

# Smart Growth and The Rural Context

*Rocky Mountain Land Use Institute*

Kevin Nelson, AICP

Smart Growth Program

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Washington, DC



When you've seen one rural community...

You've seen one rural community.

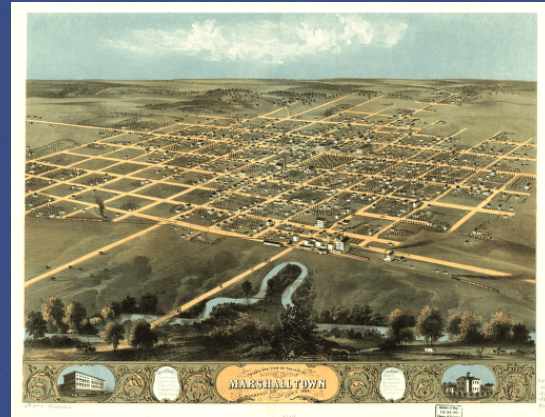






# Historic rural form: determined by economic necessity and transportation technology

- Small towns in rural areas served the agriculture economy
- Were mixed use, compact, walkable **and** many had regional transportation (RR or river transport)
- Form varied by region



Marshall Town, IA



Kingman, KS



# Changing rural America

- Economy, culture, transportation has changed
- If historical rural had some homogeneity, that's clearly changed;
- Proximity to metro areas defines what's going on in rural America as much as anything today...
- 1/3 of rural counties are declining; 2/3 are growing
- ... And what else?
  - The need for economic diversity
  - The need for expanded choices in where to live, how to get around, where to work



Old rural economy?

Images: US EPA



Part of the new rural economy?

Environmental Protection Agency



# What are some of the issues and challenges small towns and rural communities?

- How to grow AND maintain small town/rural character?
- Is there capacity – people and funding – to get the policies right?
- Are new policies – the right policies – politically possible? Do leaders want to lead?
- What's the local economy like? It's certainly not what it was when the small town or city was founded.
- Land and Place: How can the people who want to stay on their land do so?
- What are the transportation policies and investments that will allow for growth and the maintenance of the small town/rural character?



# Strategies for better growth in small towns and rural areas:

1. **Support the rural landscape:** Create an economic climate that enhances the viability of working lands and conserves natural lands.
2. **Help existing places to thrive:** Take care of assets and investments such as downtowns, infrastructure, and places that the community values.
3. **Create great new places:** Build vibrant, enduring neighborhoods and communities that people, especially young people, don't want to leave.







# To support the rural landscape, communities have:

- Supported the resource economy in the region: promoting CSA and farmers markets; local products, and direct sales.
- Cultivated economic development strategies supportive of the traditional rural landscape; used conservation easements, purchase of development rights, transfer of development rights, and tax policy to protect the land.
- Strategically purchase threatened and endangered properties and/or development rights.



Images: USDA







# To help existing towns thrive, communities have:



- Reduced barriers to infill and brownfield redevelopment.
- Updated zoning ordinances and development codes to support traditional mixed use development.
- Adopted “fix-it-first” policies, such as rehabilitating existing schools and the Main Street Approach™

