

Where to go for 'smart growth' advice

A new alliance has hopes of influencing developers on better land usage

NATALIE KOSTELNI
 STAFF WRITER

A new group spawned by the Philadelphia Chapter of the Urban Land Institute is set to give stamps of approval to construction projects that follow so-called "smart growth" principles.

The Delaware Valley Smart Growth Alliance which has been two years in the making, hopes to influence projects from their inception as well as encourage municipalities to recognize and adopt smart growth land-use policies.

It's the area's first tri-state consortium, covering parts of Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, dedicated to promoting smart growth. It is comprised of more than 100 stakeholders in the real estate industry, including developers, government entities, nonprofit agencies and other land-use advocates.

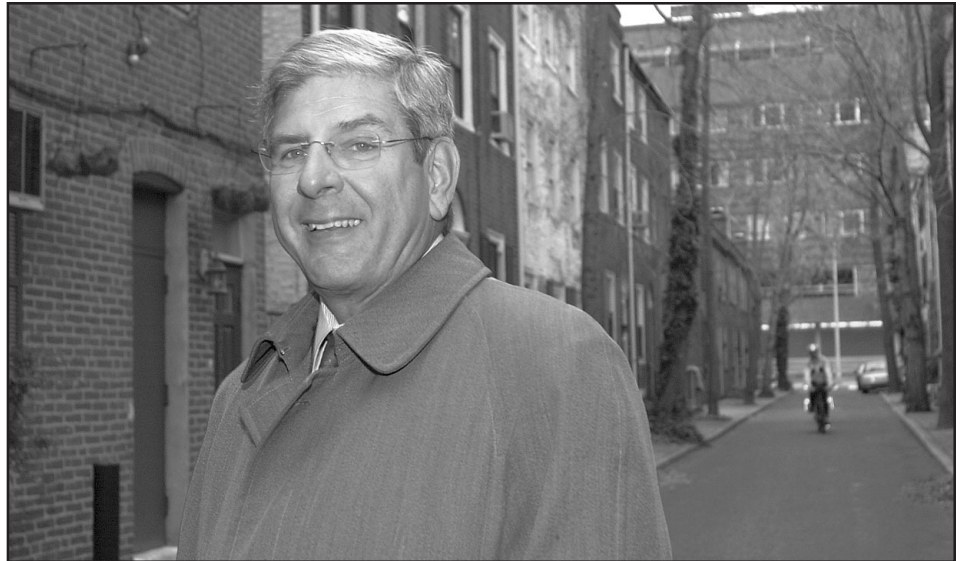
While a priority, the alliance wants to go beyond creating an awareness of smart growth, which is defined as anti-sprawl development that is environmentally, fiscally and economically sound that incorporates land-use planning as well mixed-use development. It wants to take an active role in shaping developers' projects to meet smart growth criteria before their plans reach the local approval process. It also encourages municipalities to have their own set of such policies.

"We're not crusaders here," said Marc D. Brookman, a real estate lawyer at Duane Morris, who helped form the group and is its president. "It's an effort to help local government and developers. You need to have the willingness to do something different and put a greater value on the quality of design than the way we're used to doing things."

The group has devised a set of smart growth standards for developers to follow when designing a project. On a quarterly basis, for a \$500 fee, an independent panel of land-use experts from the alliance will review plans that developers have submitted to determine if the project meets smart growth criteria.

The panel's stamp of approval means a project meets smart growth standards. The developer can then take that certification to local municipal or county planners when seeking zoning or other approvals.

If the project doesn't meet the smart growth standards, the developer can re-submit its revised project for another review. Developers also can't



BOB FLEISCHHAUER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Group head Marc D. Brookman seeks an emphasis on the quality of design.

SMART GROWTH

AT A minimum, a project must comply with the following criteria to be considered as meeting smart growth standards:

LOCATION — A project must be in an area designated or appropriate for growth or revitalization, such as infill sites or existing residential or commercial districts.

DENSITY, DESIGN and DIVERSITY — A project must support a mix of uses, walkability and use of public transit; it should be designed to fit into an existing community fabric.

TRANSPORTATION — The use of single-occupancy vehicle trips should be minimized, while pedestrian, bicycle and public transit access maximized.

ENVIRONMENT — The environment should be protected and damage to open space, water, air and the ecosystem mitigated.

COMMUNITY ASSETS and PARTICIPATION — A project should generate benefits for the surrounding area and community. These may include adding affordable housing, historic preservation, access to parks or open space and the adaptive reuse of old buildings.

Source: Delaware Valley Smart Growth Alliance

influence the outcome of the panel's review. A project either meets the criteria or it doesn't.

"It's not a political organization and it doesn't politicize land use," said Ken Balin, president and chief executive of real estate investment firm AMC

Delancey and vice chairman of the local chapter of Urban Land. "It's also not to stop development but to do it properly. It's a vehicle to identify and recognize developments that are being done in as sensitive a way as they can. There is a right way of doing things and a wrong way of doing things, and in today's world, [smart growth] is the only way to do things."

One hurdle the alliance faces since it's new is to gain credibility among developers and municipalities. Balin is hopeful that over time, municipalities will recognize and rely upon the alliance's stamp of approval, and even encourage developers to seek it out.

Another goal is to get municipalities to start thinking in terms of smart growth.

"When you present these ideas to local governments, they become very nervous because it's change. It's fear of the unknown," Brookman said. "Our hope and goal through education is to alleviate the fears that come with these type of projects, to encourage local governments to think outside of the box."

Brookman recalled a developer who wanted to put in a dense, smart-growth designed project with lots of open space on a site that was zoned for houses and no open space. It took the developer five years to convince the township that a walkable community with open space, smaller lots and a community center would be better use of the land, he said.

nkostelni@bizjournals.com | 215-238-5139