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Smart Growth and the Irish Land-use Stakeholder: From Rhetoric to Reality

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Abstract

In the past decade, Ireland has undergone a period of unprecedented growth culminating in the creation of a new economic society based on service provision, a move away from a traditional agricultural base. Allied to this has been an increase in economic, social and legislative inroads into Europe and beyond. This change has brought with it challenges commonly associated with unpredicted growth such as traffic congestion, urban sprawl, access to education and a perceived lack of affordable housing. One part of the solution proposes adopting the principles that underpin the concept of "Smart Growth". This paper critically evaluates the concept of Smart Growth. In a country with increasing concerns regarding land-use and property development, this paper demonstrates possible roles for Smart Growth in the mitigation of these issues. The paper also identifies the novel dimension of the research and its contribution to the knowledge base.

Keywords: Economy, Environment, Planning and Development, Society, Smart Growth

1.0 Introduction

This paper is based on a PhD research project entitled: "*Smart Growth and the Irish Professional Land-use Stakeholder: From Rhetoric to Reality*". Although there are several published definitions of smart growth, the Urban Land Institute describes the underlying objective as follows: "*Smart growth seeks to identify a common ground where developers, environmentalists, public officials, citizens and others can all find acceptable ways to accommodate growth*" (Porter, 2002:12).

Objectives:

1. Explore how international land-use legislation and EU Directives and Regulations affects Irish land-use policy;
2. Critically evaluate the nature of the Irish political system and its influence on the formation of planning policy in Ireland in terms of long-term smart growth versus short-term political system;
3. Explore the concept of smart growth and identify if the principles of smart growth have been embraced by policies of spatial planning;
4. Identify and critically evaluate methods and processes needed to provide and implement smart growth land-use;
5. Explore the role of Futures methods and techniques such as strategic conversations and scenario planning in urban planning;
6. Create an Irish smart growth Toolkit applicable to a unique Irish context.

The fundamental aim of the research is, to ascertain the extent to which the concept of smart growth is being strategically translated into action in the Irish land-use system. The main question that has arisen thus far is: how can the long-term goals of smart growth be reconciled with the short-term

political goals of the government of the day? The research to date has identified that there are an abundance of policies and strategies that seem to support the principles of smart growth in Ireland, however, implementation in its current form does not seem to reflect the policies. Other research questions include:

1. Why are the policies and strategies that support the concept of smart growth not being strategically translated into action in the Irish land-use system?
2. What is required to move from the aspiration stage to the delivery of smarter land-use policy? and
3. How can Ireland move from rhetoric to reality in terms of smart growth?

A possible solution to effect implementation of efficient land-use policies in Ireland is to tailor strategic smart growth 'best practice' tool kits that have been developed elsewhere to the Irish situation. The end product is an 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit'. The tools to aid policy implementation in the Irish context may be used by a range of land-use stakeholders as a means of achieving more sustainable land-use. For example, local authorities might adopt tools relating to more creative land-use zoning. Fiscal tools such as incentives for more brownfield development may be of concern to public and private developers. The tools within the kit may include visual aids, similar to the Community Imaging Survey used in the United States during public participation workshops to create a sense of visual imagery of possible land-use scenarios (Corbett, 2000). The 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit' might also contain a tool that would enable land-use stakeholders to get a more accurate measure of the cost of urban sprawl.

To date a questionnaire has been distributed to a purposive sample of land-use stakeholders throughout Ireland including, Architects, Chartered surveyors, Planners, Planning consultants, Property developers and Property investors the aim of which was to ascertain opinions and attitudes on land-use issues in Ireland. Of the 440 questionnaires distributed, 164 were returned of which 152 were completed. The data is currently being processed with the aid of SPSS statistical package.

1.1 Background

Ireland has experienced unprecedented economic growth rates, which have averaged 8% per annum between 1994 and 2001. The emergence of the tag 'Celtic Tiger' came about in the mid-1990s and played on the term 'Tiger economies' then being used to describe the leading Asian economies (Memery, 2001). Ireland is now subject to the challenges commonly associated with unpredicted growth such as, traffic congestion, urban sprawl, access to education and a perceived lack of affordable housing. Although there has been a recent slow-down in the economy with more modest growth rates, Ireland still has higher growth rates than many European countries.

