

ABAG Projections 2003, Smart Growth, and Sustainability  
Sherman Lewis, February 14, 2003

“Smart growth” means developing more densely around transit in urbanized area, reducing auto dependency, and protecting the greenbelt. It is concerned with how to grow, while “sustainability” is concerned with how much to grow, e.g., bending the growth curve down.

The Smart Growth Strategy Planning Process, sponsored over the last three years by the Regional Agencies and the Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities, was premised on ignoring the role of job growth and the importance of sustainability. As a result it systematically ignored any clear or structured participation on issues such as job location externalities, regulating to prevent severe job surplus cities from making matters worse, conditioning job increases on housing provision, job education and training, health services, fiscal reform, subsidies to automobiles, and the problem of accommodating cars in smart growth.

Quite the contrary, rather than slightly lowering job growth to balance housing growth, the Steering Committee chose to increase housing targets to reach job growth.

The Smart Growth workshops were then guided to three choices and picked “network of neighborhoods” as the preferred option. The results were analyzed in a Final Report and submitted to ABAG for developing projections for 2030. The Final Report had three successes and two failures. It was successful in supporting smart growth as the way to meet needed growth, successful in balancing jobs and housing, and successful in designating the greenbelt for protection. Clearly, the idea was to regrow within the urbanized area in order to save the open space. The failures were that the numbers did not make sense in some places, and the numbers accommodated far too much growth for sustainability.

ABAG Projections 2003 is now out in draft form. In a previous analysis, I showed how it did not consider the smart growth which might occur between now and 2010, made assumptions that led to a job-housing imbalance far worse than what we have now, and failed to allow public review of impacts on the greenbelt.

This analysis looks at the ABAG data to see what is implied about open space development. Older job surplus cities were designated as central cities; older, contiguous employed resident area were designated as inner suburbs, those further out were designated as outer suburbs even if they had a recent job surplus, and some areas were designated rural.

I went county by county, looking at Santa Clara, Alameda, Contra Costa, and Solano as high growth counties and at San Francisco as a central city. Each county’s growth rate can be compared to the ABAG regional growth of two million more people, a 29 percent increase in population from 2000 to 2030.

Looking first at the counties as a whole, the rate of 20 percent for San Francisco is below that for the other counties, which have 35, 33, 29, and 46 percent growth rates. So it is clear that the suburban counties will be growing much faster than the central city county.

The four growth counties, however, also have internal variation, so that it is possible the growth could be going into their urbanized areas and not the greenbelt.

For Santa Clara County, with the most growth of any county, this seems at first to hold true. The central cities get 85 percent of the total growth and grow a little faster than the county as a whole, 38 percent vs. 35 percent. Yet when we look at the outer suburbs we find they are growing even faster, at 39 percent. It looks like about 34,000 people are being placed in the greenbelt. Santa Clara gets this pattern by holding down growth rates in the inner suburbs below those for the county and even for the region. Santa Clara, then, seems to get densification without greenbelt protection. Assuming about 12 persons per gross urbanized acre, I estimate the projections call for urbanizing about four and a half square miles of open space.

For Alameda County, with the second most growth, we find central cities and inner suburbs growing faster than San Francisco, but more slowly than the region or the county. They are getting only 48 percent of the growth despite having 66 percent of the population in 2000. The outer suburbs are to grow by 50 percent, well ahead of the regional average. It is not hard to imagine how 242,000 more people can be physically accommodated within their urbanized areas, but it is hard to imagine there is any political willingness to do so. More to the point, it seems likely that the ABAG projections staff has projected urbanization of the greenbelt. The rural growth is not many in number, but still has to be considered. If only half of the outer suburb and all the rural growth is on greenfields, it suggests another sixteen square miles of open space would be built on.

In Contra Costa County, third place winner, the growth rate matches the region, but with less in the central city and inner suburbs— less than the region and less than the county. The outer suburbs grow by 38 percent, with the same issues as Alameda. Half of a growth of 179,000 people implies urbanization of about thirteen square miles.

Solano County has the highest growth rate but, with a smaller population base, less absolute growth than the three above. Solano lacks a central city. Its two inner suburbs have a high growth rate but still below that of the whole county, which grows even faster. The outer suburbs grow at the county rate, so it is the rural areas that cause the high average rate. Substantial rural growth—about a doubling of the population – is projected. The rural area now has 9 percent of the population but gets 19 percent of the growth. If half the outer suburb growth and all the rural growth goes onto new land, it would urbanize about eleven square miles of greenbelt.

I would prefer not to have to guess about estimating 44 square miles more of open space being lost. ABAG can come up with much closer estimates, and will eventually, but not on time for public review.

At this point I have to conclude that the Projections assume continued unsustainably high growth rates, aggravate the imbalance of jobs and housing, include much densification, generally put higher growth rates in the outer suburbs and rural areas, and fail to protect the greenbelt. If so, the Smart Growth Strategy planning process was a complete waste of time.

## Greenbelt Development Implied in ABAG Projections 2003 for population in 2030

County / Category	2000	Percent	Amount of Growth	Percent of total	Growth Rate 2000 to 2030
<b>REGION</b>	6,784,141		1,996,559		29%
<u>Santa Clara</u>					
Central city	1,320,236	78%	503,764	85%	38%
Inner suburb	261,332	16%	53,168	9%	20%
Outer suburb	86,221	5%	33,679	6%	39%
Rural	14,796	1%	1,004	0%	7%
Total	1,682,585	100%	591,615	100%	35%
<u>Alameda</u>					
Central city	509,109	35%	125,191	26%	25%
Inner suburb	446,317	31%	106,583	22%	24%
Outer suburb	481,673	33%	238,927	50%	50%
Rural	6,642	0%	4,258	1%	64%
Total	1,443,741	100%	474,959	100%	33%
<u>Contra Costa</u>					
Central city	78,337	8%	12,463	4%	16%
Inner suburb	414,050	44%	86,150	31%	21%
Outer suburb	433,895	46%	162,805	59%	38%
Rural	22,534	2%	16,666	6%	74%
Total	948,816	100%	278,084	100%	29%
<u>Solano</u>					
Inner Suburb	146,845	37%	53,355	29%	36%
Outer Suburb	212,489	54%	95,111	52%	45%
Rural	35,208	9%	34,292	19%	97%
Total	394,542	100%	182,758	100%	46%
<u>San Francisco</u>					
	776,733		158,367		20%