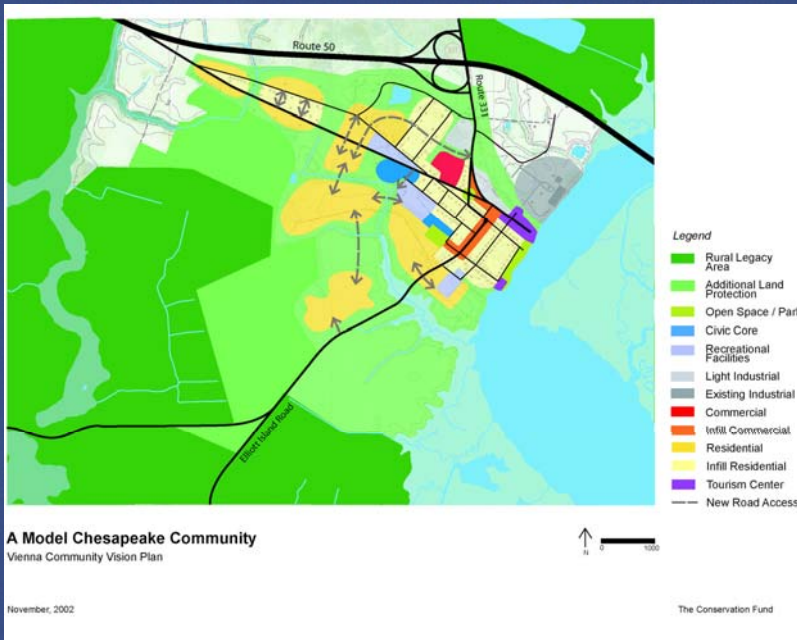
Image Source: US EPA





# To promote the development of great new places, communities have:

- Created comprehensive plans that call for the development of traditional villages and hamlets in appropriate places *and* aligned the underlying zoning with these plans.
- Recognized developers that build great places.
- Where possible, accommodated growth through the expansion of the historic grid so new neighborhoods are integrated into the existing town.



## Vienna, MD: Model Chesapeake Community



Image Source: Vienna, MD







Photo courtesy of Jeff Speck, NEA

Smart growth in a rural community: How could it work in the landscape?





# The game has evolved in 2009: Partnership for Sustainable Communities

Mission: To meet the President's challenge for our agencies to work together to encourage and fully assist rural, suburban, and urban areas to build sustainable communities, and to make sustainable communities the leading style of development in the United States.

*The Partnership is focused on ensuring that federal investments, policies, and actions do not subsidize sprawl and, instead, support development in more efficient and sustainable locations.*



**Partnership for Sustainable Communities**





# SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES PARTNERSHIP

## What we want to do:

## Increase All Community Benefits

- Reduce household transportation costs.
- Attract private investment.
- Avoid infrastructure costs.
- Strengthen neighborhood property values.
- Protect farmland and open space.
- Deliver equitable investments.
- Improve public health and mobility for all ages.







# SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES PARTNERSHIP

## What we want to do:

# Strengthen Our Rural Communities

- Jobs and affordable homes are often far apart, especially in resort towns
- Best farm land and treasured open space under pressure from development
- Strong rural towns protect our landscapes, heritage, and the rural way of life
- Nearly 50% of EPA brownfield grants each year go to rural communities.



Partnership work affords a broader conversation on smart growth in rural America

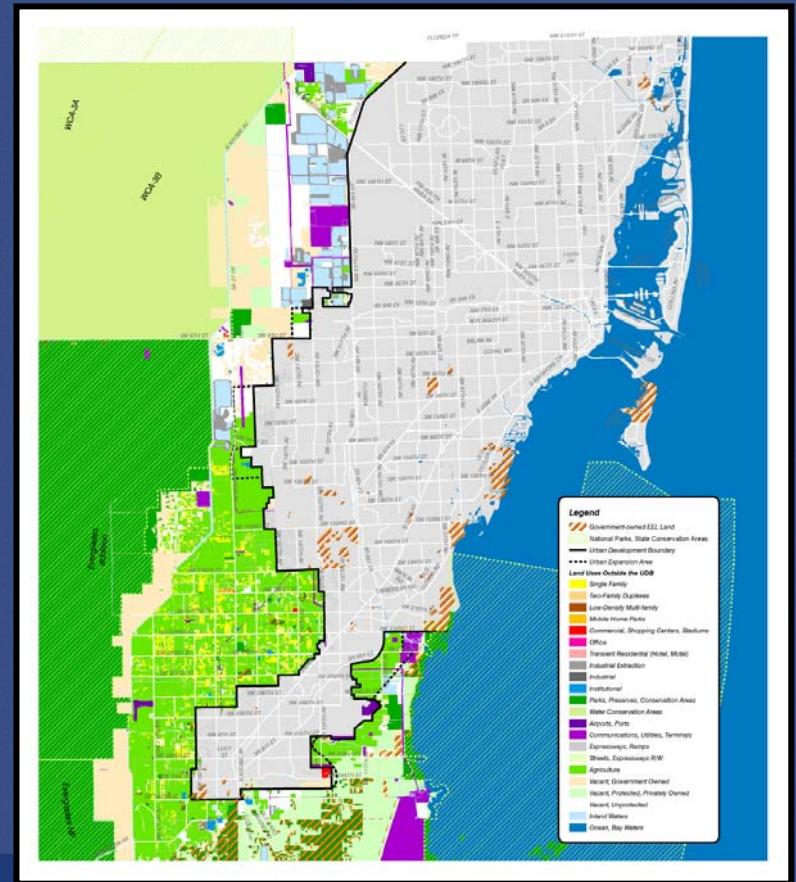




# Policy/Technical Consequence: Miami-Dade County

Where the line is and whatever the process is, there must be:

