We Say YES!

6 Actions to Support Sustainable Regional Development and a Greater Philadelphia

A DVSGA event on April 17, 2020 at The Racquet Club of Philadelphia

www.delawarevalleysmartgrowth.org
Growth happens. The population of Greater Philadelphia has increased 14% in the last fifty years to reach a total population of 5.8 million, and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) projects that our region will grow by another 650,000 people by 2045.

The question is not whether we will grow. The question is how we will grow. Where will the new families live? Where will the new jobs go? Will it be affordable to buy a home or start a business? How will we travel around our region? What happens to our farms and open space?

In the 20th Century, growth was shaped by the conversion of natural and agricultural lands into suburban sprawl, and was made possible by massive federal highway spending, cheap fossil fuels, and low-density zoning, among other factors. Is this a pattern we want to continue? It left us with the unintended consequences of disinvestment in established centers, social segregation, an overburdened and undermaintained infrastructure, and an American dream paradoxically out of reach for many.

Across the region, there is a sense that the system is broken and that we need to do something about it. This fervor often manifests itself in visceral opposition to change, especially new development. We oppose many new proposals because we seem to be in a vicious cycle where every increment of growth erodes our quality of life. Congestion increases, new residents force out existing ones, and open space unnecessarily goes away.

But imagine a Greater Philadelphia in which we welcome new neighbors, children can walk or bicycle to school, and seniors can age gracefully in their communities. Imagine a Greater Philadelphia in which our air is cleaner, open space is conserved, and fewer people die in traffic. Imagine a Greater Philadelphia where housing is more affordable and local entrepreneurs can make their mark. Imagine a Greater Philadelphia where growth enhances our quality of life.

If all we do is to say NO at every turn, our shared quality of life will never improve, and the best we can hope for is the status quo. But even the status quo doesn’t stand still; by continuing to say NO in the context of a growing region, we actually push a Greater Philadelphia further out of reach. To change the vicious cycle into a virtuous one, we have to figure out how to change the system by saying YES.
The Delaware Valley Smart Growth Alliance – a consortium of advocates, experts, and public officials – has identified six actions to shift our region to a socially, financially, and ecologically sustainable pattern of development. These actions are deeply interrelated, none of them will work as a stand-alone solution, and each may require some individual sacrifice, but together, they can lead to growth that improves quality of life for all of us.
Join us as we say yes to a Greater Philadelphia.
**YES to density where it belongs.**
Compact development in established centers leverages existing infrastructure, provides housing choices, and reduces development pressure on open space.

**YES to open space preservation.**
Protected natural and agricultural lands preserve wildlife, promote recreation, and constrain sprawl.

**YES to walking, cycling, and transit.**
Practical transportation options strengthen local economies, improve public health, and reduce congestion.

**YES to cutting the red tape.**
Complex approval processes increase costs and discourage small-scale entrepreneurs, creative design, and affordable housing.

**YES to removing parking minimums.**
Minimum parking requirements inhibit redevelopment, increase costs, and promote traffic.

**YES to infrastructure reinvestment.**
Infrastructure that supports existing centers has more fiscal and environmental benefits than building new, and should be prioritized.
Our region spent the better half of the 20th century converting farmland and natural areas into low density suburban sprawl. Our communities are much less dense and much less walkable than they were 100 years ago and, in fact, population added since 1970 has consumed nearly 4 times as much land per person. This pattern not only consumes open land, but burdens infrastructure far more than compact development.

Preferences, however, have shifted dramatically. Demand for walkable, mixed-use and transit-oriented neighborhoods is substantial. Surging prices in neighborhoods from Media to Fishtown indicates a lack of supply in many established centers. Failure to meet it will push people out of the neighborhoods where they want to be.

The market faces regulatory and political challenges. Zoning ordinances not only typically require that new neighborhoods, shopping areas and employment centers consume too much land, but they even undermine the dense walkable urbanism of our established centers through exclusionary density caps, excessive setbacks, and low coverage ratios. In cities and towns alike, NIMBY opposition to density seeks to exclude new neighbors, exacerbating the constraints on supply.

**Density belongs in established centers.** Especially where robust transit service exists, red tape should be cut so that higher density residential neighborhoods and mixed-use buildings are permitted by-right. We need more than low-density single-family housing types; our increasingly diverse population needs diverse housing types. Higher densities make transit, neighborhood retail, and walkable schools possible.