The economic boom in the 1990s in Ireland and advancements in technology has served to influence settlement patterns and how people work, rest and play. Peoples consumption patterns may be more sophisticated, nonetheless, people now want fewer hours in traffic and more opportunities to enjoy green space, and housing that is both affordable and close to jobs and activities. Furthermore, people

want healthy cities, towns and suburbs, air and water of the highest quality and a landscape that future generation can be proud to inherit. Advocates in favour of changing from the 'business as usual' (BAU) model feel that smart growth offers the best chance of attaining those goals.

From the outset it is critical to note that Irelands economy was traditionally dependent on agriculture as its main source of income and as such has never been an industrialized nation when compared to countries like Germany, United Kingdom and The Netherlands. Settlement patterns in Ireland have shifted from a past dominated by rural lifestyles to the present day situation, like many developed countries, where the majority of people reside in urban areas. *"For city planning, this transformation demands a more imaginative approach towards the way communities think, talk, plan and act creatively in tackling the urban issues they face"* (Ratcliffe, J, 2002:2). Ireland has witnessed a continual decline in agriculture and is now enmeshed in a global network of connections trading goods and services on an international scale. This requires a sophisticated and advanced array of initiatives and tools to guarantee Irelands continued competitive presence at a global level.

Despite Ireland having a buoyant economy, and relatively low levels of unemployment until recently, there is still significant poverty, as indicated by Irelands low United Nations Development Plan index. Levels of homelessness, social exclusion and inequality are also increasing, notwithstanding the high levels of economic growth, (Comhar, 2001). It is suggested that adopting the NAPS principles would go some way in addressing existing inequities in the planning and development system by ensuring policy decisions are directed towards addressing uneven development, achieving more equity and ensuring that full implementation of new policies takes place.

Furthermore it will be necessary to monitor the effectiveness of new policy initiatives using suitable benchmarks like sustainability indicators alongside the traditional gross domestic product indicators. Urban areas have a dual characteristic as victims and perpetrators of social, economic and environmental degradation. It is important to note that with 60% of the population in Ireland living in urban areas it is critical to ensure the planning and development system is sensitive to the paradox of urban living. It could be argued that in order to accommodate increased urbanisation in Ireland in a more sustainable manner, lessons could be learned from countries like Germany and the Netherlands who offer many examples of best practice. Advocates of smart growth assert that there are significant fiscal and competitive advantages to be gained from adopting smarter growth development patterns (Muro and Puentes, 2004). Allied to this are the social and environmental benefits that would accrue from smarter land-use (Pavlov, 2004).

2. Planning in Ireland

Physical planning in Ireland formally commenced with the enactment of the 1934 Town and Regional Planning Act. This act introduced a coherent system of positive and regulatory planning based on the making by the planning authority of a planning scheme, (the precursor to the development plan), which was to govern the carrying out of future development. It is

important to note that in the 1930s neither the general public nor the politicians had much interest in planning as apathy prevailed (Grist, 1999). Traditionally planning has been dominated by short-term and present-focussed decisions about space (Scannell, 1995) and (Bannon, 1989). This short-term approach is not conducive to smart growth and in fact may act as a barrier to achieving the objectives of the concept. In contrast to Ireland countries like Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands have traditionally taken a long-term approach to the planning and development process (Beatley, 2001).

Recent policy and planning initiatives include *Sustainable Development A Strategy for Ireland 1997* the Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area 1999, The Planning and Development Act, 2000, and the National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020. The Planning and Development Act, 2000, has been noted as a watershed and replaces the 1963 Act and all intervening amendment Acts to date, with the goal to counter problems in relation to imbalances in the planning and development system and challenges arising from recent social, economic and environmental factors. Most notable about this Act is the words sustainable development throughout the entire document where previously the word development appeared. Another important watershed is evident in the Local Government Act, 2001. This Act modernized and simplified the law relating to local government, in particular repealing a series of statutes dating from the early nineteenth century and providing a common legislative code applicable to all Local Authorities.

