

“Smart growth” can't be smart if it is predisposed to growth

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The catchphrase “smart growth” has recently become highly popular among politicians, developers, land speculators, real estate entrepreneurs and other business interests with a shared mission.

That is, they seek to obtain variances, rezonings, official plan amendments and public infrastructure investments to build more roads, malls, houses and condos, more bridges, office towers and assembly plants, more water and sewage systems, more parking lots, sports facilities, hotels, restaurants and gas bars.

“Smart growth” has become the buzz-term of choice, the phrase of persuasion, widely used in media releases, council discussions and boardroom meetings, invariably to sell the notion of growth.

The City of Ottawa is clambering onto the smart-growth bandwagon, but is adding a bit of a spin. Ottawa is justifying a substantial expenditure of taxpayers' money, and politicians' and staff time, by connecting its four-day, smart-growth summit, which opened yesterday, to the official-plan review process.

I believe the meeting could make a productive, citizen-serving contribution to the official plan review. There are, however, reasons to be skeptical about the real purpose behind this summit, and about the validity of any conclusions drawn from it.

- First, a number of politicians and interest groups are attempting to equate smart growth with sustainable development. It has even been suggested that the terms are interchangeable.

Contrary to those representations, earnest or otherwise, there is a major, no-compromise distinction between the two philosophies. So-called smart growth is based on the presumption of growth. Growth is a given, and is taken to be a good thing as a first principle. The smart-growth imperative is to figure out how to serve growth, accommodate growth, facilitate growth, perpetuate growth, and pay for growth (with other peoples' money if possible), in a never-ending, ever-expanding cycle of moreness.

Sustainable development does not begin with that premise. Rather, growth or not growth are matters of choice, and ecological, social, financial, and other tests of sustainability are then applied to both the growth and not-growth options.

Any purported correspondence between smart growth and sustainable development is specious, which should prompt hard questions about the motives behind slipping presentations on sustainable development into a smart-growth summit.

- Second, smart is a relative term, and can be manipulated. For example, a foolish growth proposal can be made to appear “smart” by running it alongside a proposal that is outrageous.

To illustrate, Ottawa could grow big-time by rezoning 25 per cent of its remaining agricultural land for strip malls and parking lots, or it could rezone all the agricultural land for those purposes. The first proposal, while patently foolish, could be rated as smart, relatively speaking, because the second proposal is beyond mind-boggling by comparison.

How, then, do Ottawa council and senior staff define “smart” operationally? Until that

question is answered, “smart” equals “smoke and mirrors.”

Moreover, the recent, gushy embrace of the word smart is especially troublesome for elected officials and senior staff who have been around for five, 10, 15 or 20 years. Is this a tacit admission that their previously approved growth policies and plans were something other than smart?

- Third, a review of planning journals and newspaper files suggests that there is little of substance in Ottawa's summit program that has not been discussed at similar meetings in numerous Canadian cities, including Ottawa, over the past 30 years.

A key question, therefore, is what, specifically, is actually new or different about the growth topics, objectives, issues, benefits, costs, impacts, strategies, tactics and on and on, that are on the Ottawa agenda?

- Fourth, there is the matter of Ottawa's recent studies on growth, and the city's track record on funding smart-growth and official-plan research.

In the past year or so the City of Ottawa/Region of Ottawa-Carleton paid \$400,000 for an industry cluster study and \$200,000 for the stunning “Technically Beautiful” branding effort; it committed \$350,000 to sit at the table for a provincial ring-road study that has no official purpose or statement of work; and it spent more money on a just-completed study involving four alternative growth projections for Ottawa over the next 30 years.

Which prompts a question: Where is the evidence that the terms of reference and findings from recent studies and consultations have been thoroughly examined by council, have been fully analysed and synthesized by staff, and have been effectively communicated to and understood by area residents?

- It is evident that there is no evidence of such a review by any of council, staff or residents, which is cause for more, deeply troubling questions about the motives behind the so-called smart-growth summit.

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