

SMART GROWTH CAN BOOST CITY FINANCES, TOO

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Build smart, save money.

A national coalition that advocates for "smart growth" says denser, more compact communities save money by building less infrastructure and spending less on future police and fire protection, while also earning more tax revenue across a smaller area.

The concept of smart growth isn't new, but the Washington, D.C.-based Smart Growth America says this is the first time the financial benefits have been quantified.

The findings are significant, the group says, in an era when city budgets are tight and some communities - most notably, Stockton - have gone bankrupt. This city and others are now exploring options for smarter growth in the future.

"Smart growth strategies are a tremendous opportunity for cities and towns to save money," said Geoff Anderson, CEO of Smart Growth America.

The group identified three areas in which smart growth saves money:

» In general, infrastructure for smart growth is about one-third cheaper than conventional development because fewer new roads, sewers and water lines must be built.

» Smart growth saves taxpayers an average of 10 percent on services such as police and fire, since patrol cars and fire trucks won't have so far to travel to reach the scene of an emergency.

» Smart growth can generate 10 times more tax revenue per acre.

Stockton is not specifically considered in the new report, but it does examine 13 other communities across the country, including Fresno. Officials there found that building smarter would reduce the cost of services by 9 percent, and that denser development would generate more tax revenue per acre than conventional building.

Stockton City Planning Manager David Stagnaro had not seen the report, but he said the conclusions as described to him sounded reasonable.

"If you take one square mile instead of two square miles, the surface area is smaller and you have the ability to serve that area with the same resources," Stagnaro said.

While Stockton's outward sprawl during the boom years has been well documented, Stagnaro said there was development occurring within the city's footprint even then.

A settlement over a Sierra Club lawsuit now requires the city to consider ways to put even more emphasis on smarter growth.

The settlement eventually requires 4,400 housing units downtown. Meanwhile, the San Joaquin Council of Governments is evaluating areas where such development might make sense.

Stagnaro said the city may use information in the new report as its planning efforts progress.

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