3. Smart Growth in theory

The concept of Smart Growth emerged in the United States during the 1990s from research undertaken by the Urban Land Institute (ULI). At this time the ULI was looking at ways to deal with the problems arising from urban sprawl, traffic congestion, school overcrowding and air pollution. Other issues of concern to ULI at this time were the loss of open space and skyrocketing public facilities costs. The concept is also a reaction to the apparent failure of traditional planning techniques to improve conditions. As David Crockett, the leader of sustainability efforts in Chattanooga, United States said at a speech in Cleveland: “*Every time a bulldozer cranks up it doesn’t mean we’re making money*” (Porter, 2002:41). Although the origins of smart growth are to be found in America, the worsening trends listed are not unique to the United States and are evident in many developed countries including Ireland. Smart growth is not anti-growth and instead provides solutions to address the global challenge of achieving more sustainable development defined as “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (Bruntland, 1987).

The concept is evolutionary and is continuously influenced by economic, environmental and social factors. In 1996 in America a broad coalition formally joined hands as the Smart Growth Network

(SGN), with members spanning real estate, advocacy and policy-making circles (Tregoning *et al*, 2002). The idea is that a community should fashion its own version of smart growth through a shared decision-making process. The concept embraces a holistic approach that accords with community interests and reasonably balances the various principles that make up smart growth in theory. The actual term ‘Smart Growth’ may be uniquely North American, but the ideas behind the concept are not. The European Union (and especially densely populated countries such as the UK and The Netherlands) has had a long history of thinking about new ways to manage growth, especially in cities. From the 1990 ‘Green Paper on the Urban Environment’ to the adoption of the ‘Strategy for Sustainable Development’ in June 2001, the European Union reaffirmed that sustainability lies among the Communities’ policy priorities (Tregoning *et al*, 2002). The concept of smart growth can be compared to other new forms of planning and development.

Some community groups view smart growth as an open invitation to public officials and developers to design too dense projects. Efforts to control development collide with strongly held values concerning property rights and home rule. This reluctance to embrace change could result in a BAU approach with little change in favour of smart growth. “The related dynamic of urban decline is more amenable to change because political forces required for change are likely as aged suburbs themselves face decline” (Bier, 2002:83). There is evidence to suggest that the present day advocates of smart growth looked to the past to get ideas for the future. In the early 20th century the ideal of a planned residential community, “The Garden City”, was devised and promoted by the English town planner Ebenezer Howard in *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform* (1898). The book was a response to the need for improvement in the quality of urban life. Howard felt that overcrowding and congestion due to uncontrolled growth since the Industrial Revolution had marred urban life. Howard had the gift of persuading practical businessmen that his idea was financially sound and socially desirable. Howard’s “Garden City” concept could be compared to smart growth, where there is mixed-use development, a town centre and open space conservation whilst adopting a more holistic approach to the planning and development process. These features are evident in the Garden Cities of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City established in England at the beginning of the 20th century and prove that good design can produce enduring values and lasting streams of profit in social, economic and environmental terms.

Traditional planning of urban form was based on short-term economic gain, and the need to find quick solutions to deal with the ills of overcrowding in the inner city slums. The dominant planning ideology of this period was based on low-density, mono-use, and lack of diversity and flexibility. The legacy of this planning era is present day auto-dependent commuter lifestyles. Tregoning *et al* (2002) discusses how the term ‘sprawl’ has become a popular pejorative, shorthand for poorly planned growth that consumes precious open space and mars the landscape with ugly development. It is blamed for constant traffic jams, crowded schools and a host of other ills that afflict fast-growing communities. But while people from all walks of life agree on the consequences of this growth pattern that originated in the 20th century, they rarely see themselves as part of the problem – or the solution.

Many gravitate to the outer edges of suburbia without fully accounting for its trade-offs and contradictions (Tregoning *et al*, 2002).

