America is a nation with an unquenchable thirst for developing land. And the majority of that growth is in the ever-expanding suburbs. Planners, researchers, developers and even the staunchest conservationists concede that there is no way to stem the demand for suburban and exurban growth. So the bottom line is — if it is a foregone conclusion that growth in the U.S. will continue to occur farther and farther from central cities — what can be done to make sure that growth is smart, not sprawl?

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) has published Ten Principles for Smart Growth on the Suburban Fringe to outline clear, attainable methods for solving the sprawl riddle while building the best urbanism possible.

Michael Pawlukiewicz, ULI’s Director of Environment & Policy Education, directed the team that compiled the report that opens with the staggering fact that “across the country, land is being developed faster than ever before: more than two million acres of open space is converted each year.”

“We know there will be a lot of growth in the U.S. According to the Census Bureau, we’ll grow by 50 million people in the next 20 years,” Pawlukiewicz said. “Even though we would like those people to live in cities or close-in suburbs, the fact is most of the population growth will continue in the farther suburbs.”

Pawlukiewicz also noted that even though people will continue moving to the fringe, this nation can build with better development patterns to avoid the problems that sprawl development of the past 50 years has given us. Sprawl has created traffic jams, degraded the environment and wasted land.

“We have to move toward compact nodes of development,” he said. “As we identify appropriate sites for these development nodes we must also make sure we identify and protect land for recreation, agriculture and habitat conservation. We have to make sure that development and the protection of natural areas and resource areas go hand in hand.”

Pawlukiewicz said transit-oriented development can be a powerful tool for Smart Growth — but communities must be sure to coordinate transportation investments with planning for smarter land use. He also stressed the importance of promoting compact, walkable and mixed-use communities where everyone has transportation choices including walking, public transportation and driving.

Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech and part of the research team for the Ten Principles publication, said suburbia needs to focus on Smart Growth principles such as building compact multifamily subdivisions that conserve land.

Lang said a conventional subdivision built without using Smart Growth principles typically has very limited connectivity that abuts retail and is often separated by a wall. He noted the irony that a resident in a subdivision house closest to retail actually has the farthest trip because he must wind through the subdivision to reach way out and over to it.

“Without Smart Growth principles, the cycle is cheap — developers come in and build chock-a-block and conservation principles are not used. It’s not an enduring form,” he said.

Pawlukiewicz said local land-use policy must have a vision for an appropriate and sustainable future and then organize policies, codes and regulations to make it easy and profitable for the private sector to implement that vision.

“Everybody blames developers for sprawl and while they are not without fault, most of what they develop is in keeping with public zoning codes and land-use regulations,” Pawlukiewicz said. “In most suburbs, sprawl is easy and profitable to build. Local governments are mostly responsible for regulating land use. These policies make it difficult to build mixed-use communities or use better urban design practices like putting buildings close to the street or to narrow the streets to make them safer for pedestrians. The codes and regulations must be changed so that it is easy and profitable to do the right thing — the smart thing. The sprawl that we see in the U.S. is, in fact, the implementation of public policy.”
Principles for Smart Growth on the Suburban Fringe

1. Create a Shared Vision for the Future... and Stick to It

A successful visioning process is rooted in a community’s landowners, developers, elected officials, environmental groups, citizen activist groups and local business. Temptations will emerge that run counter to the vision in the form of appealing short-term economic development opportunities. If a way cannot be found to make the proposal enhance the vision, it should be rejected.

2. Identify and Sustain Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure is a network of habitat, parks, greenways, conservation easements and working lands sustaining native species, natural ecological processes, plus air and water resources. Between 1982 and 1997, the amount of urbanized land in the U.S. increased by 47 percent while the nation’s population grew by only 17 percent. Considering those numbers, it becomes obvious that green infrastructure is a community’s natural life-support system and must be strategically planned and managed as carefully as built infrastructure.

3. Remember that the Right Design in the Wrong Place Is Not Smart Growth

Traditional design — with its back alleys, front porches and spaces where kids play and neighbors congregate — is critical, but not the only component of Smart Growth. Design must be integrated with local climate, land conditions, transportation facilities and economically viable development that preserves open space and natural resources, infrastructure that serves existing and new residents, compact development such as new town centers, and other factors that take a holistic approach to stamping out sprawl.

4. Protect Environmental Systems and Conserve Resources

Take advantage of building orientation, prevailing winds and tree cover for cooling. Manage the effect of the sun’s rays for enhancing or limiting heating. Conserve water by using conservation-designed appliances and plumbing fixtures, harvested gray water, recycled water and natural (non-piped) drainage systems and pervious paving to recharge aquifers.

5. Provide Diverse Housing Types and Opportunities

Direct growth to walkable mixed-use subdivisions that offer more diverse housing types such as rental and ownership of single-family houses with yards, townhouses and multi-family apartment buildings to meet the varied lifestyles of people living in the suburbs.
Build Centers of Concentrated Mixed Uses
Sustainable urbanized fringe development has a convenient mix that meets people’s daily needs: homes, schools, stores, services and amenities. A concentration of mixed uses on the fringe provides a critical mass and a sense of place that gives communities a strong identity and a heart. Mixed-use projects create a destination with housing, employment, retail and public services. Successful communities include a full range of uses and activities: office, retail, entertainment, hotels, housing and civic institutions.

Use Multiple Connections to Enhance Mobility and Circulation
Traffic congestion is a big problem in conventional suburbs because clusters of residential subdivisions with only one entry and one exit concentrate the traffic onto and off arterial roads, which quickly become clogged because of the lack of connectivity and alternative routes. To avoid becoming a placeless collection of disaggregated subdivisions, a network made up of vehicular, pedestrian, cycling, park and open-space connections must be planned. Communities should create a template for a street grid with a hierarchy of connected streets to guide development and promote connectivity.

Deliver Sustainable Transportation Choices
Smart Growth communities provide a range of transportation choices, but to be sustainable, these alternatives must be built in rather than added later to a car-based culture. Staged development of real estate and transportation facilities ensures that a range of options will be available to travelers — walking, cycling, transit, carpooling, telecommuting and driving — and that each will be adequately supported.

Preserve the Community’s Character
America’s commercial landscape, largely due to the proliferation of chain stores and franchises, has deteriorated from the unique to uniform, from stylized to standardized. National franchises and chain stores can change their standard building designs to fit local character, but only do so in communities savvy enough to reject off-the-shelf architecture and demand customized, site-specific design that addresses local historic preservation, site planning and vernacular architectural concerns.

Make It Easy to Do the Right Thing
One major barrier to better development on the fringe is local regulation. Most local zoning and subdivision regulations make it easier and faster to build conventional low-density, auto-dependent developments than undertake Smart Growth on the suburban fringe. Developers build sprawling projects because they are easier and cheaper to construct. Local officials should make local regulations more flexible to encourage mixed uses, narrower streets, compact development and other smart practices.