

# Smart Growth Fuels Vibrant Urban Villages

By Brad Broberg





Inspired by a variety of forces—notably the dwindling supply of undeveloped land—successful Smart Growth undertakings continue to mount.

New projects are springing up from coast to coast as government, developers, and consumers are finding that Smart Growth is more than a buzzword. In the right time, place, and form, it can be the most effective and marketable approach to development.

REALTORS® in Pasadena, California, and Arlington County, Virginia have found this to be especially true. Fueled by strong support from local government, development in those two communities reflects numerous Smart Growth principles. And buyers are eating it up.

"There's a tremendous market for it," said Dominic DeFazio, a REALTOR® with Coldwell Banker in Pasadena.

REALTOR® Tom Meyer, president of Condo 1 Inc. in Arlington, said, "There's been a little overbuilding with apartments in the last couple of years, but the condo market is extremely hot. In 15 years here, I've never seen it this crazy."

As attractive places to live within large metropolitan areas, Pasadena and Arlington shared pressure to grow. Yet as established communities, any vacant land had long since disappeared. The answer was redevelopment using Smart Growth principles as the building blocks.

Arlington, one of the first communities to embrace Smart Growth, and Pasadena, one of the latest, both adopted infill strategies that increased density at key locations, encouraged a mixture of uses and, most importantly, took advantage of the arrival of rail lines. The result? A series of vibrant urban villages where people can live, work, and play—all without having to battle growing congestion in their cars.

"There is a nice mix of retail, offices, and multi-family residential at each Metro stop," said Meyer. "You can walk up out of a Metro station and find anything you want."

Metro is the transit network that serves the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Its extension of rail service west into Arlington County 25 years ago gave county planners the perfect tool to prepare for the growth they knew was coming.

"At a certain point, several decades ago, the people in power said, 'We know growth is coming to our area. We know we're going to get a Metro line here. How can we [plan] to make sure the county doesn't get all clogged up with cars,'" explained Meyer.

## Arlington is proof that you can have quality of life and growth if it's planned right.

A compact and highly urbanized county, Arlington had gotten a taste of what might be in store if it didn't act aggressively when Rosslyn, a gritty neighborhood just across the Potomac River from D.C., began to redevelop in the 1960s as an office center.

"It was occupied during the day and dead at night," said Tom Miller, planning commission coordinator for Arlington County. "There was very little housing and not much retail. People viewed Rosslyn as something they didn't want to see duplicated."

Thanks to farsighted planning, that style of development did not continue. As plans were made in the late 1960s and early 1970s to extend MetroRail into Arlington, the county fought to build the Orange Line underground along the aging Rosslyn-Ballston commercial corridor rather than along a new freeway. And instead of relegating transit stations to roles as glorified parking

lots, it targeted areas surrounding the stations for high-density, mixed-use growth with plenty of public amenities, offering incentives to entice developers to participate.

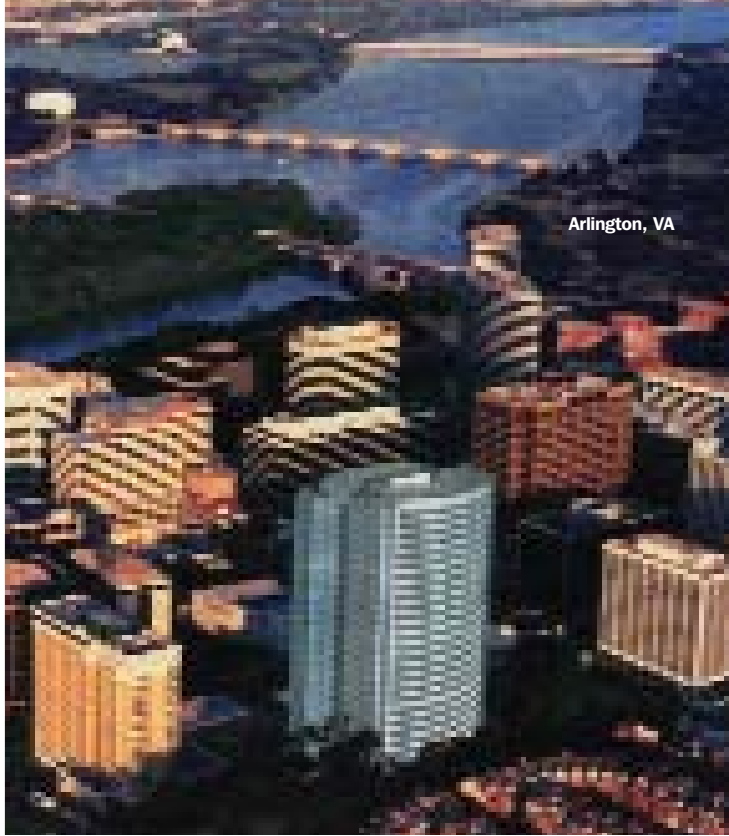
"A lot of thought went into where the rail stops went," said Meyer. "There's a small community around each stop. Arlington is very vibrant now. The night life is exciting in these places" (see photo at right).

