

Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities



**Achieving Economic Vitality
through Smarter Growth
in Rural Communities and Small Towns**

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About EPA's Office of Sustainable Communities



- EPA's mission is to protect human health and the environment.
- OSC focuses on the environmental and public health impacts of the built environment because where and how we build affects our land, air, and water.
- We work on:
 - *Changing the conversation:* Education and outreach
 - *Helping the willing:* Tools and technical assistance
 - *Changing the rules:* Research and policy analysis



What Is a smart growth community?



A Sustainable Community is an urban, suburban or rural community that has more housing and transportation choices, is closer to jobs, shops or schools, is more energy independent and helps protect clean air and water.

- Balances economic and natural assets to meet the diverse needs of residents now and in the future
- Uses resources efficiently
- High quality of life attracts residents and businesses



What Does it Look Like?

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- Compact, walkable neighborhoods
- Transportation options within neighborhood and to the region
- Range of housing types
- Mix of uses — housing, offices, stores, schools, parks, etc.



Benefits of Sustainable Communities



- **Economic benefits: Creating competitive jobs**
- **Environmental benefits: Protecting our air, land, and water**
- **Health benefits: Helping people lead healthier lives**



Economic Benefits



The Challenge:

- High unemployment rates
- Mortgage and foreclosure crisis
- Changes in the US economy (post-industrial / agriculture)
- Expensive infrastructure to serve suburban fringe development
- Transportation costs



The Opportunity:

- New businesses on America's Main Streets
- Better transportation options to connect workers with job opportunities
- Revitalizing neighborhoods and communities
- Reduced household / energy / transportation costs
- Utilizing infrastructure already in place

Saves Local Governments Money



Compared to the status quo, smart growth:

- Costs less to build and maintain;
- Provides services at a lower cost;
- Reduces maintenance costs by directing spending to existing infrastructure;
- Reduces tax burden by maximizing return on public Investment;
- Preserves existing communities;
- Reduces household transportation costs;
- Reduces health costs.

Saves local governments money



- In general, higher density and mixed use returns far more per acre than lower density and single use
- Specifics depend on local tax regimes

- **Sarasota, FL**
 - Pop 370,000 in county, 50,000 in city
 - Downtown mixed-use yields 3-100x more property tax per acre than big-box retail

- **Asheville, NC**
 - Population 70,000
 - Wal-mart returns \$50k/acre in property+sales tax
 - Downtown yields \$330k/acre in property tax alone



Promotes Economic Growth



- **Attracts private investment**
- **Attracts employers and workers**
- **Supports small businesses**
- **Improves access to jobs**
- **Increases property values**
- **Provides greater stability in times of economic uncertainty and rising energy costs**
- **Responsive to demographic shifts**



Silver City, New Mexico:

Targeting Investments Downtown

- Population: 10,545
- Main St. Association Formed: 1985
- Buildings rehabbed: 151
 - Jobs created: 150
- ~\$2 mil public investment leveraged ~\$4.5 mil
- Downtown attracting regional hospital on old auto dealer site



How are Development Patterns Shaped?



- Many influences
- Government policies and investments
 - Local
 - Regional
 - State
 - Federal
- Developers
- Private landowners
- Economic, demographic, and cultural trends
 - Gas prices
 - Aging baby boomers
 - Increasing interest in walkability and proximity to destinations



Local Government



- **The Primary Land Use Decision Maker and Communities can choose to grow in particular ways**
- **Where are public and private investments made, including: local, state, federal**
- **Private investments often follow catalytic public investments**
- **Communities can make these investments achieve multiple goals**



The State Role



- **Every state is different**
- **State statutes determine which planning tools are available to localities**
- **States structure taxes and provide credits for certain activities**
- **States create environmental and other regulations**
- **States distribute some federal funds**
- **Some states take a more direct role in setting land use priorities or planning standards**

The Federal Role



- Local governments make decisions about development patterns, but the federal government can influence land use through policy & spending
- Allocates funding to states, regions, and communities for housing, transportation, other infrastructure, environmental protection
- Sets policy priorities that are reflected in programs, regulations, and investments
- Try as it might, (history tells us) Federal gov't priorities are not always community priorities and programs are often not flexible

What is a Rural Community?



- It depends on who you ask!
- 49 million Americans live in rural communities
- 75 percent of the total land area in the U.S. is rural



Virginia



Berlin, Maryland

Types of Rural Communities



- Gateway communities
- Resource-dependent communities
- Edge communities
- Traditional Main Street communities
- Second home and retirement communities



Carbondale, Colorado



Larimer County, Colorado



Dallas County, Iowa



Lewes, Delaware



Seneca Falls, New York

Historical Rural America



- Small towns in rural areas served the agriculture economy
- Were mixed use, compact, and walkable by necessity; had regional transportation connections (RR or river transport)
- Physical form varied by region



Marshall Town, Iowa



What's Changing in Rural America Today



Seneca Rocks, West Virginia: Seneca Motor Company Building (top);
U.S. Forest Service Seneca Rocks Discovery Center (bottom)



