

BING & DECIDE.  
 bing FIND FLIGHT DEALS



Not Logged In [Login](#) / [Sign-up](#)

**chron** | Viewpoints, Outlook

NOW **64°**

NEWS SPORTS BUSINESS ENTERTAINMENT LIFE TRAVEL BLOGS JOBS HOMES CARS CLASSIFIEDS

Mobile | SMS

11 Comments 0 Recommend

Search [advanced search](#) | [archives](#)

Chron.com  Web Search by **YAHOO!**

## Smart-growth plans are a failure in Portland

Leader in promoting inner-city density suffering from congestion, high costs

By RANDAL O'TOOLE  
 HOUSTON CHRONICLE  
 Nov. 14, 2009, 7:15PM

Share

- Print
- Share
- Del.icio.us
- Digg
- Twitter
- Yahoo! Buzz
- Facebook
- StumbleUpon

Some people have suggested that Houston could have avoided the Ashby high-rise controversy if it had more planning and smart growth. In fact, the opposite is true: Smart-growth planning makes land-use debates even more contentious.

Smart-growth planners believe that Americans live the wrong way, and they use land-use regulation to impose on others what they believe is the right way to live. Surveys consistently show that all but 15 percent to 25 percent of Americans want to live in single-family homes with a yard, but planners think we would be better off if a much higher percentage lived in high-density apartments or condos.

Consider my former hometown of Portland, Ore., which many consider the nation's leader in smart-growth planning. To increase urban densities, planners are turning dozens of neighborhoods of single-family homes into apartments and condos. While past land-use rules set maximum densities, Portland's rules set minimum densities.

This means if your neighbors own a vacant lot, they cannot build a single-family house on it; they must build a rowhouse or apartment. In some cases, regulation is so strict that, if your house burns down, you cannot rebuild it; you must replace it with an apartment.

Portland planners soon decided that rowhouses and low-rise apartments were not dense enough, so they increased height limits to 50 feet or 60 feet to allow four- and five-story mid-rise apartments. Even that isn't dense enough, so now they are beginning to encourage high-rises.

After the first high-density developments saturated the demand, planners supplemented land-use mandates with tax breaks, below-market land sales and other subsidies to developers who built high-density housing. This means Portland neighborhoods continue to be invaded by mid-rise and high-rise developments, even though there is no more demand for dense housing.

Many of these developments are in transit corridors. Yet independent studies reveal that the people living in them don't ride transit significantly more than residents of single-family neighborhoods.

Portlanders did not welcome densification. Almost all of the targeted neighborhoods fought it; almost all of them lost. Planners followed a divide-and-conquer strategy, taking one neighborhood at a time so opponents could not build up enough momentum to stop the process.

Increased densities destroyed the small-town atmosphere that once made Portland attractive. Congestion is worse, housing and consumer costs are high, and urban services such as fire, police and schools have declined as the city took money from these programs to subsidize high-density developers.

Despite these problems, scores of cities from Missoula, Mont., to San Diego, Calif., have passed similar smart-growth regulations. Planners want to use smart growth everywhere they can, including Houston.

To get out of Portland, I moved to an exurban neighborhood 150 miles away. Like many Houston neighborhoods, we have a homeowners association and deed restrictions, so we will never have to worry about outside planners imposing some unwanted development on us.

Unlike most other cities, Houston makes it easy to create homeowners associations in neighborhoods that do not have them. Houston's system of deed restrictions puts you and your neighbors in charge of your neighborhood's future.

By contrast, smart-growth planning puts your neighborhood's future in the hands of people who may know little about you or your neighbors and whose ideas about how you should live may be very different from yours. If you want to protect your neighborhood from high-rises and other unwanted developments, then smart-growth planning is the last thing you need.

*O'Toole is senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of "The Best-Laid Plans: How Government Planning Harms Your Quality of Life, Your Pocketbook and Your Future."*

## Comments

Readers are solely responsible for the content of the comments they post here. Comments are subject to the site's [terms and conditions](#) of use and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or approval of the Houston Chronicle. Readers whose comments violate the terms of use may have their comments removed or all of their content

advertise here

**THE ALL-NEW 2010 SRX CROSSOVER**  
 LOW MILEAGE LEASE FOR WELL QUALIFIED LESSEES

**\$479** PER MONTH\* **39** MONTHS **\$3,954** DUE AT LEASE SIGNING AFTER ALLOWANCE

NO SECURITY DEPOSIT REQUIRED. \$395 DUE AT LEASE TERMINATION. TAX, TITLE, LICENSE, DEALER FEES EXTRA. MILEAGE CHARGE OF \$.18 PER MILE OVER 39,000 MILES. AT PARTICIPATING DEALERS ONLY. RESIDENCY RESTRICTIONS APPLY.

LOCATE A DEALER VIEW ALL OFFERS EXPLORE THE SRX

ROLLOVER FOR IMPORTANT DETAILS

- [Fort Hood deaths bring new scrutiny to Army](#)
- [Skateboarder falls to his death from SW Freeway bridge](#)
- [Officer kills armed man after short chase in SW Houston](#)
- [Mother feared for her life before she and child were killed](#)
- [Police looking for driver in fatal Meyerland hit-and-run](#)

- [Anti-gay effort opposing Parker motivates ministers, conservatives\(320\)](#)
- [Obama urges Congress to put off Fort Hood probe\(297\)](#)
- [10 years after Bonfire collapse, Aggies still torn over tradition\(40\)](#)
- [Officer kills armed man after short chase in SW Houston\(38\)](#)
- [Soccer stadium could play role in mayor's race\(35\)](#)

- [Recovery won't mean new jobs soon](#)
- [Thomas Friedman: Time for China to do the right thing](#)
- [Letters to the editor](#)

- [Developers preparing for post-Mayor White era](#)
- [Hopefuls offer no big changes for developing unzoned Houston](#)
- [Guiding growth will be key in '09 city election](#)
- [Would more housing rules raise Houston costs?](#)
- [Is high-density ordinance worth fighting for?](#)
- [Ashby high-rise would fail new Houston standards](#)
- [Homebuyers' return to city center brings big changes](#)
- [Some wary of Heights high-rise proposal](#)
- [Sarnoff: Decorative Center offices draw the less traditional](#)
- [Plan to overhaul low-income housing alarms some](#)