For planners and environmentalists who hope to counteract the societal forces behind sprawl, it helps to keep that perspective in mind. For most people land-use issues reside in the here and now, in their own backyard and in a time frame that can be pencilled in on the calendar, not in some distant place or future. They think about different facets of planning and development in isolation, not as interrelated pieces of a big picture. In North America, the smart growth movement has emerged as the most promising attempt yet to make these connections. Advocates share many of the same goals as of earlier anti-sprawl efforts fought under the banner of sustainability- with a key difference. Their language and methods are more pragmatic and inclusive. Instead of appealing almost entirely to environmental sensibilities, as much North America sustainability discourse does, they wrap the discussion around basic quality of life issues (Ibid). Recent urban design and planning theory attach considerable importance to the concept of mixed-use in achieving sustainability, lower reliance on private vehicular use, and achieving more vibrant urban areas for the long-term. There is however, scepticism that whilst mixed-use developments are desirable, they are, nevertheless, difficult to achieve. In an article in the journal, *Urban Design International*, Hall argues that local development plans commonly work from a paradigm based upon two dimensional uniform land use allocations, (Hall, 2000). This approach has difficulty in coping with mixed-uses, urban design principles, urban history and the more general pursuit of more compact and sustainable settlements. Furthermore this approach does not provide an adequate basis for public participation. Alexander and Tomalty (2002) argue that in practice, local residents may oppose mixed-use projects because they will generate noise, parking difficulties or other nuisances. Municipalities are increasingly interested in performance-based zoning as a way to address this issue. Performance-based zoning regulates land-use based not on proposed use, location and dimensions of the development, but on the basis of the actual impacts it will have on the neighbouring residents and businesses. It allows any land use to locate adjacent to any other use, provided it satisfies predetermined performance standards (noise, dust, hours of operation, views, etc) (ibid).

3.1 Key principles of smart growth

In 1996 the Smart Growth Network defined the principles of Smart Growth as follows:

1. Mix land uses,
2. Take advantage of compact building design,
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices,
4. Create walkable communities,
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place,
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas,
7. Provide a variety of transport choices,
8. Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost effective,
9. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions, and

10. Infill redevelopment, and adaptive use in built-up areas.

4.0 Proposed plan for the duration of the research

Respondents who participated in the recent survey were invited to take part in further data collection for further research. A total of 60 respondents indicated a willingness to participate further in the research. Preliminary examination of the survey results presented a broader and deeper remit for the research. It is contended that the quantitative dimension of the survey data could be further enhanced, expanded and elaborated upon by further qualitative data. The valued opinions of land-use stakeholders may be of great value in order to identify tools or processes required to successfully implement smarter land-use policy in Ireland. The research is currently at the theory building stage and it is envisaged to collect further data by means of futures methods of enquiry such as focus groups, strategic conversations and scenario planning in the next six months. According to Ratcliffe (2003) such scenario-based plans will progressively become integrated forums where the objectives of many sectors are synergised and synchronised. Future studies can simply mean any exploration of what might happen and what we might want to become. It contributes to an overall understanding of and approach to the future and its methods. Future studies is subject or questions oriented, for example what are the critical technologies that will have the greatest influence over the next 25 years? Futures research means the use of techniques to identify systematically the consequences of policy options and to identify alternative futures with policy implications for decision makers.

The Smart Growth Network that was established by the Urban Land Institute in 1996 has to date published two reports entitled “Getting to Smart Growth” (2000) and “Getting to Smart Growth Two” (2003). Both reports contain a hundred policies for implementation of the smart growth principles. These implementation policies may form the basis for the 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit'. Another potential resource for the research is the upcoming report by Sir John Egan in the United Kingdom, using 7 criteria for sustainable communities, due to be published in mid April 2004. The 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit' will be tested for robustness and suitability using a pilot process with land-use stakeholders. This wind tunnel testing of the 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit' will identify who would use the toolkit, its benefits and be a means to effect more efficient land-use than was hitherto the case. Allied to this may be the use of suitable benchmarks like sustainability indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of the 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit'.