- **Economy, culture, transportation has changed**
- **Some rural communities are growing rapidly, others are declining**
- **Clearly a need for economic diversity and a need for expanded choice for where to live, how to get around, where to work**

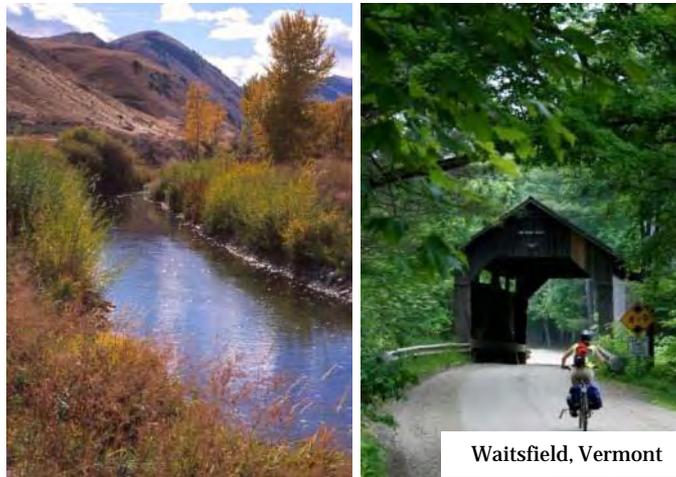
Challenges Facing Rural Communities



- Fewer farms and farmers
 - Although there is a growing interest in farming
- Loss of forest and other natural and working land
- Some communities are growing, some are shrinking
 - Rapid growth at metro edges
 - Shrinking population in some communities
- Limited access to jobs, services, and transportation
- Limited planning capacity



Smart Growth: A Response to Rural Challenges



- **Development that provides:**
 - Choices for where to live and how to get around
 - A stronger, more resilient economy
 - A safer, healthier place to live
 - Opportunities to protect the things that you love about the place you live (farmland and open space, natural beauty, sense of community, etc.)

So what does smart growth mean for a rural community?