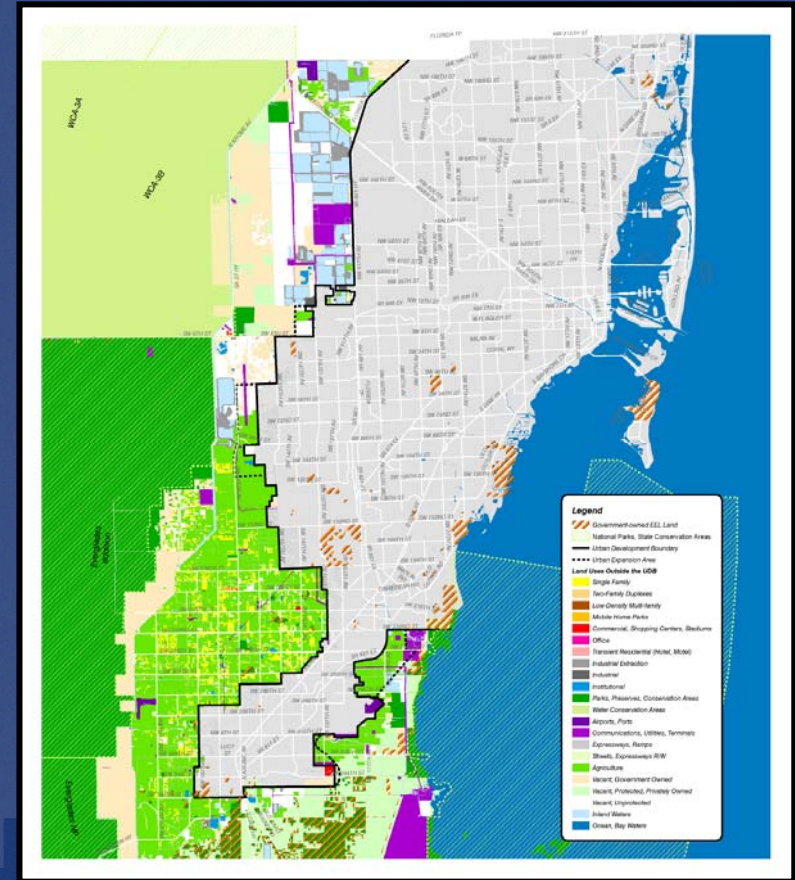
- Need for more bulletproof capacity methodology
- Need for more aggressive and/or highly tailored policies both inside and outside the line.
- Political will to commit to the UDB as a central growth management policy





# Outside-the-Line Policy: Miami-Dade County

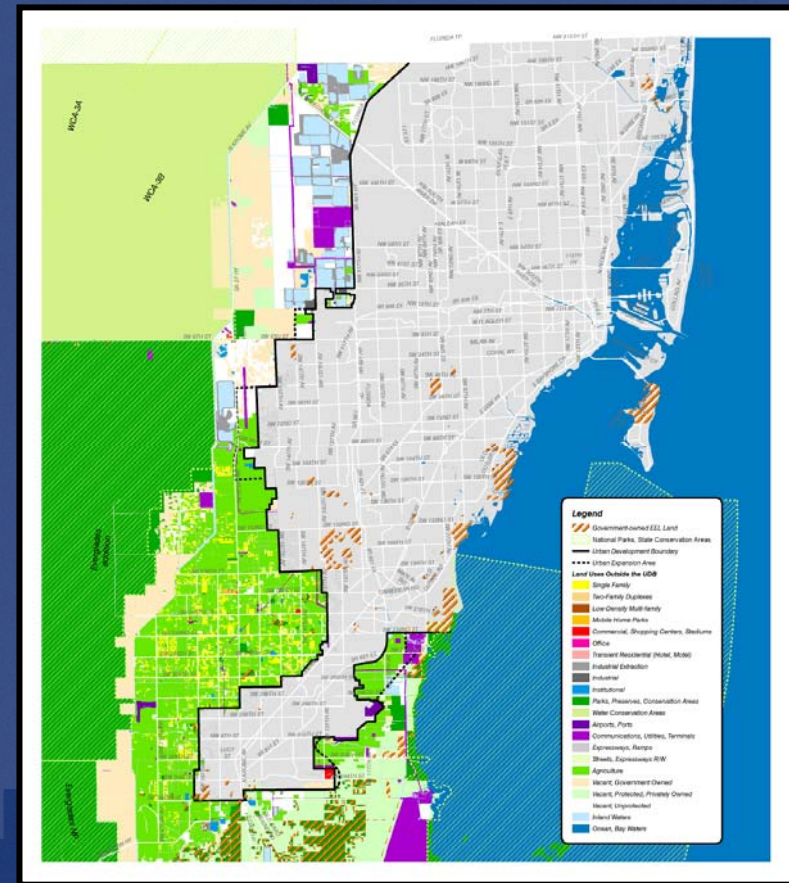
- Master plan for conservation and development?
  - Phasing
- More coordinated acquisition policy to protect land (EEL, water district, etc.)
- Larger and more aggressive compensation programs (TDR, PDR)
- Better targeted agricultural policies (5-acre lots for agriculture only; work with farmers on new markets)





