



TALKING IN PUBLIC ABOUT GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

This paper is for funders, citizens and organizations advocating better planning for the improvement of communities and regions. It contains communications guidelines, checklists and pointers which are based on nationwide focus group research, media analysis, consultation with philanthropic funders, and a series of regional meetings and follow-up work with advocates and policy makers¹. Key findings from the research include:

- Growth and development are understood in local and specific terms. Participants are eager to engage on these issues, but only in terms of the particularities of places they know.
- Issues about growth are understood best when a picture with details is presented. Leading with statements of principles is largely unsuccessful, because reactions vary according to each individual's needs, beliefs, and examples.
- There is a widely expressed desire for choices and options for how communities are designed and for how people live. Which consumer choices individuals make vary according to age, income, and preferences; but there is wide agreement that people should have choices.
- Voters blame local officials for problems that result from poor planning, and they don't think officials are being held accountable. Participants are not satisfied. They believe elected officials have their own agendas, set largely by developers, and that they discourage meaningful public participation. Local officials are not trusted to consider long-term consequences of their development decisions.
- Fairness to everyone in the community is a strong value. There is a strong consensus that everyone should be treated fairly, that everyone's needs should be met – including those who already live in a specific place (NIMBY). There is agreement that maintaining and restoring older and poorer neighborhoods is important for the common good.

¹ For more information about this research and the development of this material, go to the resource library at www.fundersnetwork.org and select Communications, then download *Communicating about Smart Growth August 2004*.

Communications frame for smart growth

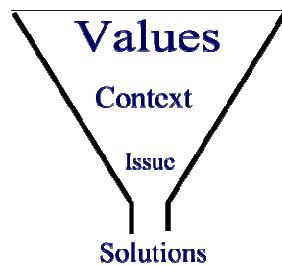
How advocates talk about the issues of change and growth can dramatically change the terms of debate and the criteria considered in development decisions. By using language and rhetoric based in how citizens think and understand these issues, leaders and advocates can gain support from broad constituencies for better planning, policy and decision-making.

Through careful attention to language and to the assumptions behind the language they use, advocates can tell their story in ways that make the listener is receptive to new information and ideas.

Framing is an intentional process. It is based in values – what people *already* know and understand, and how they organize their thinking. If we want someone we don't know to understand a problem, we don't launch right into our solution. We try to establish some comfort and common ground first -- values.

Basing all communications in values is how we get the widest audience to categorize and define the issue in ways that will lead them to the understanding we are trying to establish. The communications goal is to define the problem and possible solutions in ways that support efforts to change policy – setting the terms of debate.

Framing acts like a funnel -- moving people from broad values to narrow specifics. Frames are built and used in a hierarchy. A frame can be seen as an outline for structuring communications.



The frame for “smart growth” is really a frame about growth and development.

The Appeal to Values:

Fairness, big picture, community benefits, and democracy. *Also when considering specific developments or proposed developments:* choice, security, convenience, conservation, and community.

Defining the Context for the Values:

Local progress, growth and development

Understanding the Issue:

The issue is always what, where and how should we build next.

Promoting values- how to say it

1. This is about the future. The decisions we make are about what, where, and how to build next. We have to look at the big picture and think through the consequences of our decisions.
2. This is about improving our community. This is our home, every decision we make is an opportunity to make it even better.
3. Development must benefit the community as a whole, not just the developer or a few members of the community. Let's put all the options on the table, look at all the choices available.
4. Insist on being fair. We have to be fair to everyone – people already living here, and the people who will move here; the developers and the taxpayers; the people on this side of town and the people on that side of town. Explicitly state how and why a bad proposal is not fair, and how the change you want will be more fair.
5. Citizens want meaningful participation in decisions. They want early and complete information about the community's future and its options. No more back room deals. Everyone must have the opportunity to help make fair decisions that will benefit the whole community.

Pointers on Addressing the Opposition

The core of the opposition argument rests on the premise that “the free market” best meets the individual and social needs of the community, and that “smart growth advocates” seek to reduce freedom and impose their beliefs and attitudes on everyone else.

Do not engage on your opposition's terms. If you respond in terms of the opposition's frame – growth and freedom vs. government intervention -- you are reinforcing their definition of the issues, their frame and consequently, their terms of the debate or discussion.

Instead, *force the opposition onto your terms -- improving the community – by consistently framing every communication, whether about a specific development proposal, a local policy, or a broad state or national policy.* The five elements listed above as “Promoting Values” should be included in most communications. Repetition is the key.

When an opponent brings up property rights, do not respond in those terms – redefine the issue simply by saying this is about how we make fair decisions to benefit the community, and talk about the options that should be considered in good planning. Repetition is the key.