**When you've seen one rural community...
you've seen one rural community.**



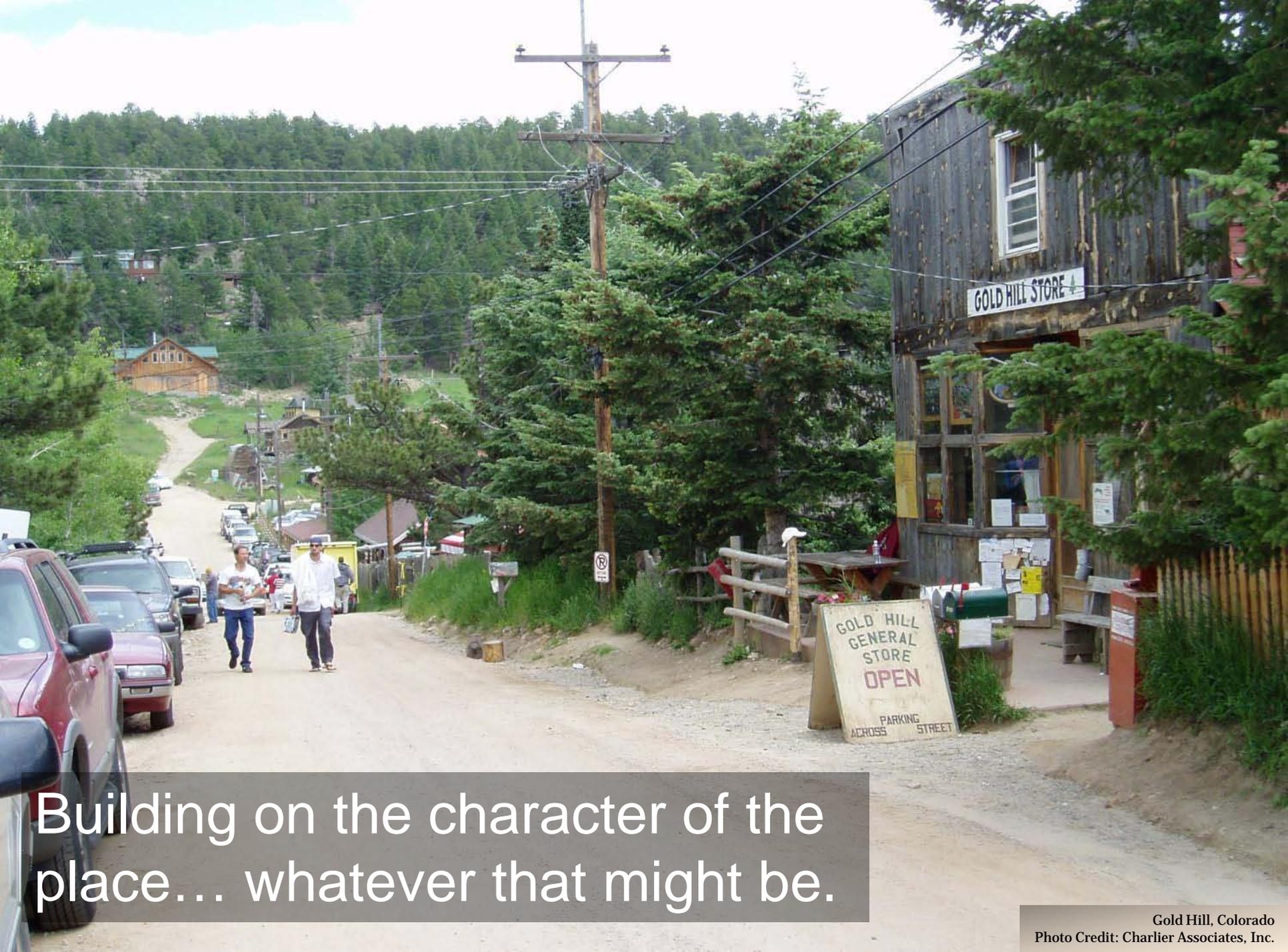
Vienna, Maryland



Smart growth means
choices for where to live...



...and how to get around.



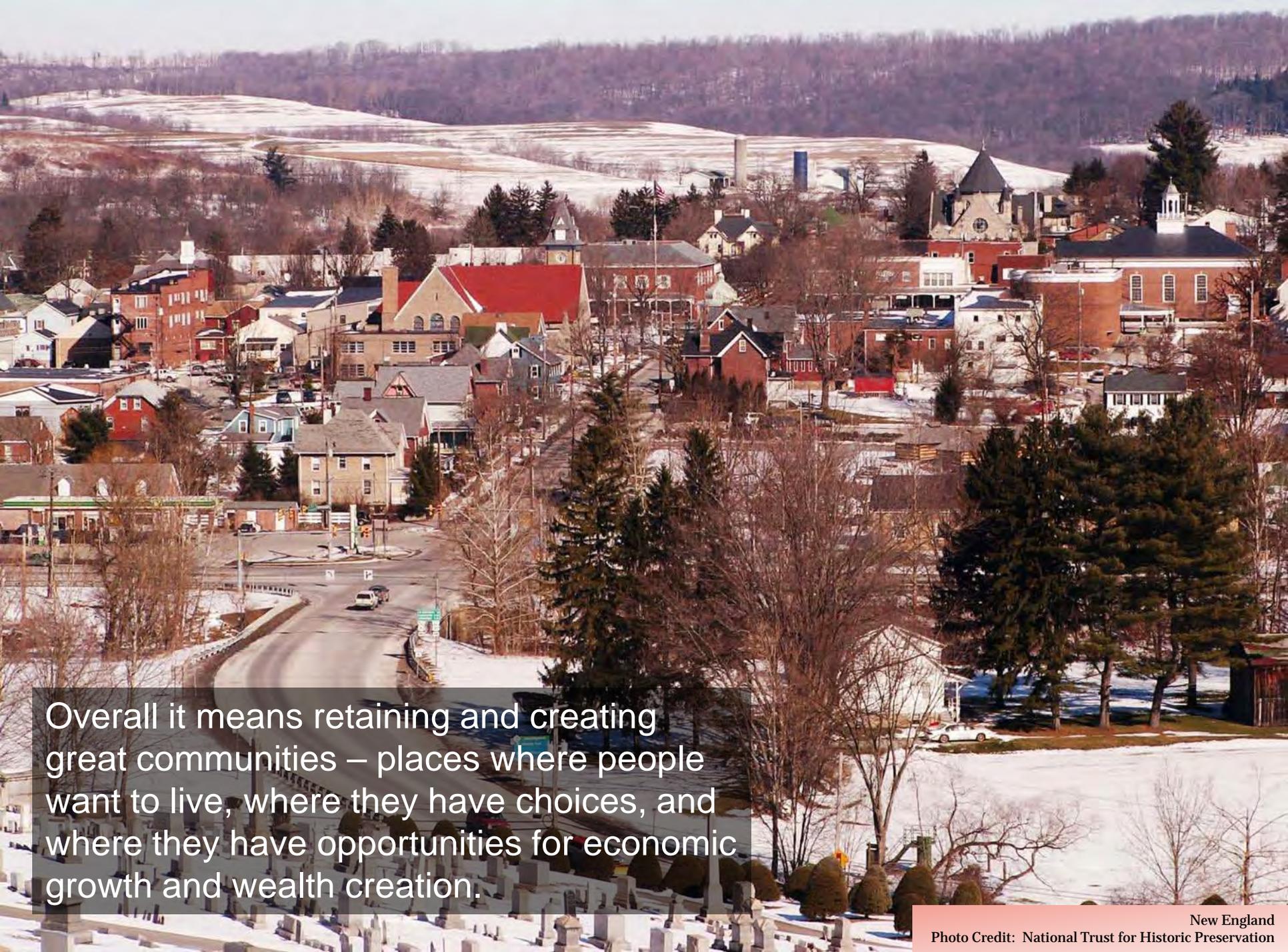
Building on the character of the place... whatever that might be.



And preserving what's
great about the community.



Smart growth also means developing a strong economy through economic development strategies that take advantage of a community's best assets.



Overall it means retaining and creating great communities – places where people want to live, where they have choices, and where they have opportunities for economic growth and wealth creation.



Smart growth looks different depending on where you are, but in every case it means building on a community's strengths.