By focusing growth within a quarter-mile radius of the transit stations, Arlington not only preserved the surrounding single-family neighborhoods, it enhanced their value.

"As you get a few blocks away from the Metro stop, you see density go down from high-rise to mid-rise to single-family homes, which are now extremely valuable because they're near the Metro line," said Meyer. "The prices have gone out of sight a few blocks from Metro stops."

Kristin and Wayne Westbrook, both profession-





Arlington, VA



als in their mid-50s, live in The Atrium, a 13-story condo in Rosslyn. "I like the energy of the neighborhood," said Kristin. Not only is their condo two blocks from a Metro rail station, but restaurants, shops, and theaters are all within walking distance.

"It's a wonderful way of getting the body moving," said Kristin. "When I relied more on a car, I walked a lot less. This is a healthy alternative."

Arlington is proof that "you can have quality of life and growth if it's planned right," said Miller. Arlington's success has not gone unnoticed. Miller said other communities are constantly asking the county how to make Smart Growth work for them.

"It doesn't happen overnight," said Miller. "It's difficult to create a strong sense of place and a place that people want to be. You can start on it and build the foundation ... but you can't make development go where it doesn't want to go."

In Pasadena, a community known for its graceful architecture, creating a sense of place was not a problem for the city as it wrestled with a need to accommodate growth. The problem was how to preserve the existing sense of place while opening the door to redevelopment.

Mission accomplished, said Hans Hagemayer, a REALTOR® with Team Provident Realty in Pasadena. "Pasadena has done a good job of seeing that these projects keep in character with the city," he said. "The new projects don't stand out because they look like they've always been there."

For many years, Pasadena was a sleepy city where change occurred slowly—if at all. "When I started, Pasadena was still 'The little old lady from ...'" said DeFazio, who has been selling real estate in that community since 1981.

By the 1990s, however, Southern California's growing population, squeezed by a chronic housing shortage, caught on to the charm of Pasadena's leafy neighborhoods and elegant architecture—especially after the heart of the city, Old Pasadena, was revitalized and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority announced plans to build a new rail line linking Pasadena to Los Angeles. The little old lady has been kicking up her heels ever since.

"We had almost zero development for so many years and now there's a development on every corner," said Maggie Navarro, a REALTOR® with Coldwell Banker in Pasadena.

Well, maybe not every corner. Following Arlington's example, Pasadena chose to channel growth, which had been leaking into single-family neighborhoods in the form of small apartment complexes, to the areas surrounding the rail



within walking distance of Mission Meridian."

Sean's mother, Janine, thinks the family is making a wise investment. "People in California are getting tired of [driving]," she said. "I think this type of development will be the rule for the next 10 years at least."

Given the community's deep desire to preserve its heritage, some Pasadena residents now wonder whether the city's Smart Growth approach is working too well. "It's raising people's eyebrows," said League. "They're asking when is enough enough."

Developments in Arlington and Pasadena are vivid examples of the market's appetite for Smart Growth, but they are not the only

**"We had almost zero development for so many years and now there's a development on every corner." *Maggie Navarro, REALTOR® with Coldwell Banker, in Pasadena***

stations for the Gold Line, which opened last year.

The city created incentives to attract high-density, mixed-use developments to transit station sites that add urban spice to Pasadena's predominantly suburban flavor. "They're creating transit villages ... where people can live, work, and go to a cool restaurant without leaving their neighborhood," said Navarro.

The strategy has been wildly successful. "Every developer in Southern California is trying to build here," said Brian League, senior project manager with the city of Pasadena.

Pasadena developers find their projects in high demand. "People want to be able to live close to shopping, close to theaters, and keep their cars at home," said DeFazio. "People are flocking here."

With help from his parents, recent college graduate Sean Saraf is buying a unit in Mission Meridian Village, a mixed-use development near a rail station in the adjacent city of South Pasadena. "I'm looking forward to being able to walk out of my loft and take the train to Los Angeles ... without having to get in my car," said the 23-year-old. "Plus there are a lot of things to do

ones. Post Properties can point to several Smart Growth apartment communities it has built around the country—including Pasadena and Arlington but also Denver, Dallas, and Atlanta—that have received similar responses.