Call out ad hominem attacks. Ideological opposition statements almost always attack the smart growth position by attacking the advocates. MarySue Barrett, President of Chicago's Metropolitan Planning Council, responded well to a recent attack in the NYTimes

John Tierney's "Autonomist Manifesto" (Sept. 26) sets forth a deceptively simple argument. [His] fatal flaw is that he's staged his drama with players who do not exist...

....sensible growth advocates are motivated by what they see happening in their own communities. They are folks from Elburn, Ill., pop. 3,238, who want to benefit as much as possible from the economic opportunities afforded by Chicago's westward march, yet still preserve their small-town charm, low crime rate and plentiful natural areas. They also are residents of Joliet, Ill., pop. 106,221, who are taking bold approaches to reviving a downtown retail market devastated in the mid-80s when the town was de-industrialized. Indeed, if sensible growth advocates were to find commonality around anything, it would be the power of choice - despite Tierney's assertion to the contrary.

...While the Elburns and Joliet of the world are taking the time to struggle with the complexities that growth and development encompass, Tierney and his "renegade" thinkers are stifling public policy debate around smart growth by oversimplifying the issues.

When arguments are more localized, challenge opponents to name names. For example:

You say the people proposing this change are elitist (uninformed, anti-suburban, etc.) Exactly who are you talking about? Do you mean business owner Amy Johnson who is part of the task force that has made the proposal? Or Bill Smith from the community group that is pressing the City for further study? Or the members of the local church, who, with their Pastor Steve Brill have called for putting all the options on the table?

If you insist on name-calling, at least have the courage to name who you mean. Or, better, focus on the decisions at hand, and join us in helping to find the best way to create the greatest community benefits through growth and development.

Repetition is the key. Always reference the values behind your position by promoting the five key elements:

- Looking at the Big Picture
- Improving the community
- Considering all the options
- Being fair
- Meaningful citizen participation

Do's and Don'ts

DO NOT say "Sprawl is the problem, Smart Growth is the solution."

If your current materials use this sprawl versus smart growth construction, change them. Despite its negative connotations, most people do not view "sprawl" as necessarily a bad thing – it's a form of progress. Sprawl isn't the problem, it is a symptom.

DO say "The problem is poor planning and poorly planned growth." The context is making decisions about growth. Those decisions must look at the big picture.

DO NOT say "The solution is to implement Smart Growth." DO NOT say "Smart growth is the better way" or "following Smart Growth principles leads us to better communities"

DO say "The solution is to make better decisions about what, where and how to build next." Our decisions for the future must look at all the available options to bring benefit to the community, and be made on the basis of fairness and maximum benefit.

DO use concrete examples, with pictures, of how these solutions have been developed elsewhere.

DO talk about growth in the local context using specific statistics (e.g. one million new residents in the next twenty years). Use pictures and examples from similar places to be specific about options for what, how and where to build.

DO use phrases and pronouns such as "we", and "our" that imply ownership or a stake in the issue. Say "OUR neighborhoods", "OUR region", "WE need to keep and invest in what WE already have..."

Places for people to live

DO NOT talk about housing. Few people have a positive notion of housing. Avoid general policy terms, even when talking to policy makers. There is no benefit, and considerable down-side, to talking about "housing", "affordable housing", "low-income housing."

DO talk instead about homes and "safe, decent places for people to live, that they can afford." Be specific about who it is that needs safe and decent homes and apartments they can afford: the members of the community who are currently *excluded*. "Our children starting out, our parents who no longer want or need big houses, the hospital nurses and orderlies, the teachers and police officers, mechanics and retail employees, the staff at the very City Hall whose administrators claim there is no unmet need. The **people who work in this community** are part of the community, and they must have decent places to live that they can afford."

DO NOT talk about workforce housing, UNLESS employers are ready to speak out as messengers. Workforce housing is an employer's term, and need. They are the credible messengers about such need.

DO talk about the community's need, to meet the challenges of the future. “Our future depends on building a vital community, one that is an active and welcoming part of the region's growth. It's time for everyone to participate in the decision. Do we want **an exclusive community**, building walls to keep out the neighbors and the people who work here? Let's look at our options, and figure out how we can all benefit from the region's growth.”

DO talk about choices. “The market, when it works, functions to meet people's needs and provide choices that make sense. Right now, we have rules and policies that don't meet the needs, and certainly don't provide enough choices about where to live and in what kind of home. We should **increase the choices available** to people, and do so in ways that are fair to everyone in the community.”

DO NOT talk about NIMBY's. It's a negative term that lumps all kinds of local opposition into a single category of narrow-minded motives. Focus group responses show that virtually anyone (rich/poor, white/minority, Republican/Democrat) will be a NIMBY if they feel their home and family are threatened, or that they are being treated unfairly.