# Inside-the-Line Policy: Miami-Dade County

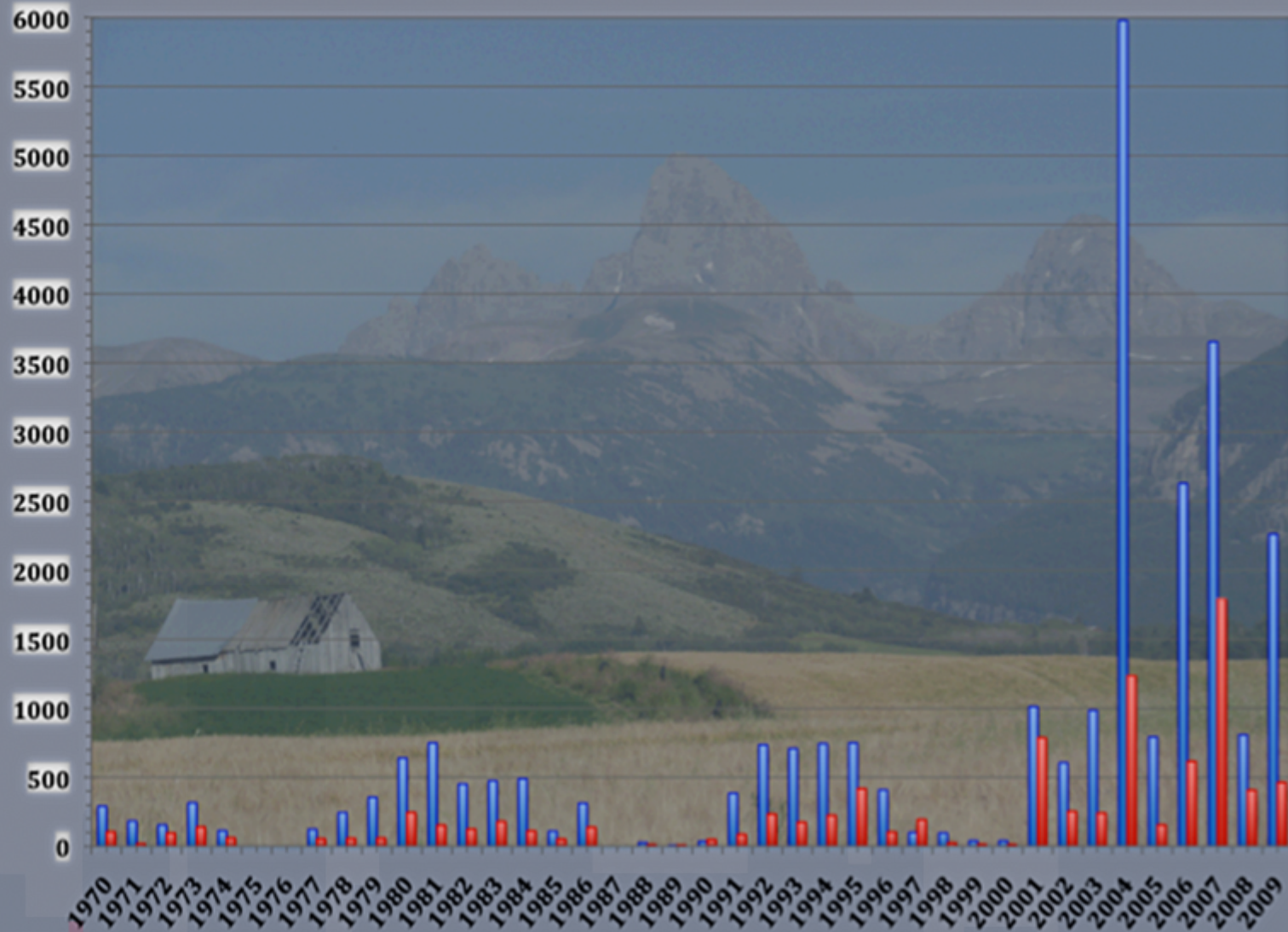
- More coordination with cities and/or greater assertion of county power.
- Infill policies that reflect redevelopment goals and market realities
  - Infrastructure investments targeted to infill areas
  - Reasonable parking requirements, pooled parking
  - Multiple-use districts, not necessarily mixed-use projects