Naturally, density means different things in Rittenhouse Square and Kennett Square. We encourage municipal leaders to establish a clear vision for how existing rural, suburban and urban centers can best embrace taller buildings and compact development patterns while maintaining the authentic character and unique heritage that makes each place special.
Greater Philadelphia’s population has grown relatively slowly compared to less established regions, but the development of land has skyrocketed. Since 1970 our population has grown just 14%, but the amount of developed land has increased 56% from 641,000 acres to 998,000 acres - a nearly 400% increase in developed land for each new person. If, instead, Greater Philadelphia’s land development pattern had remained at that of 1930, today’s population would occupy fewer than 400,000 acres instead of nearly a million - conserving an area larger than all of Chester County.

Only 600,000 of the region’s 2.5 million acres have been permanently conserved. DVRPC has set the goal of protecting 50% of our unprotected open space - another 400,000 acres - by 2045. In the wake of the great recession and shifting consumer preferences, the last decade has slowed the region’s consumption of agricultural and natural lands, creating an opportunity for a re-set. But as Greater Philadelphia expects to grow by 650,000 people in the next 25 years, pressure to develop the metropolitan periphery may renew. At the same time, traditional public resources for conservation are dwindling and many localities are reluctant to generate their own.

**We support more aggressive land conservation.** From trails to tot lots, working farms to wildlife habitat, and village greens to athletic fields, open space adds to the quality of life and economy of the region. Conserving natural areas reduces healthcare costs, increases the value of nearby homes, and reduces infrastructure costs. From the Pine Barrens to Fairmount Park to the horse farms of Chester County, we are the beneficiaries of the conservation leadership of past generations. We have an obligation to do the same for future generations...before it’s too late.

But conservation does not happen easily, especially in today’s political climate. Meeting the challenge may involve a range of creative approaches including local or state regulatory measures, greater publicly funded acquisitions, donated and purchased easements on private property, conservation development, and transfers of development rights to places where density belongs.
In much of the region, using a car is a de facto requirement to participate in society. This requirement, however, comes with a lot of costs.

Personal vehicles are the second largest household expense across our region, burdening households with an average cost of $9,000 per vehicle per year. The requirement to own a vehicle in order to work or to access basic services burdens everyone, but especially those who can least afford it.

Motor vehicle crashes result in nearly 400 deaths in the region every year, vehicle emissions are the source of 60% of Philadelphia's air pollution, and the use of vehicles even for short trips is a major contributor to heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers associated with sedentary lifestyles. Road congestion costs the United States more than $300 billion per year in lost productivity, higher transportation costs for goods, and wasted fuel.

Without practical alternatives to the car, economic growth only exacerbates congestion by putting more cars on our roads. In turn, established places enact anti-growth policies that ironically worsen congestion by pushing the growth out to more peripheral, car-dependent places.

**We support the prioritization of walking, cycling and transit.** Walkable communities are social places with demonstrated value; every bus full of passengers represents fifty fewer cars on the road; every additional bicyclist improves local air quality; every car a household doesn't need to maintain directly increases the amount of money that can be spent on housing or spent in the local community. Especially as density increases, priority of these modes over driving should be reflected in policy, design, and budgets.

To be clear, walking, cycling, and transit won't work for all people in all places and for all purposes. For most long trips and freight transport, motor vehicles will likely dominate for the foreseeable future, and many people's lives have been organized around their car. But if we invest in infrastructure to make these trips safe, convenient, and enjoyable for people of every age and ability, then walking, cycling and transit can become practical and popular replacements for trips otherwise taken by car.
Construction and land use regulations have exploded in our region during the last 50 years. Zoning began in the early 20th century as a common sense attempt to reduce the nuisances of factories in residential communities in big cities, but evolved to compartmentalize every activity of daily life and promote social divisions. Today, a municipal zoning ordinance in the Philadelphia area can run hundreds of pages and may accompany an opaque, often politicized process for approval. The Wharton School says the Philadelphia region ranks fourth among all US metropolitan areas in the complexity of its land use regulations, ahead of Seattle, San Francisco, and New York. This complexity is often most pronounced in existing centers, further pushing development out to the periphery.

What was once a simple process typically handled by citizens with assistance from a surveyor or architect, now routinely involves teams of consulting engineers, traffic planners, and land use attorneys. From plan filing to groundbreaking, the approval process for residential projects routinely takes two or more years and costs $5,000 to $20,000 per home. The difficulty of delivering homes and commercial space in a timely manner further increases costs for consumers by keeping supply tight and favors the large projects and developers who can afford these costs and delays. The complexity of our regulatory system has inadvertently created barriers to equitable development, small entrepreneurs, and human scale design.

