to say ‘no’”]*

Third, the program just was not strong enough in enforcement authority.

Though we could technically comment on, and send smart growth plans back for changes, The Office of Planning had very limited authority to require changes to proposed Priority Funding Areas. As a result, not all the PFA's were ideally drawn in regards to where investment should really be going.

And when you examine the numbers, a weakness of the program also corresponds with a strength:

It has been documented that from 1990-2004, one fourth of all households were consuming three-fourths of the land. Growth outside of the PFA's is limited to about a quarter of all new households, even though they are using up three quarters of all acreage developed. But at the same time, three quarters of all new housing units have been built inside the PFA's.

Because of the lack of regulatory authority to impose any penalties for construction outside of smart growth areas—or to prohibit such construction—the program has not halted sprawl in those places. But it has resulted in a large number of units being built inside those areas, taking up a small amount of acreage, which is certainly the intended goal for those areas.

Go look at Hyattsville or Silver Spring or Baltimore — and see the successes.

Go to Frederick County or the upper E. Shore — and see the failures.

Fourth, a concept that was not on our radar screen at the time was a requirement for workforce housing. The success of some of our core cities in their revitalization effort has often left behind segments of our society. Even today, there is no requirement for localities to include any plans or accommodations for affordable housing in their comprehensive plans.

They do not even have to inventory existing stocks of workforce housing. It is a glaring oversight within Maryland Planning Law, and one I wish we could have corrected. Providing for housing affordability will be one of the greatest challenges of the smart growth movement over the next ten years in Maryland—and elsewhere.

There is a sense of urgency now that did not exist in 1994. As we face booming population, rising sea levels, a warming planet, escalating gas prices, and a troubled housing market — the need for aggressive action is urgent.

You could replace “smart growth” for “Rome” in the old expression “all roads lead to Rome.” In this case, “all roads lead to smart growth — and the built environment.” Many important issues like traffic congestion, civic pride, economic competitiveness, housing affordability, public health, and climate change can be addressed in part through smarter growth.

We will add 100 million new Americans in 40 years or so, and 1.5 million new Marylanders in just 23 short years. That means 1.5 million more people in an already-densely-populated state, with development pressure exacting a devastating toll.

Make no mistake, the required growth will either be smart growth and carefully designed density—OR—it will be sprawl. There are no other alternatives.

I choose smart growth.

Gas prices are hovering near \$3.00, headed to 5 dollars a gallon by the end of the decade, and scarcity at the end of the next, if not sooner. It is clear that our continued investment in a pattern of growth where the price of gas could paralyze the economy has left us vulnerable to forces beyond our control. Investing in places with transportation options — whether walkable neighborhoods or more transit — will help the economic development and security of our cities and counties.

It is becoming increasingly clear that adult and childhood obesity, childhood asthma and other respiratory diseases, hypertension and diabetes can be tracked directly to our lack of exercise and activity and to increased air pollution. And in turn, our sedentary lifestyles and car-based living are directly a result of auto-oriented sprawl that favors cars over walking or biking.

It is no wonder that we walk less, drive more, and spend more time in the car each day. The skyrocketing amount of driving we must do just to traverse the auto-dependent communities we have built is aligned with declines in every aspect of our health.

We have now learned that there are other adverse affects to our skyrocketing amounts of driving as well. One of the most important effects is on our changing climate. Despite the President constantly reminding us that we are addicted to foreign oil, Federal action on energy policy and climate change has been mostly, well, inaction.

Just two weeks ago, we at Smart Growth America helped release a report by Reid Ewing from the National Center for Smart Growth that documents how our skyrocketing driving will offset any proposed gains in fuel efficiency or emissions.

The report, “Growing Cooler,” lays out the evidence for mitigating climate change just by satisfying the growing demand for walkable neighborhoods with easy access to jobs, schools, and retail — because residents of compact, walkable communities, drive one-third as much as residents of sprawling communities.

So, what needs to be done?

- We need to strengthen the program and strengthen enforceability.
- We must transform the state’s relationship with local governments — if counties cannot do the job, the State must step in.
- Investment in transit absolutely must continue (*MARC, Metro, Amtrak*)
- The restrictions on the historic preservation tax credit must be lifted, and the amount increased greatly.
- We must make sure that all smart growth policies work in accordance with each other and not in opposition (*Kent Island Four Seasons Story*)
- We must absolutely stop subsidizing sprawl.
- We should adopt a fix-it-first fund, such as a green fund committed to funding infrastructure in existing areas.

Ten years ago, we set out into uncharted territory — uncharted in our State, and in the nation, and we attempted the unprecedented, greatly expanding the state role in land use by trying to leverage the state budget to stop sprawl, protect the environment, and reinvest in our communities.

Today, Gov. O’Malley, the General Assembly, local leaders, and citizens of Maryland have the distinct opportunity to retake the mantle of leadership with smart growth.

You have years of experience, and the value of hindsight in knowing what works, what does not, and how to adjust the program to meet your desired outcomes. And you have examples of other states experimenting with different approaches of their own.

We want a Maryland that is prosperous, where we spend our resources carefully — a Maryland full of good jobs and economic vitality and strong communities.

We want a Chesapeake Bay that is clean and healthy to pass on to our children — where they can eat the fish they catch and enjoy the scenic beauty of the region’s jewel.

We want to provide transportation as a means to create and sustain livable communities with mobility and choice — so we can get where we need to be in a timely and efficient manner.

We want a Maryland with a better solution for growth than forcing people to live farther away from everything, pushing them into isolated places, accessible only with a tank of gas, a ton of steel and miles of asphalt.

We want a Maryland where our seniors can “age in place” — where they can continue to function in society without having to drive.

Looking back has great value, but looking forward is what gets me excited.

I have great hope for the future of smart growth in Maryland. I feel confident that as we reconvene in this very spot ten years hence, we will once more be on the forefront of innovation and leadership—emulated by others around the country.

We have the expertise, the knowledge, and the visionary leadership to change the future.

Let us all work together and make sure it is the “best of times.”

Thank for this great honor of being here today.