DO talk about, and honestly address, people's real and legitimate concerns. Work to understand, name, and isolate the concerns, to divide the opposition. What will be needed to deal effectively with legitimate concerns of safety, traffic, schools, services, property values, etc.? How can the proposal be improved to meet these concerns? Maintain the position that the community's decisions should be fair to everyone, and debate the specifics in terms of how to make it most fair. Listen carefully to understand the concerns (is it about safety? Privacy? Property values?) and address them directly.

Transportation

DO NOT portray the issue as roads versus transit. The issue is not mass transit, and certainly not any formulation that can be seen as “transit vs. auto-dependent” investments.

DO talk about the “a balanced transportation SYSTEM that gets people and goods where they need to be, when they need to be there.” “Our transportation system is failing, because it is out of balance. “We must build a transportation system that gives people choices about how to spend their time and their transportation money, choices about how to get where they need to go.”

Conservation

DO talk about environmental quality and natural area preservation in terms of keeping what we have. Talk about these issues in the same way you talk about investment in existing neighborhoods and infrastructure, and downtown revitalization. One over-riding value takes precedence: conservation of what we have.

*DO talk about this value in terms of its opposite – **waste and neglect** of important community assets.*

“Let's **take care of our assets** and solve existing problems, instead of running off to build new problems somewhere else. No one wants to let our neighborhoods and infrastructure fall apart in one part of town in favor of new construction at the edges.”

“Let’s **keep the good things we have**. We have choices to make: we can use up natural areas and farmland, or we can keep it. We can abandon buildings and let our infrastructure fall into disrepair, or we can fix, reuse, and conserve them.”

Social justice and regional equity

DO talk explicitly about existing inequities in the allocation of resources within the region.

DO NOT talk about fairness without specifying what is now un-fair, and what would be more fair. “It’s not fair to the taxpayers in the city to subsidize investments in outlying schools and roads, while neglecting our schools, homes and infrastructure in the city. Every part of this region depends on the entire region’s health and prosperity. That’s why decisions must be made to benefit the community as a whole.”

DO talk about democracy and the importance of meaningful citizen involvement in decisions about growth and development (including redevelopment). “Everyone in the community must have **the opportunity to participate meaningfully** in considering the options, and making the decisions. Excluding groups from this process isn’t only unfair to them – it will prevent us from making the right decisions for the future.”

Keeping the frame in play

Advocates influence the public discourse by their won speech, by publishing of websites and print materials, and by working with journalists. By consistently following these do’s and don’ts, by promoting the values and organizing communications to be consistent with the growth and development frame, practitioners can play a vital role in re-setting the terms of discussion about growth and development. There are three essential activities for all practitioners and interested parties.

1. **Use the frame consistently.** All communications, including internal documents and even informal meetings, should be viewed as opportunities to advance the frame. It’s important to remember that the measure of success in setting the terms of debate is creating the “echo effect.” The more people hear the powerful and inclusive growth and development story, the likelier they are to use it themselves. It’s also important for those who speak in public to become practiced at using the frame when speaking in private, for two reasons: the frame can help provide insight into strategy, by clarifying the context and issue; and, unless advocates are accustomed to using the frame whenever they speak about the issues, they will tend to default to the comfortable and practiced “sprawl vs. smart growth” story when under pressure, or when led in that direction by journalists or opponents.
2. **Share the frame explicitly.** Provide allies with positive examples of the use of the frame, consistently over time, and point out how the frame is being used. Praise and share good examples, especially examples of the “echo” – messages that reflect the frame from those not directly a part of the growth and development advocacy community. Help to create these examples by drawing attention to the values, context and issue in communications with

journalists, editorialists and political leaders. Every such communication is an opportunity to say, “Ultimately, this is what (this decision or this proposal) is really about...” This will help political leaders speak in terms that resonate with their constituents, and will help journalists organize their coverage according to the advocates’ terms.

3. **Engage in constructive mutual criticism.** Both the force of habit, and pressure from opponents, will tend to cause advocates to slip back into describing the issue as “fighting sprawl by using smart growth.” When this happens, it’s appropriate and useful to provide a direct, private communication, pointing out the missed opportunity and suggesting how the frame might be applied when restating the message in the future. This kind of on-going discussion among advocates will strengthen the frame, and will create a climate conducive to the future evolution of the frame as new opportunities present themselves.

ActionMedia

416 E. Hennepin Ave
Minneapolis, MN 55414
612.331.6466
www.actionmedia.org
ActionMedia@scc.net

Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities
1500 San Remo Avenue Suite 249
Coral Gables, FL 33146
305.667.6350
www.fundersnetwork.org
ben@fundersnetwork.org