# TETON COUNTY SUBDIVISION TRENDS - 40 YEARS OF BOOM BUST







# Change came quickly to Teton Valley...

- the sleepy agricultural community turned to real estate and recreation
- A town of old pick ups and a black dogs switched to fancy SUVs and designer dogs
- Millions of dollars in development, construction and real estate started to flow
- Growth was palatable
- The winds of more change were in the air



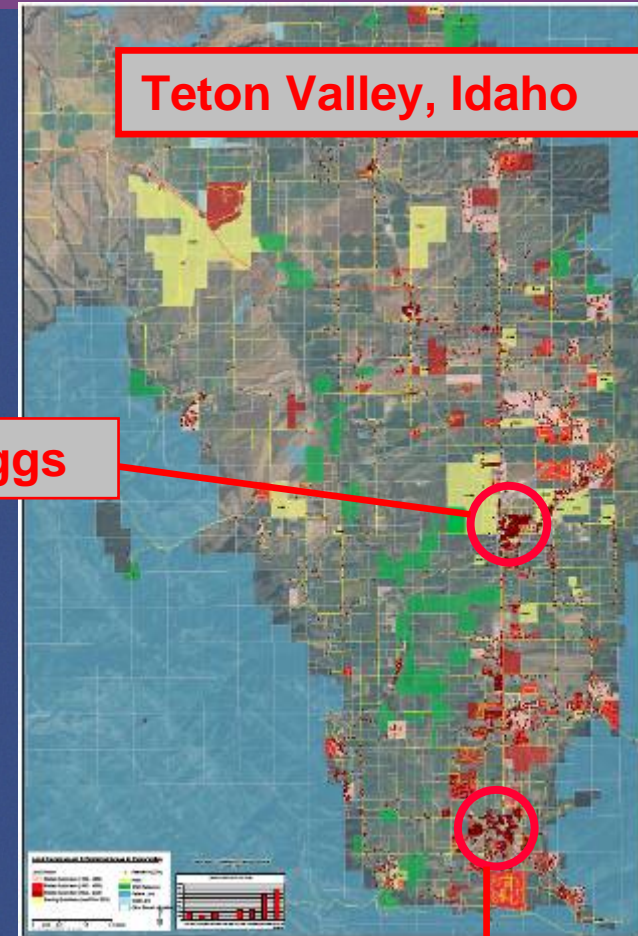
# Impacts to Teton County Budget

- End of first quarter of 2009 cut nearly \$1 million from budget. 2010 budget reflects cuts.
- Property tax collection at 82%, down from 97%.
- 3% cap + low mill levy = increased taxes
- Increased demand for services: hospital, roads and schools.
- Planning and Building department funding (fees and property taxes) dramatically down.



