

## **Framing, Presenting and Contesting Smart Growth Policies and Strategies** **John Hannigan**

By Katherine Lynch '13

Following lectures given by over a dozen experts from Smart Growth related fields, a mix of industry professionals, managing directors, and academics, Professor John Hannigan of the University of Toronto closed the 2011 *Smart Growth?: Environmental and Social Implications* two-day conference with an analysis of how Smart Growth policies can be framed in order to combat their ambiguous nature and broad implications for broad demographics. In his talk Hannigan developed a central claim that smart growth appeals to numerous types of people and is therefore inclusive of too many views to satisfy with a singular policy. His discussion was two-pronged: first, how influential the framing of an argument in a political arena can be for issues of social constructivism, and second how the case of Smart Growth can be applied to his model given its environmental focus. He analyzed these ideas with respect to modern examples of environmental issues that lend themselves to policy, where Smart Growth does not, and how best to adjust public understanding of Smart Growth in order to incorporate it more functionally into legislation.

Hannigan set the stage for his discussion by drawing on his youth, a Canadian boy growing up across the border from an industrial giant, Detroit, MI, and witnessing its subsequent growth, as compared to the anti-growth sentiment he witnessed in Toronto, Canada. He described 1950s Detroit as vibrant, with a culture welcoming symphonies and classical art, and the viable auto industry, which spurred private wealth. Growth within the city over time, however, encouraged “white flight,” with approximately 80% of the middle class fleeing to the suburbs, leaving a desolate downtown urban area to suffer. Poor planning and poor infrastructure within the city to support its burgeoning families and their post-material interests, such as a clean environment, led to the suffering of the industry giant.

In comparison, Toronto maintained middle-class city neighborhoods. These urban communities halted a 1960s plan to build an expressway, and also stopped urban redevelopment. Canada from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, “sustained economic prosperity and industrial growth from 1896 to 1929 [and] transformed ... into a predominantly urban society.” This reality was confirmed by the national census of 1931, which recorded that 53.7 percent of the Canadian population lived in incorporated cities, towns, and villages (as the term

"urban" was then defined), compared to 19.6 percent in the first national census 60 years earlier" (Reindau 1). Although Canada's industrial revolution lagged nearly a century behind that of the United States, its ability to sustain population and avoid white-flight in the 1960s is supportive of Hannigan's argument in that collective behavior dictates cultural norms and accepted practices; the way in which those arguments are framed determines the public's acceptance or manner of dealing with the issue. While Toronto city neighborhoods were bound by a sense of community activism, Detroit's industry's decentralized personal ties to the area allowed the issue to be framed as one beyond citizen control, resulting in the movement of the majority of the population to the suburbs.

As the underpinning of his narrative, Hannigan described Collective Action Frames, frames that develop from real people, interaction, and conflict, as the motivation behind success stories like Toronto. He went on to describe three key components of social constructivism, and how they directly related to the topic of Smart Growth and environmental concern.

Grounds: documentation of empirical basis of claim

Warrants: moral imperatives; justifying taking action

Conclusions: proposed solutions

These three tasks of social construction, according to Hannigan, evolve linearly.

Hannigan drew extensively on his book, now in its second edition, titled *Environmental Sociology*, leaning on his three-stage model to describe the complexities associated with politically framing Smart Growth, and the challenges proposed Smart Growth policies will face. Convention & Labeling, Presentation, and Consensus Building & Contestation mimic the three traits of Collective Action Framing, though they require greater public input to evolve linearly. In fact, the fallacy of Smart Growth lies in its inability to garner large swaths of public support – as a result, it remains stagnated in areas with low threshold for postmaterial values, as compared to more affluent areas able to see beyond basic, civilized needs.

In Stage One, Convention and Labeling, Hannigan compares the process to that of scientific observation. For example, black carbon or soot is now considered a dangerous resource and technology source; it diminishes sunlight flections, has adverse health effects, and because its impacts are both direct and visible, it is easy to pass legislation which bans its uses and presence. Due to scientific observation of the material, its hazardous affects were made readily apparent to scientists, the public, and legislators, all three of whom were required to adjust the frame around black carbon. Comparatively, Smart Growth does not readily offer an identifiable problem, according to Hannigan. "Some claim it's an invention of Urban Lobby Institute," he

added with a chuckle. Another problem of Smart Growth is the difficulty documenting that it works as policy. Due to its brief existence, it does not yet have a track record to garner support based on longevity or record of proof.

