

Center of Excellence

Advancing smart growth through transportation and land use



Land use and transportation shape the future of our communities, making them critical policy areas for local decision-makers. Smart Growth America collaborates with experts and local leaders nationwide and has created this sheet to explain their connection and highlight strategies for success.

Introduction

Land use and transportation are inseparable. It is impossible to successfully do one without the other. For example, a strong network of bike lanes or sidewalks will not be useful if people have to travel long distances to get from one destination to another. Because land use and transportation are inherently intertwined, cities and towns should make every effort to treat them in a holistic and multidisciplinary manner. This means aligning policies, plans, regulations, and projects. Collaboration between departments is also crucial. This includes eliminating siloes, fostering strong working relationships between different departments, or even merging them together. But a basic first step is to make sure different departments are meeting and communicating with one another.

Key signs of strong collaboration between departments

- Regular meetings and communication
- Joint planning/strategizing efforts
- Sharing of resources and data
- Coordination on project selection, implementation, and reporting
- Coordinated community outreach and communications

“Fragmented government produces fragmented results.”
-Mitchell Silver, award-winning planner and Raleigh City Council member



Strategies for successful coordination in land use and transportation

Activate public space

Create great places that people actually want to visit and can easily reach. [Placemaking](#) is a vital strategy to help make communities more enjoyable, vibrant, and healthy. Design is one ingredient of successful public spaces. It is also crucial to understand and plan for the people who use, or would use, public spaces with the right support. What are their daily activities, their preferences, their values, and priorities? [Quick-build projects](#) (sometimes referred to as pop-up or [demonstration projects](#)) can be a fast, effective, and cost-efficient way to pilot test interventions, demonstrate impacts, and finalize permanent changes to better utilize public spaces.

Key action to take: Pilot-test a quick-build project and measure results.



Assess and highlight the economic benefits of smart growth

Sprawl and car-centric development are not only dangerous, they are fiscally inefficient. Smart growth-aligned development that brings homes, jobs, and amenities closer together is a more efficient economic model that provides numerous benefits. For example, local governments can more easily provide services like public transportation, road maintenance, waste pick-up, and snow removal. Cities and towns should examine their growth models and consider adopting smart growth approaches that consider land use and transportation together, maximizing these benefits. Resources such as [SGA's Benefits of Complete Streets tool](#) and the [Fiscal Impact Analysis Toolkit](#), can help communities measure and project impacts to help support decision making.

Key action to take: Conduct fiscal impact analysis to determine the potential benefits and impacts of new smart growth initiatives.

Engage communities to understand their intersecting challenges and priorities

Communities don't experience transportation and land use as separate issues. For example, if residents say that there are no jobs or grocery stores that they can reach safely and conveniently, it's not just a transportation problem. Community engagement should be central to all development and planning processes. This means involving communities before, during, and after a project is complete. It is crucial to truly understand the community and make residents partners in your work, not just recipients. For an overview of the importance of community engagement and dozens of effective strategies, see this [USDOT guide](#). And for an illustration of what good community engagement looks like, see [this case study](#).

Key actions to take:

- Connect with trusted stakeholders in the community such as community organizations, business owners, and religious leaders
- Hold public events at places where people feel comfortable
- Employ members from the communities being served, for the duration of projects, or permanently

“Bring people together based on what they share in common. When you do this, their differences become assets.”

—Kim Mitchell, architect and city planner



“You need to engage both your friends and enemies. If you have a meeting and everyone is completely aligned with your thinking, that’s not necessarily something to celebrate. It means you might have to work harder in your outreach.”

—Charnelle Hicks, President of CHPlanning, Ltd. and Nspiregreen

In 2024, Smart Growth America launched the Center of Excellence, a virtual program designed to strengthen collaboration between transportation and land use practitioners. Through expert-led sessions, participants explored key intersections of land use and transportation, gaining practical insights and strategies to advance smarter, more connected communities. Learn more at smartgrowthamerica.org.