# Smart Growth assistance in Victor and Driggs, Idaho, 2006

- Rapidly growing cities in Teton Valley, Idaho (pop. ~1300 each)
- Accommodate growth in the cities:
  - Articulate the vision: community wants a thriving, revitalized downtown and development that respects the land
  - Revise policies and codes to allow for compact, mixed-use development
  - Strategic public investment









# Transportation challenges: Within a community

## Victor, Idaho

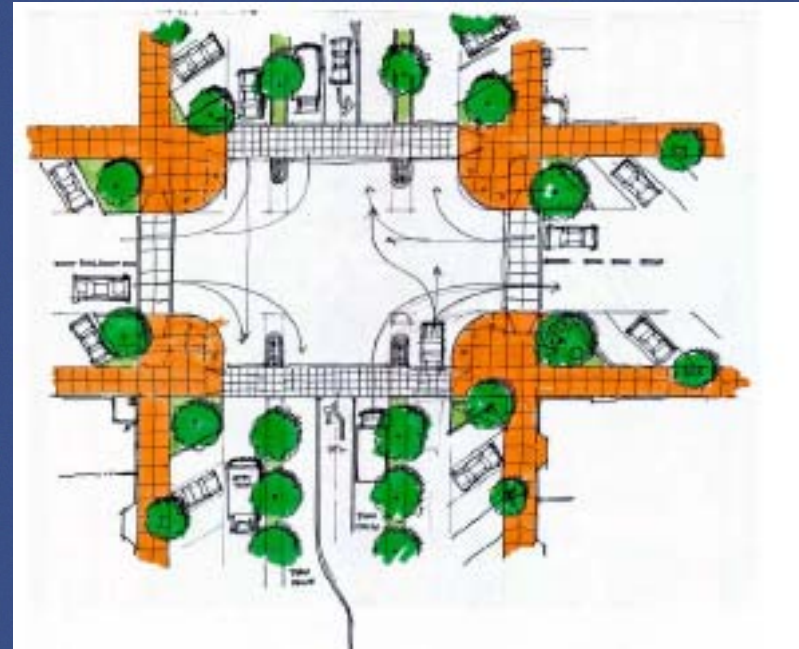
- State highways in downtowns create challenges:
  - Traffic
  - Noise
  - Pedestrian safety
  - Economic development





# One solution

- Public investments in road infrastructure can support community goals AND address challenges created by state highways in downtowns
- Boulevards can separate local and through traffic, provide pedestrian refuges, and help create attractive places for ground floor retail







ELEVATED IMAGE © 2009 HTPHOTOGRAPHICS.COM

VICTOR MAIN STREET AUGUST 2009



# Moving forward....

## the New Comprehensive Planning Process

- The political shift, combined with the economy and changing market trends will be the driver to implement smart growth.
- Define sustainability and make it the focus of the new plan
- Incorporate broad viewpoints, ditch the committee
- Work with the cities to conduct concurrent updates that reflect a seamless continuum of policy
- Vitality of the towns and the character of the county can only be achieved through smart growth.
- Implement our own Sustainable Code using form base/smart code



# Smart Growth Assistance: Examples

- EPA-FEMA collaboration in Iowa on long-term community recovery from June 2008 floods and tornadoes
  - Provided assistance in 5 communities during 2009
  - Partnership: EPA, FEMA, Rebuild Iowa Office, Iowa Dept. of Economic Development
- Ongoing discussions with Waverly, IA: collaboration w/ Iowa USDA RD, FEMA, EPA, RIO, IDED