"Without question, the reception has been very positive," said John Mears, executive vice president of the Atlanta-based development company. "People want to be closer to where they're working and closer to the cultural amenities of the metropolitan area and not spend inordinate time in their vehicles," said Mears.

Post Properties had specialized in building garden-style apartment homes outside the urban core. "They were gated communities, strictly residential," he said.

That changed about six years ago. "It was a financial strategy as opposed to something that had a greater social conscience," said Mears. "We thought if we could find well-located properties within the city, it would be hard for our competition to find properties that would provide immediate competition to what we were building."

The role and scale of retail in Post Property

developments varies from location to location. In some, it is ancillary to the residential component. In others, it is an attraction in its own right.

"The destination retail, as an amenity, has been tremendous," said Mears. "Where we have done that, the retail is in fact a huge selling point and clearly distinguishes us from our competitors and enables us to achieve premium [rents] for that convenience."

While Smart Growth advocates have plenty to cheer about, Smart Growth remains a "woefully small" percentage of overall development, said Todd Zimmerman, co-managing director of Zimmerman/Volk Associates, a development analysis firm specializing in New Urbanism. "It's growing by leaps and bounds, but it's growing off such a small base," he said.

Despite its many advantages, New Urbanism, one element of Smart Growth, comes with no guarantee of success, said Zimmerman. "Like any other real estate development, it depends on how well it's executed and positioned," he said. "There are several failures out there, but they're not fail-

ures because there's a lack of a market. They're failures because they were very poorly executed."

Perhaps the biggest mistake is trying to duplicate a successful development at a different location without taking into account the unique needs of that location. "The principles of New Urbanism apply everywhere, but it takes its physical form from the characteristics of the location," said Zimmerman. "It's not a style. It's a complete system."

Looking ahead, Zimmerman says the New Urbanism expression of Smart Growth is the perfect response to a looming "demographic imperative" in which both aging Baby Boomers and Millennials—the generation that is currently between the ages of 7 and 27—simultaneously seek alternatives to traditional suburban living.

"It is clearly the future," said Zimmerman.

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**T**he combination of New Urbanism and mass transit is a match made in Smart Growth heaven and the knot is being tied more and more often, said Andy Kunz.

"Transit-oriented development (TOD) is happening in a lot of places to varying degrees," said Kunz, director of NewUrbanism.org, a nonprofit organization that promotes urban living and mass transit—twin hallmarks of Smart Growth.

TOD uses rail and bus stations as magnets to attract high-density, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development, which in turn stimulates mass-transit ridership. Atlanta, Portland, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. are among the metropolitan areas experiencing significant transit-oriented development, said Kunz.

"It's just about exploding around D.C.," said Kunz. "New housing in D.C. is selling faster than they can build it and most of it is within walking distance of rail stations."

What's exciting to see, said Kunz, is that transit agencies are taking the lead in soliciting TOD proposals from developers—not just for new stations but for existing ones as well. "They are looking at their parking lots and seeing potential [commercial] gold mines as well as a way to increase ridership," he said.

In the Los Angeles area, TOD is underway up and down the rail lines of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. In South Pasadena, Creative Housing Associates (CHA) is putting the finishing touches on a showcase example.

Mission Meridian Village features 53 courtyard condominiums and 14 lofts combined with 4,000-square feet of neighborhood retail and a 324-stall parking garage—all within a short stroll of the South Pasadena Gold Line Station.

Developer Michael Dieden founded CHA in 1997 with the express purpose of pursuing TOD. "Our mission is to build places where people can live near transit and use transit and leave their cars in the garage," said Dieden, who began planning Mission Meridian Village before it was even certain the Gold Line was coming.

Dieден's faith did not go unrewarded. "Every unit has been pre-sold," he said. "It just shows how much of a demand there is for this type of living."

The key to successful TOD, said Dieden, is cooperation between cities, transit agencies, and developers. That's what happened with Mission Meridian Village. "South Pasadena is very progressive in terms of transit-oriented development," he said. On the other hand, Dieden backed away from two potential TOD projects in the Bay Area after he and the cities failed to agree on development strategies.

"Transit development is difficult because you're dealing with multiple public agencies, and they often have different objectives that can conflict with the objectives a private developer is going to have," said Dieden. "It's not foolproof, as I have learned the hard way."