We favor clear and predictable land use regulation. Property owners and citizens should be able to understand easily what is allowed on every tract in a community. Overlapping jurisdictions of governmental agencies should be minimized. Regulations should be streamlined for compact, walkable development in places where density belongs. Especially in a competitive global economy, the whole process needs to get faster.

Cutting red tape, however, should not violate our standards of health, safety, and public welfare; in fact, our focus on those areas should be strengthened. Nor should it be applied to sensitive environments such as wetlands, grasslands, forests, and agricultural lands, where regulation should clearly discourage development. While it should become much easier to build in existing centers, it should become harder to build at the edge: sadly the reverse is usually true today.
In an effort to prevent parking scarcity, municipalities consistently demand that developers provide more parking than the users of a project need. This excess parking has a high social cost and should not be required by governments.

Construction costs per space vary from $5,000 in a surface lot to $30,000 and more in a garage, to $65,000 underground, not including maintenance or operating costs. Users of a development often pay for the increased costs through rent or sales prices, even if they don’t use the parking. The parking mandate makes everything, especially housing, less affordable.

When provided as surface lots, parking can often consume more land than the uses it serves. Garages occupy less land, but still consume a significant volume of otherwise buildable space. Especially in established centers, which were often built before such requirements, the provision of required parking often disrupts their walkable character. In all circumstances, the space necessary for required parking competes with otherwise more productive uses and either reduces density or increases the scale of a project.

Finally, mandatory excess parking distorts transportation choices. By subsidizing the cost of driving, it increases the likelihood of people keeping and driving a car, thereby further contributing to congestion and undermining transit.

We favor market-driven parking policies. Municipalities should remove parking minimums from their zoning codes and let the market determine how much parking to build based on the viability of walking, bicycling and transit to replace car trips. Doing so will lower construction costs, enable more affordable housing options, and facilitate walkable density where it belongs.

But removing parking minimums does not mean that developers will stop providing parking, just that they will not be required to create more than is necessary. Their bottom lines depend on meeting their customers’ needs, whether by building parking, arranging for shared parking with a neighbor, making use of shared vehicles, or relying on alternatives to driving. When parking is provided, its design should be context-sensitive, mitigate stormwater runoff, and serve the needs of people with mobility issues.
Infrastructure, especially transportation, shapes regional development patterns. Investment in roads and utilities at the metropolitan edge results in continued development of greenfields; new infrastructure in outlying areas is often an inefficient use of strained financial resources, serving relatively small numbers of people for the investment being made. With notable exceptions, the overall trend of the last several decades has been a proliferation of diffuse infrastructure and the decay of systems that serve a density of people and businesses.

At the same time, Greater Philadelphia suffers from deferred maintenance of its existing infrastructure and lurches from one crisis in state funding to the next. Relative to other metropolitan areas, the region is heavily reliant on state and federal transportation funding, especially for public transit, the backbone of walkable cities and towns. Smart growth is not possible under these conditions.

We support the repair and upgrading of infrastructure that serves existing centers. Reinvestment in established centers supports their continued viability and growth. Upgrading existing infrastructure is fiscally sound because it uses existing land and facilities, and when it serves more people per linear foot or acre, it is less expensive to maintain per person. Upgrading existing infrastructure is environmentally sound because it supports private reinvestment in intensely developed areas instead of inducing wasteful greenfield development. Our limited resources should prioritize existing infrastructure over new.

Such a shift in priorities, however, requires a major shift in how infrastructure is funded. First, it is critical to reprioritize existing streams of state and federal funding. Second, we should identify sustainable sources of local and regional funding for infrastructure to complement those state and federal resources. Forward looking metropolitan areas around the country from Denver to Florida have successfully created revenue streams that allow them to invest in themselves and shape their own future. The ideal funding plan will be broad-based and not only provide revenue, but create incentives that reduce congestion and long-term maintenance burdens on our shared infrastructure.

YES to infrastructure reinvestment.
Infrastructure that supports existing centers has more fiscal and environmental benefits than building new, and should be prioritized.
DVSGA is the leading advocacy organization dedicated to making the case for Smart Growth in Southeastern Pennsylvania, Southern New Jersey, and Delaware. It is a 501(c)(3) non-profit formed in 2005 to help:

**educate**
the public and local governments about the benefits of Smart Growth

**advocate**
that developers incorporate Smart Growth into development proposals

**facilitate**
support for Smart Growth project proposals during the municipal review process