# North Cedar Concepts

## The New North Cedar

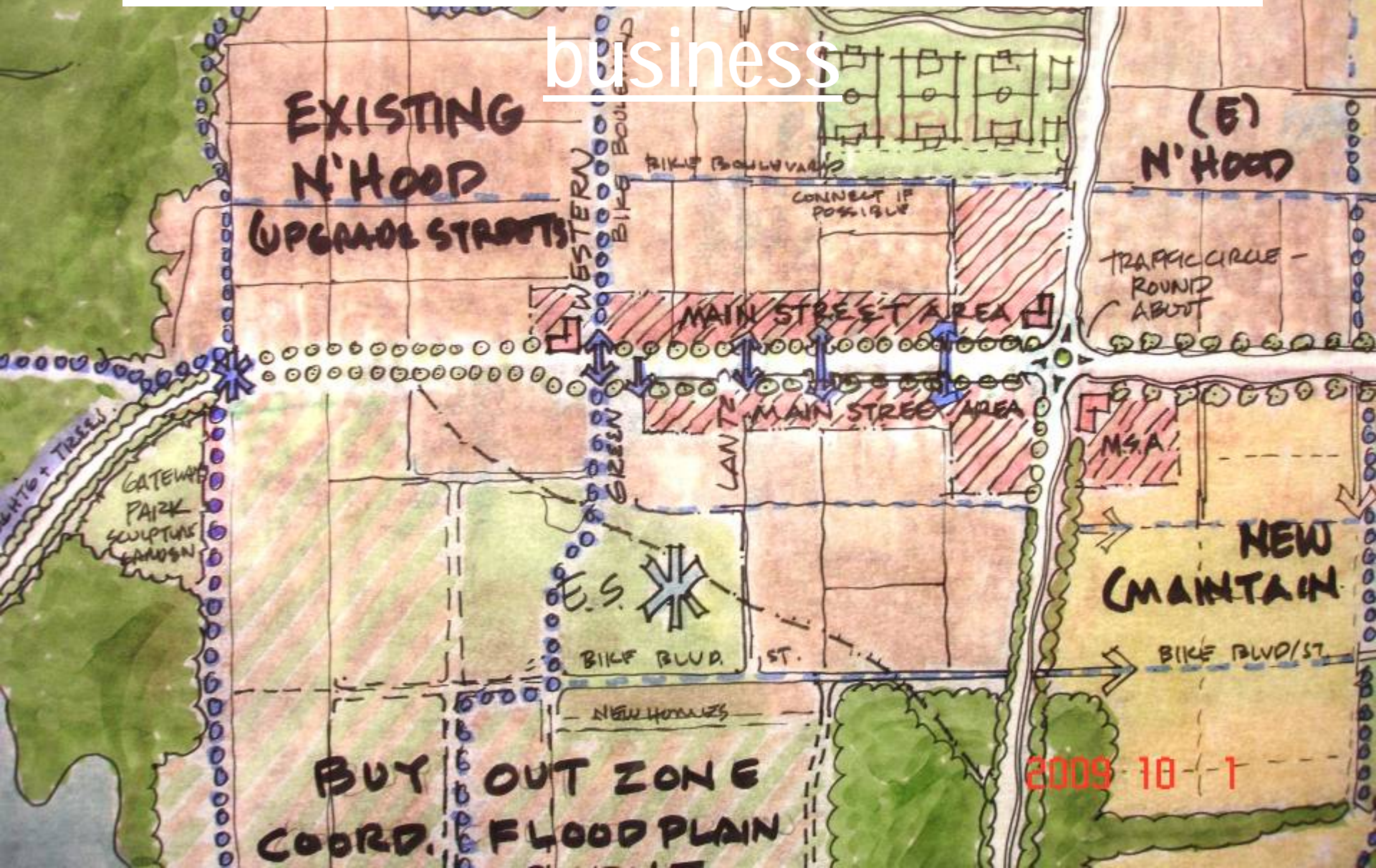


- New trail and street network connects to existing streets and trails
- Existing residential neighborhood expands
- New mixed-use “center” to “feel like” downtown Cedar Falls



# North Cedar 'main street' district

## Focal point for neighborhoods and business





# Can we work with USDA?

## Waverly, Iowa: Scoping Smart Growth Assistance

- Policy priorities we've heard from Waverly's leaders:
  - Establish green infrastructure strategies city-wide.
  - Conduct an audit of Waverly's development regulations to identify opportunities to integrate smart growth concepts.
  - Increase housing options and infill strategies in Waverly to accommodate the demand for housing as a result of the floods as well as new growth
- Pending upcoming discussions with Waverly, assistance work will occur this spring



FEMA



IOWA  
*life* | changing®





# Partnering with other agencies in rural America: USDA Rural Development

- Working with USDA Rural Development
    - Scoping technical assistance projects
    - Looking for places that Agency/Department goals overlap in support of SG/sustainable community outcomes
    - Transfer of knowledge and expertise between/among staff
  - What have we learned?
    - USDA has a big footprint in rural America (infrastructure and people resources)
    - Policies and spending criteria can work with or against SG/Sustainable outcomes.
- Challenges waiting to be met



# Thank You

Kevin Nelson, AICP

US EPA

202.566.2835

Nelson.kevin@epa.gov

[www.epa.gov/smartgrowth](http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth)

[www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org)