

## Sustainable Growth

*“2. Adopt and enforce land-use policies that reduce sprawl, preserve open space, and create compact, walkable urban communities” from the Mayors Climate Agreement*

Smart growth, as understood in the urban design community, is about finding a way to grow economically, and in quality of life, without suburban sprawl:

*“The Urban Land Institute defines smart growth as development that is environmentally sensitive, economically viable, community-oriented, and sustainable.” From The Urban Land Institute website*

Healthy cities and towns maintain the density of their central areas, revitalizing them and keeping them attractive for continuing use and redevelopment. Think for a moment of some favorite cities –London, or San Francisco, or NYC. They have a variety of walkable neighborhoods at their centers, which are connected by mass transportation with the larger metropolis. In these places, a car is more trouble than it’s worth.

Similarly, the smaller cities and towns that are vital typically also have a compactness of development that allows them to be “walkable.” College towns especially have this quality, thanks in large part to the captive walking population of students, and the resulting cluster of services and restaurants around the campuses.

There’s been an effort in the last couple of decades to capture the qualities of walkable cities by building compact new communities that aren’t reliant on autos. In these communities, residences, corner groceries and services mingle; porches and sidewalks get preferential treatment above driveways and garages. Walking and biking is made easy, due to the compactness of the development. Lots are on the small side, but the towns are often surrounded by untouched land for all to enjoy. These “new-towns” are based on the model that you find in much of the world, where compact villages, surrounded by farmland or open space, are linked to other towns by mass transportation. Cars become much less necessary in a town like this: pre-teens are less dependent on the parental taxi service, the elderly less isolated, and the rest of us have the ability to walk to the corner grocery for milk if we need it. Sounds good, doesn’t it? Towns like this are raising quality of life, and protecting the climate while they’re at it.

Here’s where small towns have it right. Those the size of Alliance are largely *walkable*, just by virtue of their size, if we’re willing to get out of our cars. Bravo Alliance! This is something we should appreciate, and build on. Think about it for a moment. If your car broke down, could you find a grocery or convenience store, a bank, a pharmacy, or a doctor’s office within 15 or 20 minutes walking distance? The answer is probably yes, if you live within town limits. So what can Alliance do to keep it this way, and become even friendlier for those who don’t have cars, and for those who would rather not have to use them?

Alliance has come a long way toward walkability with the installation of sidewalks along State Street some years back, and improvements to sidewalks in various other parts of town. Residents, and especially businesses, can be sure that they actually have sidewalks, and do their best to keep their sidewalks clear of snow and ice in winter, to encourage those hearty souls who are willing, or need, to walk year-round.

The City has just passed a zoning code which can provide a framework and jumping-off point for exploring what it means to grow in a compact and sustainable fashion. New housing developments can intentionally be a little more compact and walkable, with some smaller lots, sidewalks, open spaces, and connections to services within walking distance. We could further encourage the development of “brownfield” lots within the city, and continue the great program that sees that abandoned lots in the city are cleared and made available to those who would like to develop them. Is your business looking for space? Renovation of existing buildings, which stand empty in the city center, could help to protect farmland and natural habitat on the city’s edges, and provide jobs within walking distance of residents.

Rather than zoning our inner neighborhoods to encourage building on larger lots, what if the historically small lots were maintained, and maybe even a few small businesses or restaurants were allowed to mingle in, as they have historically in Alliance? Other amenities could be added to these older neighborhoods; I know that Keep Alliance Beautiful is working on finding places for community gardens. What if we also found a central space for a farmers market? These are the types of places that can knit a community together, and provide indoor and outdoor “living rooms” for people who have smaller lots and homes. They help to create quality of life in a town, and attract sustainable growth to its center.

Cities don’t have to stop growing to be sustainable. Growth just needs to be smart.

*See the Urban Land Institute’s downloadable booklet: “This is Smart Growth,” at [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org)*