5.0 Contribution to knowledge base

The concept of smart growth emerged in the 1990s in the United States from research undertaken by the Urban Land Institute. The founding principles are based on ways to deal with the ills associated with urban sprawl. The principles are closely aligned to the principles of sustainable development in terms of economy, environment and society. The world is becoming more urbanised. Ireland is by no means an exception to this trend and this is further evident in the research conducted by Hughes (2003) on Dublin as a city-state in the 21st century. It is generally agreed that there is now and will be a continual need for research into land-use issues based on their impacts on the economic,

environmental and social aspects of societies now and in the future. The World Watch Institute (2004) identifies a 'knowledge gap'. Despite the abundance of policy initiatives that seem to support the concept of smarter land-use, there seems to be a distinct lack of knowledge of what smarter land-use is and how to achieve it. The proposed 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit' it is suggested would offer a user-friendly vehicle as a means for Ireland to achieve more sustainable land-use.

Although a globally accepted blueprint for smart growth does not exist, means to facilitate implementation of the concept in individual societies may vary from country to country. The success of smart growth ultimately will depend on its adaptation to each country's unique political, cultural and market dynamics and development trends. To date, the smart growth movement has focussed on state, regional and local reforms. There may be a need for a National Smart Growth Agenda according to Katz (2002) who stated that to attain measurable success smart growth will need to address at least five distinct challenges in the coming years:

1. the spatial distribution of affordable housing;
2. expanding housing opportunities for middle class families in the city, suburbs and more affordable housing near job centres, (for example through zoning policies);
3. significant policy reforms at all levels of government (for example building code changes);
4. construction of new affordable housing in fast-growing areas where jobs are increasingly concentrated and requiring a change in rules;
5. regional diversity; since smart growth first and foremost focussed on changing the basic laws and practices that govern both patterns in 50 states and in thousands of local jurisdictions.

6.0 Novel dimension to the research

Over the last couple of years Ireland has updated a wide range of land-use policy documents and strategies. The National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 represents a watershed in spatial analysis being the first strategy that looks at Ireland as a whole. The Local Government Act, 2001, brought about the modernisation of local government in an attempt to be more transparent and effective and to decentralise power to a more local level. A National Biodiversity Plan was also launched for the first time in Ireland in 2002. Furthermore, the Planning and Development Act, 2000, has replaced the word development with the words sustainable development throughout the entire document. It would appear that Ireland has indeed made a huge commitment in terms of achieving a more holistic and integrated approach to planning and development. The research being conducted is novel in that it is concerned with the most up to date strategies and policies in land-use in Ireland to date. During the continual review of literature it has become apparent that there is a deficit in the availability of literature on the concept of smart growth as applied to the Irish situation. This represents a limitation but also presents an novel opportunity to generate greater awareness of the concept by conducting the research.

The research coincides with huge local, national and global changes in a world where greater attention is being given to environmental and social factors and more recognition is being given to the

inextricable link between economy, environment and society. Another possible benefit of the research may be an enhanced awareness and shared understanding of smart growth issues across a wide range of stakeholder groups.

The research proposes the use of traditional research methods alongside the use of ‘futures methods’ such as prospective through scenario planning to facilitate the adoption of the principles of smart growth. The study of the future is a multi-disciplinary examination of change in all major areas of life to find interacting dynamics that are creating the next age (Glenn, 1994). It is only in recent years that the benefits of applying futures methods to the discipline of planning have been recognised.

The research coincides with Ireland’s EU presidency from the first of January until 30th June 2004. Ireland is in a strategic position to advance the concept of smart growth further in Ireland and throughout the rest of Europe, especially at this critical time when ten new Member States will join in May 2004 (adding an extra 100 million people to the European Union). What will the agenda be during the period of this presidency? According to the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern on 14th January 2004, the theme of the Irish presidency will be “*Europeans Working Together*”, a theme which captures a vision of the people of the European Union working as a partnership, striving together to achieve our common goals and objectives. The Irish presidency has placed sustainable growth and social cohesion at the very centre of its work programme (EU Presidency, 2004). To advance the concept of smart growth in Ireland and the European Union the following ingredients are essential:

1. vision;
2. entrepreneurship;
3. specialisation;
4. social cohesion; and
5. governance. (All the ingredients to be found in successful competitive cities) (Ratcliffe, 2003).

