

Smart-Growth Strategy Must First Embrace Real Growth

Notably absent in the ongoing state-level discussion on the need for so-called "responsible growth" is an emphasis on the most important element: growth.

The latest group grappling with this issue, the Governor's Responsible Growth Task Force, should first acknowledge that Connecticut has a growth problem, declare unequivocally that the state needs both job and population growth to thrive, and propose guidelines that will encourage people and companies to move and expand here.

Instead, the task force is poised to offer vague, undefined and highly subjective growth criteria: Emphasize top-down regional and state planning; seek to control what are now individual, private actions; side-step the drafting of objective criteria to guide myriad state agencies; and perpetuate itself as an advisory group. Enacting these recommendations would lead to a more difficult growth environment, which is the last thing Connecticut needs.

The report reflects an underlying mistrust of the free market, consumer preferences and individual choice. Policy leaders who may look to the task force for guidance should beware any proposed "solutions" that could further complicate an already overburdened, dysfunctional land-use and development approval process.

Specifically, the task force uses terms that require (but defy) definition in the government context, such as "encourage," "revitalize," "give preference to," "promote," "support," "coordinate," "create," "increase," "invest strategically." It further calls for "equitable sharing of the benefits and burdens of development," "regional equity," "off-site developments and improvements" and "impact fees" on development. Meanwhile, the "how" questions are left open to interpretation by others, presumably state and local regulators.

Perhaps most concerning is the broad recommendation that the governor "formally ... direct all state agencies and quasi-public agencies to ... develop Responsible Growth criteria and to use them in making decisions impacting both state policy and the expenditure of state funds." This throws the door wide open to a vast new array of regulations, taxes, fees and costs, all of which are huge disincentives to attracting investments and growth in the state.

The task force defines responsible growth, in part, as that which "supports a vibrant and resilient economy and preserves the natural resources (upon which our) quality of life depends."

We should not be wasteful of natural resources — we must be responsible custodians. Yet all growth involves altering or making use of natural resources. The real question is how to strike a balance between what we choose to preserve and where and how we grow.

The task force says there are three steps to achieve that balance: redevelop first, revitalize central cities, and give preference to brownfields. It stresses the need to reuse and rehabilitate existing infrastructure rather than create new infrastructure in undeveloped areas. Nowhere does it acknowledge the wants and needs of people who like suburban living. Nor does the report recognize the difficulties and high costs associated with revitalizing weak-market neighborhoods and cities.

This policy would be welcomed by folks who don't like suburbs, but it's contrary to the desires of most people who live in Connecticut. Most people simply don't care for density. Given the choice, they don't want to be packed in together. Yes, we need to accommodate those who do, but if our state is to grow

and compete successfully for more jobs and people, we need to accommodate the vast majority of those who do not.

Beyond the need for specific definitions, "responsible growth" requires objective standards of measurement. Without guidance, this too is left to regulatory interpretation. Rather than advance the task force's stated goal to streamline and increase coordination between the state, quasi-public agencies and communities, the lack of definition and objective measures will create greater confusion and regulatory burdens.

Those who claim they are in favor of growth should answer the following questions, all of which represent essential components of a growing economy:

- Do we want more jobs?
- Do we want an increasing population?
- Do we want more houses and apartments?
- Do we want more roads and other transit options?
- Do we want more cars, trucks and buses on the roads?
- Do we want more factories?
- Do we want more office buildings?
- Do we want more warehouses?
- Do we want more shopping centers?

Those who can't answer "yes" to all or most of these questions are really not prepared to accept economic growth as it's defined in most markets. Those who seek to limit growth or channel growth to just the cities or other developed areas should admit that the outcome may be a Connecticut that becomes uncompetitive on the national or world stage.

To the degree that Connecticut won't accept the growth that most other markets will, we place our economy at a distinct disadvantage and our future at risk.

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