

SOLVING SPRAWL

Models of Smart Growth in
Communities Across America



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Foreword by Maryland Governor Parris Glendening

THIRD STREET COTTAGES

LANGLEY, WASHINGTON

Many think of smart-growth developments as large-scale projects comprising scores if not hundreds of homes, frequently with shops and offices built in. But the values and principles that smart growth embraces can be applied to even the smallest of projects. Indeed, it is important to do so, for some communities may be presented with more small opportunities than large ones.

**A POCKET-SIZED
ENCLAVE OF
SMART GROWTH**

Just three blocks from the center of Langley, Washington, sits Third Street Cottages, an award-winning community of eight detached cottages placed around a common garden, covering less than an acre. Third Street Cottages is the first development of its kind, using an innovative zoning code that allows higher densities for smaller homes surrounding a common area. The development is part of an effort to increase residential density while retaining the charming character of the area.

Sitting in Sprawl's Path

A town of approximately 1,000 people, Langley is located on Whidbey Island, an hour away from downtown Seattle, in Puget Sound. Langley is not really a suburb. Not yet. So far, Whidbey Island, which is accessible only by ferry, has been spared the worst effects of suburban sprawl. But its proximity to Seattle and Everett, another fast-growing city, have put it in sprawl's path.

In an effort to preserve this rural character, the Island County government first imposed a minimum lot requirement of five acres. Unfortunately, had the opposite effect, spawning what Jim Soules, Third Street Cottages' developer, calls "five-acre ranchettes" that cut up

Third Street Cottages with community garden.



and divide the land, virtually guaranteeing sprawl. The community grew increasingly worried.

In response to the growing threat of sprawl, and in an effort to meet state urban growth and housing goals, the city of Langley's

SMART-GROWTH FEATURES

- ▶ Infill development
- ▶ Increased density
- ▶ Village character preserved
- ▶ Sense of community
- ▶ Proximity to village center
- ▶ Environmentally preferable construction

Growth Management Committee and the Planning Advisory Board established new conditions for land-use planning. Future revisions to the land-use code had to retain and enhance Langley's village

character, by fostering strong neighborhoods and expanding the options for detached and affordable housing.

Using these criteria, Langley adopted the Cottage Housing Development (CHD) Zoning Ordinance in 1995. The CHD allows detached homes at twice the previous allowable density in single-family zones—up to 15 homes per acre. The ordinance encourages small houses of no more than 650 square feet on the first floor and no more than a total of 975 square feet. Each home must be adjacent to a common area, and parking spaces must be hidden from the street. Jim Soules points out that the CHD provision and the development respond to a major shift in demographics that is taking place across America. Most American households (about 58 percent) consist of one or two people, but the majority of detached housing is built for families.

Third Street Cottages, the community's first CHD project, offers an alternative to the usual townhouses, condominiums, and apartments typically available for singles and couples. The project, which was completed in January 1998 by Soules and architect Ross Chapin, is a successful integration of infill and compactness, built on a vacant parcel in the heart of Langley at a density of 12 development units per acre (DU/acre) on a site previously zoned at 6 DU/acre.

Sustainability and Community

"Sustainability is the key here," Chapin told reporter Judy Hammond. "When you build houses with care, people tend to put care back into them and they will last longer."¹⁰ Indeed, all of the building materials used in the project were environmentally sound. No old-growth wood was used, and the whitewashed, wood-paneled walls are reclaimed Sitka spruce that was on its way to the pulp mill to make toilet paper. The builders did not use any drywall at any point in the construction.

While the interior space of each cottage was limited to 975 square feet, the developers did everything they could to make the houses feel spacious. In the living rooms, the ceilings are at least nine feet tall, and large windows and skylights create an open feeling. Walk-in closets, built-in shelves, and attics provide plenty of storage space. Seating alcoves, bay windows, and covered porches add additional functional space.

The development team also took particular care to create a sense of community at Third Street Cottages: They placed parking away from the houses so that a person coming to the cottages must first enter a courtyard. Mailboxes are clustered in a kiosk, inviting neighbors to stop and chat while getting their mail. Front porches and kitchen windows overlook the courtyard, creating a sense of security.

The courtyard is the heart of the small development. Neighbors work together in the garden or pick fruit from the old trees that were preserved during construction. They gather for parties at the workshop or trade tips in the cottages' collective tool shed. Decisions about the property are made by all of the residents. These group decisions range from choosing a communal barbecue grill to hiring someone to weed the garden.

In addition to fostering a sense of community, Soules and Chapin also provided residents with a sense of privacy. In front of each cottage is a swinging gate opening into a private yard. Each yard is bordered by a low fence and flowerbed. From the gate, a walkway leads to the steps up to the porch. The developers also positioned windows carefully within the cottages in order to ensure privacy.

Despite their similarities in design, each cottage has its own character. Flowerboxes and private gardens, for example, express the styles of the owners. Perhaps most expressive of all are the names the owners have given their cottages. Faith Smith, for example, calls hers Hale Iki Molokini, Hawaiian for "little house of many connections." "I grew up in wartime Maui, in a small cottage like this one," she told *The Seattle Times*. "This place reminds me of that very tight community where everyone kept an eye on each other."¹¹

PRINCIPALS

Developer: Jim Soules of The Cottage Company

Design: Ross Chapin of Ross Chapin Architects

Public sector: City of Langley Growth Management Committee; Langley Planning Advisory Board

A Successful Model

Clearly, others wanted to be a part of that tight community, as well. The homes in Third Street Cottages sold quickly for \$140,000 to

\$150,000 each. In fact, five of the eight were sold before construction was completed. The first cottages were occupied in January 1998.

PROJECT DATA

- ▶ Detached homes: 8
- ▶ Maximum floor area: 975 sq. ft.
- ▶ Total development area: 0.67 acre

The project has received widespread local praise, as well as an award from *Sunset* magazine. Planners, developers, architects, and activists from other communities have visited. Several Puget Sound cities are considering adopting a CHD zoning provision like Langley's, and Soules and Chapin have gone on to develop more cottage projects around Whidbey and other parts of the area. For example, construction is now under way for the Greenwood Avenue Cottages in Shoreline, Washington, with completion expected in late 2001.

The owners of Third Street cottages are all conscious of sustainable living. Almost all of them own only one automobile, and most walk the three blocks to the village center of Langley to do their shopping. Peggy Moe, owner of the cottage named Pears and Cherries, told the *Seattle Times*, "Everyone here shares a belief that sustainability is an important value. We have to start taking responsibility for the earth's dwindling resources by taking a look at how we live."¹²