SMART GROWTH
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
A project of Smart Growth America

CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION
# Greenville, South Carolina

## About the Community

The City of Greenville is situated in northwestern South Carolina. Once a prosperous mill town, the City of Greenville's economy went into a steep decline when its primary industry went offshore. The County Seat of Greenville County, the City of Greenville has steadily lost population since 1970 even while the surrounding area grew. The 2000 Census placed its population at 56,002 residents. The total county population at that time was about 379,620 but the American Community Survey estimates it to have grown by an average annual rate of 1.6 percent to around 417,170 by 2006.

The city encompasses 26.1 square miles and has a population density of roughly 2,146 residents per square mile.

At its nadir, the City's downtown was boarded up for the most part, but an aggressive redevelopment campaign has successfully transformed the area into an attractive and lively mixed-use district that purportedly has a daytime population of 225,000. The City has also deservedly received accolades for its efforts to redevelop older residential neighborhoods close to the core.

Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research (ICAR) is located just outside Greenville. A business consortium that included BMW, Timken, IBM, Microsoft, Michelin, and the Society of Automotive Engineers International (SAE) created the research center to be "*the premier automotive and motor sports research and educational facility in the world*." Surrounding ICAR along Interstate 85 is the Millennium Campus, a large office park built to attract even more investments.

## State Of Smart Growth Implementation

In the main, smart growth leadership came from within the city government. The City Council instigated and strongly supported the inclusion of smart growth principles in the draft Land Use Development Ordinance (LUDO), which was to replace the existing zoning ordinance. They had support from the development community and from the environmental advocacy groups as well.

The counter-argument against smart growth was mainly couched in terms of perceived infringements on property rights as opponents were suspicious of the comprehensive nature of the LUDO.

Northwestern South Carolina is an extremely conservative area politically, typified by strong public support for limited government and protection of private property rights. When the City began to revamp the zoning ordinance public opposition came out in force fearing that their development rights would be eroded.

The Comprehensive Plan, which was adopted in 1999, focuses on preserving neighborhoods, so the City Council has adopted a policy of "Neighborhoods First," but there is no consensus as to what this means. Interpretations range from "no change" to "quality infill." The Council does agree however that it wants to increase the city's population and encourage quality development.

Commercial areas outside of the central business district are mainly strip development. Most are showing definite signs of age. Quality of design and construction vary widely. Residential areas are not being developed to the density allowed by zoning.

The city was nearly built out until the recent annexation of the Verdae property, a large tract of land on its eastern border. With the real possibility that the city's population could double depending on how this area developed, there was a desire within the City government to see smart growth development patterns prevail in the newly annexed area—hence the drafting of a new LUDO.

There was also an underlying sentiment that the changes would increase density beyond a level desired by residents. Street connectivity was also an issue for many who desire to maintain their neighborhoods in tact and feared that a connected grid would encourage through traffic.

SGLI Technical Assistance team audited the proposed LUDO and reviewed the city's Comprehensive Plan and Neighborhood plans.

The team found that, with no city planning department, planning services were contracted with the county and the city had allowed developers an enormous amount of latitude. As a consequence, the plans for the newly annexed areas were being drawn with no city input despite the fact that they had the potential to double the size of the city.

With respect to smart growth, the city was relying heavily on pyramid zoning to provide mixed-uses, but this faith was only borne out in the downtown and areas where redevelopment was being directed by the city. Elsewhere the city was not exerting much control at the project level. There were no incentives or strictures to direct inclusion of smart growth elements.

The transportation plans concentrated heavily on automobiles and very little consideration to accommodating transit or other alternative modes of transportation. Taken together, the transportation plans and the LUDO did not work to promote walkability within or connectivity between districts or neighborhoods.

The team recommended that city become actively involved in directing development particularly with respect to the newly annexed Millennium business and office park and Verdae property. The latter was to include a large residential component and, with an unused railway right-of-way connecting this property with ICAR and Millennium Campus, there seemed to be an excellent opportunity to master plan the area so it could provide workforce housing for the research and industrial parks. The existing zoning would permit a mix of uses but did not guarantee that they would be configured in a manner consistent with smart growth

The team advised the city to strongly encourage if not require street connectivity, and that it should revise requirements regarding block length, curb cuts and pedestrian facilities in order to increase walkability. Street designs and design specifications should also be revised to better accommodate transit and bicycles.

The team advised the city to strengthen its project level oversight of commercial development by adopting site design and architectural guidelines.


Lessons Learned

### *Have faith in your community's recovery*

Cities like Greenville that have only recently recovered from a severe economic downturn are reluctant to require anything of developers for fear it may impede their recovery. The problem in Greenville was that what developed outside of the downtown area was not well designed and the codes provided virtually no leverage and no incentives to encourage the type of development the City preferred. The City relied on its modified pyramid zoning to provide for smart growth, but the results did not support their faith. The city had earned a reputation as a place where developers could do whatever they pleased.

*Watch those low beams, set the high beams*

With respect to transportation planning, the City set its "low beams" far too low, concentrating on day-to-day transportation needs, focusing exclusively on speeding car traffic through and around the city and neglecting to develop more route options and transportation choices. The price of neglecting to turn on the "high beams" and plan for better connectivity and alternative mode choices is being paid now in the form of congestion.

*Leaders first, politicians second*

The City Council exercised strong leadership by advocating smart growth in the redeveloped downtown and in the revised the LUDO. Despite the shining smart growth example of the downtown, citizens seemed reluctant to adopt smart growth principles in other areas of the city. The prospects for the success of smart growth depend the continued dedication of elected officials who are leaders first and politicians second. It will also be important to widen the base of vocal support among other community opinion leaders.

## Postscript:

The controversy that surrounded the proposed changes to the LUDO prompted the City to step back and reevaluate their approach. Rather than pressing the changes, the City revamped the existing LUDO into a more user-friendly format but few smart growth elements were incorporated.

Despite this apparent setback, City staff indicates that public support for smart growth is growing as familiarity increases with projects in places like Charlotte and Atlanta and as gasoline prices have risen. The City has initiated an update of the Comprehensive Plan, and is hoping that the public process will lead to a stronger emphasis on smart growth principles. Though few of the team's recommendations were acted upon, staff found the audit helpful because it gave outside validation to the positions they had been taking and prompted a wider discussion in the community about how smarter growth could benefit Greenville.

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## About the Case Studies

*Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.*

*The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.*

*The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with its implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.*

*Visit **www.sgli.org** for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.*

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