SMART GROWTH
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
A project of Smart Growth America

CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Richmond, California

About the Community

Richmond, in western Contra Costa County, California, United States, is located in the East Bay and is part of the rapidly growing San Francisco Bay Area. The city sits on 32 miles of waterfront, more than any other city in the Bay Area, most of this coastline is devoted to the shipping industry. The Port of Richmond, located in along the city's southern coast beside the Richmond Inner Harbor, is one of the biggest ports in northern California and claims to rank third in the state in shipping tonnage.

Richmond grew rapidly during the Second World War as a seaport and heavy industrial town devoted to shipbuilding. Its population reached a peak of 99,000+ in the late 40s. The cessation of hostilities and the eventual drawdown of military forces and logistics reduced the size of the Richmond's shipbuilding industry. The population consequently steadily declined to about 71,000 by the end of the succeeding decade.

The population fluctuated in the mid 70s but began taking off again in the late 80s. By the 1990 census, Richmond's population had returned to more than 99,000.

The population is projected to grow to nearly 111,000 by the middle of the next decade.

State Of Smart Growth Implementation

MacDonald Avenue, a prime commercial corridor in Richmond, California is facing development pressure from the rapid population growth in the Bay Area. With most of the City built out, this auto-oriented corridor surrounded by generally low-density housing, some retail, and institutional uses is currently the focus of several city initiatives and revitalization plans including the Civic Center Specific Plan, BART Access Plan, Project 10-A Redevelopment Plan, and the General Plan.

New development standards have been proposed to redevelop MacDonald Avenue into a pedestrian friendly corridor that accommodates a diversity of uses and fully capitalizes the location and assets such as existing infrastructure, access to BART station, and linkages to the Civic Center.

SGLI's Technical Assistance team reviewed the plans and guidelines that regulate the development along MacDonald Avenue and developed a set of recommendations and design guidelines for the area. The team also conducted a preliminary policy and code and zoning audit to understand how far the existing regulations are consistent with the principles of smart growth.

Lessons Learned

Crumbling Commercial Corridors are Opportunities for Smart Growth

Commercial corridors such as MacDonald Avenue are amongst the most viable places in existing urban areas that can support new density and growth, and have consequently become significant factor in defining City form and character. Largely overlooked in the past as mere transportation arteries, these corridors have languished with strip malls, obsolete buildings, and significant underutilization characterized by surface parking, vacant lots, and greyfield/brownfield sites. This story is true for many cities, both large and small. With most of the urban cities built out, there is increasing pressure to redevelop land for highest and best use. Clearly, commercial corridors have regained prominence as they are the most likely and least contentious areas where new density and growth can be targeted. These corridors can absorb a mix of uses at higher densities with relatively less NIMBYism than established single-family neighborhoods. As such, these corridors need special attention with respect to their development and design framework as they are the harbingers of change.

Design guidelines are opportunities for creating public policy that is protected from cycles of business

The physical form of the corridor in the new context is tied intimately with the economic, business, and housing development. Clearly, the pressure to develop land is dependent upon business cycles, market trends and forces, consumer demand, and other competing factors. However, this evolution of development – in bursts or gradual increase- must be tempered by flexible yet consistent and transparent public policy reflected through a sound development framework and design guidelines. New higher density, mixed use and transit-oriented developments emerging through this framework incrementally can become models for replication in the corridor.

Slow-down traffic, speed-up investments

Transportation improvements, especially slowing down traffic, and creating pedestrian oriented amenities such as wide sidewalks and street furniture is a key to the corridor's revival. While automobiles will continue to dominate the urban landscape in the foreseeable future, creating pedestrian friendly linkages between the Civic Center, BART station, surrounding neighborhoods, and existing commercial centers and multifamily housing in the corridor will significantly improve the image, make it pedestrian friendly, and make the area desirable for new investments and quality developments. Similarly, development of parking structures can significantly reduce on-street parking and make the corridor conducive for walking.

Information, information, information

Success of design guidelines is contingent upon community buy-in.

This dynamic process of design and development demands healthy interaction among residents, businesses, developers, elected officials, policy makers, and other stakeholders. In general, communities are sensitive when confronted with issues of new growth, higher density and consequently increased traffic. Educating public about the value of 'smart growth initiatives' by describing best practices can allay fears, reduce anxiety, and facilitate the project. Such information sharing, dialogue, and consensus is critical to establishing a winning smart growth strategy.

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Tools used: *Smart Growth Code and Zoning Audit*

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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.*

*Visit **www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net** for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.*