



CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Rancho Cordova, California

About the Community

The City of Rancho Cordova lies a few miles east of Sacramento along Highway 50, one of two major commuter highways that lead into central Sacramento. Rancho Cordova, which was only incorporated into a city in 2003, has a population of 60,000 and is expected to accommodate as much as 250,000 at full build out.

As with many cities formed out of large unincorporated areas, Rancho Cordova began as a hodgepodge of different developed and undeveloped areas. There are areas of older strip development along Folsom Boulevard in the northern part of the city and affluent suburbs connected by light-rail. Rancho Cordova also has large amounts of undeveloped land in the southern part of the city, primarily owned by a major defense contractor, which had large operations in the area.

The new city adopted its General Plan in 2006 that laid out a clear “smart growth” vision for the future. However, implementing that plan has proven to be a challenge. Although Rancho Cordova inherited the Sacramento County zoning code, the code in question is not as relevant in this city as it might be elsewhere because Rancho, like many other cities, has focused its efforts on “Specific Plans” – a planning document for a specific geographical area, allowed under California law, that includes not only policies for that area but also codes. In essence, Specific Plans permit the creation of a separate code for each part of town.

State Of Smart Growth Implementation

Smart growth in Rancho Cordova is primarily driven by the local government. The business community has some interest but is not deeply committed to the idea. There are regional nonprofits, such as the Environmental Coalition of Sacramento (ECOS), dedicated to smart growth principles but they have been focused on infill development in Sacramento and West



Sacramento, not more suburban locations such as Rancho Cordova. Recently, the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) has been promoting and implementing its regional “Blueprint” vision – a smart-growth vision for the future – and this provides some impetus to pursue projects that will gain regional attention.

Most of the local Rancho Cordova landowners and developers do not have experience in smart growth development but knowledge and experience of mixed-use and transit-oriented development projects is increasing rapidly in metropolitan Sacramento. In the past few years, many outstanding infill projects have been constructed in downtown and midtown Sacramento and in West Sacramento. These projects have proven that there is a market for such development in the metropolitan area and that the region does have a group of developers interested in pursuing such development.

Despite growing popularity throughout the city, smart growth knowledge and expertise has not, generally speaking, reached the more suburban portions of metropolitan Sacramento, even in areas where the light-rail line has been constructed. This is partly due to perceived market conditions, especially along Folsom Boulevard. Local planners and developers point out that, given land and construction costs in metropolitan Sacramento, the market price for new townhomes or condominiums near light-rail stations would probably be higher than the current market price of nearby single-family homes built in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Meanwhile, the relatively small group of infill developers continues to see significant opportunity in closer-in areas to the west.

Furthermore, developers often resist even small steps toward smart growth “on the ground.” In one instance the city staff to asked the City Council to require the developer of a shopping center to help facilitate the construction of an overpass across an extremely busy arterial. The idea was to connect adjacent shopping centers on the second level. The city was not asking the developers to pay for the overpass but rather merely to make the right-of-way available. This request led to considerable resistance on the part of the developers.

In 2006, SGLI selected Rancho Cordova for implementation assistance in two ways. First, Rancho would be one of the first communities to “self-test” SGLI’s policy and code audit tools. Second, SGLI would conduct a “strategic assessment” in Rancho Cordova.

SGLI’s Technical Assistance team found that getting smart growth “on the ground” by creating catalytic projects and stirring up local interest around infill were the primary ways that Rancho Cordova could “raise the bar” on the quality of development. The team recommended that the city should consider how best to use smart growth ideas to position itself in the marketplace by leveraging smart growth as “product differentiation” from surrounding communities. Similarly, the Team recommended the formation of a smart growth alliance that includes citizens and business groups, as well as the city, to undertake smart growth efforts. The team also recommended that the city reach out to the region’s infill developers and encourage them to find development opportunities along Folsom Boulevard near the light-rail stations.



By forging relationships with institutional employers in Sacramento, the city may also discover opportunities to partner on smart growth projects. Sacramento State University, UC Davis Medical Center, Sutter Hospital, and Sacramento County, whose employees have considerable housing needs, pose the greatest opportunity to pursue mutually beneficial smart growth projects in the city. Together, the partnerships and educational efforts could be leveraged to create catalytic projects along Folsom Boulevard and hold Rio del Oro Town Center to tighter design standards, creating a successful model of a suburban smart growth project at a light rail station within the city.

Lessons Learned

In-house audits are cautious audits

Self-administered assessments are likely to be valuable and knowledgeable but self-administrators are not always as bold as outside evaluators; they tend by nature to be somewhat more cautious.

Even though the Specific Plans in Rancho Cordova are supposed to be hybrid policy/code documents, the city chose to apply only the code audit to the two Specific Plans. In each case, the Specific Plan makes a big jump from goals to the development standards, with only reference to the relevant policies in the General Plan.

Self-evaluators tend to easily gloss over the procedural issues and focus on the big-picture items when conducting self-audits. There is still great value in the participation of "outside eyes."

Don't be married to the plan (or policy or code)

In the case of Rancho Cordova, as elsewhere, it can be difficult for self-administrators to be totally objective about plans and codes that they themselves helped craft. But self-evaluations can give them an organized and objective and somewhat "safe" way to articulate weaknesses they already know and see. From the city's own audit of the Specific Plans, it became evident to both the Team and the city that though the Plans call for high quality suburban development patterns, the standards contained in the Plans may not result in a more vibrant urban form.

Tighter standards on neighborhood and street design, solid guidelines for mixed-use districts and specific provisions and incentives for transit-oriented development were missing from the plans. This observation may have been evident to city staff, but was more easily articulated with the help and structure of the self-audit.



Strategic assessments can be awkward for local staff and politicians

Following the self-audit process, the city worked with the SGLI team on an iterative process to develop and use the Strategy Builder tool. But it can be very difficult for staff people to use the Strategy Builder both publicly and effectively. The assessment includes, essentially, a series of political questions which can be very touchy for staff members to answer, at least on paper. But its effectiveness depends on how defensive the staff is going to be about the current situation.

The SGLI team presupposes that the communities are receptive to change. It became evident from working with Rancho Cordova that a strategic assessment, written on paper, might better be prepared by either outside evaluators or advocacy groups.

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Smart Growth Code and Zoning Audit
Smart Growth Strategy Builder*

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About the Case Studies

Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.

The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with its implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.

Visit www.sgli.org for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.

Visit www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.