Objective 2 of the thesis suggests the need to decouple politics from the planning process in Ireland. According to Memery (2000:80), in 1987 policy was put in place by the Fianna Fáil Government to develop a competitive economy, “but failed to take cognisance of the housing (and transport infrastructure) requirements for such growth”. The legacy of this oversight is evident in the current socio-economic and environmental challenges now facing Ireland, and some would argue that it is too late to change. More joined up, integrated and holistic thinking by relevant stakeholders may help reverse the current trends.

As stated earlier in this paper, there is a need to adopt a more long-term approach to planning and development and this is reflected in recent policies and strategies such as the NSS. Allied to this is the insignificant role of regional planning in Ireland until recently and how this contrasts to our European counterparts whose success it is argued, has been founded on adopting a more regional approach to planning and development. Furthermore, the establishment of City/County Development boards and Strategic Policy Committees brought about under the Local Government Act, 2001, has facilitated

more participatory democracy in contrast to the traditional representative model (Grist, 2003). Ravetz (2000) states that local authorities occupy a strategic position as *'catalysts of change'* in terms of planning and development.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 was the launching pad for Agenda 21, which is a non-legally binding authoritative statement of the principles for a global consensus for the 21st Century (Grubb, 1993). The document advocates achieving objectives and goals through a planned, democratic and co-operative process. It singles out local government as having a special role in educating, mobilising and responding to the public to promote sustainable development (DoELG, 2001). Local Agenda 21 (LA21) is a process that facilitates sustainable development within a community. *"Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and co-operation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, over-see planning processes; establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and sub-national policies"* (UNEP, 1992).

Greater public participation is greatly facilitated by the process of Local Agenda 21 and also affords people the opportunity to participate in the decision making process about issues that affect peoples lives. As stated from the outset, the research crosses the disciplines of economics, environment and society. Collaboration is at the heart of the concept of smart growth with all stakeholders taking an active role in the planning and development process. Modern day planning and development embraces more participatory democracy. Both government and the private sector now see Public/private partnerships as a viable means to develop required infrastructure in Ireland. Interestingly, a recent relaxation of EU rules on State borrowing has opened the way for a number of infrastructure projects like upgrading the M50, the Dublin Metro and the Cork School of music. The State may allow the private sector finance the projects and spread the cost over periods of up to 20 years, considerably reducing the impact on the Government finances. More relaxed rules apply where the project is financed by private investors who assume a significant element of the risk associated with the project (McManus, 2004).

7.0 Conclusion

This paper presented evidence that would suggest a need to adopt a more integrated, holistic and long-term approach to planning and development if the goal of more efficient land-use is to be realised. The paper suggests that one part of the solution proposes the creation of an 'Irish Smart Growth Toolkit' as a means to accommodate inevitable growth that is economically viable, friendly to the environment and enhances quality of life. It could be argued, however, that mobilising support for smart growth in Ireland and achieving it will not be easy and is not inevitable. Changes will be difficult and controversial and will require leadership, a willingness to innovate and collaboration among all stakeholders will be required. Individual special interests must be put aside in the joint

pursuit of sustainable urban forms. The paper also suggested the need to learn from the good examples of the past with continual evaluation and monitoring to establish if the objectives of smart growth are being met. The paper suggested the need for increased awareness about the concept of smart growth. One way to achieve this is through further education, discussion and greater participation. The proposed plan for further research, the contribution to the knowledge and the novel dimension to the research was also examined. Smart growth advocates have a large toolkit of time-tested programmes and regulatory tools they can use to try and overcome obstacles. Experimentation and courage to break from the short-term BAU model will be necessary. Should the needs of present generations be met by adopting the principles that underlie the concept of smart growth it follows that future generations will inherit sustainable societies. Ultimately, the smart option is dependent on meeting the needs of the present in a sustainable manner.

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