Writing on social construction of environmental issues and problems, Hannigan describes the implicit problems in labeling environmental issues, and the limitations of conventional identification and the relationship between the issue and concern of the public. “Environmental problems frequently originate in the realm of science. One reason for this is that ordinary people have neither the expertise nor the resources to find new problems. For example, knowledge about the ozone layer is not tied to our everyday experience....Some problems, however, do relate more closely to our life experiences. Concern over toxic wastes frequently begins with local citizens who come to draw a causal link between seeping dump sites and a perceived increase in the neighborhood incidence of leukemia” (Hannigan pg 67). He continues on to describe the famous case of Love Canal in Niagara Falls, NY. Hannigan considers the key actors in these identification of problems to be: the researcher for where it comes from; those who manage it; the economic and political interests claim-makers represent; and the public for what types of resources they bring to the claims-making process.

Stage Two, Presentation, concerns the role of media and issues commanding attention and support. For the second stage, Hannigan drew on a release from Eric Lawrence and associates in 2010, which described the following:

“In securing public support for a national urban agenda, the following increase the chance of success:

- policies that are constructed broadly (e.g. the plight of America’s cities) versus narrowing (e.g. the failing business sector in downtown Detroit)
- Policies aimed at positively regarded groups (e.g. children, students, the elderly) versus those perceived negatively (e.g. drug users, street youth)
- Policies that promise benefits to a wide swath of beneficiaries (e.g. hole in the ozone) versus minority” (Lawrence et al. 2010)

Lawrence’s claim provided the backbone of Hannigan’s assessment of the second stage, against which he posed a caveat of scope: in order to be framed appropriately, the policy must fit within the scope of the political marketplace. In order to fit, its request must be matched by public interest, output advantage, and reasonable means to enact the policy as defined by the level of public support. Essentially, people’s perceptions and interpretations of the issues determine the amount of support – it is the responsibility of the presentation, chiefly by the media, to define the issue in a way that inspires public action.

With the complexities of Presentation in mind, Hannigan provided four Smart Growth Frames that relate more aptly to public interest for Smart Growth in its entirety:

1. Urban Improvement: mixed land uses, planning
2. Environmental: pollution
3. Environmental Justice: demographic effects, issues of equality
4. Public Health: industrial pollution

These four areas relate directly to personal issues of the public, exceeding economic boundaries and thresholds to postmaterial values. When framed as issues with direct and hazardous effects, as the example of black carbon illustrated, Smart Growth gains support due to the mental associations between enacting policy and avoiding self-harm by centralizing the community interests.

In the third and final stage, Consensus Building and Contestation, the cyclical stagnation of Smart Growth in Stage One became apparent; in order to build consensus or contestation, the policy must have gained some support from an earlier period to develop a status of either positive or negative; while there exist examples of Smart Growth implementation, as shown by both speakers at the conference and in environmental news, no major metropolitan city has yet to implement major Smart Growth change in order to inspire trickle-down change. What Smart Growth lacks is a pulse; it has no morally persuasive argument on which to draw, argued Hannigan. The closest it comes to personalization is on the issue of Environmental Justice, where equality and demographic inclusion vie for opportunity and improvement of urban amenities.

Hannigan's analysis was not cynical in its entirety; he cited three current programs in the United States that encourage the development of Smart Growth. First, the Sustainable Communities Initiative under the Obama Administration, a partnership among the Environmental Protection Agency, Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Transportation. The program features livability principles which include: providing more transportation choices, equitable and affordable housing, economic competitiveness, supporting existing communities and valuing neighborhoods, and coordination and leveraging federal policies and investment (Smart Growth Principles, epa.gov). While these principles are aims of the program and not enacted policy, their guidelines and reasoning fulfill the requirements of Stage Two, Presentation. Being presented as principles by the US EPA gives legitimacy and pertinence to the issues related to Smart Growth, and frames the issue as one of national importance, not so remote as to concern singular urban areas, but also those who come in contact with urban areas.

In fact, while Hannigan credits the EPA's attachment to Smart Growth as an idea burgeoning from the Obama Administration, the EPA has listed principles since 2006. The principles listed in that year delineate more specific aims of Smart Growth, particularly related to housing and daily life.

1. Mix Land Uses
2. Take Advantage of Compact Building Design
3. Create a Range of Housing Opportunities and Choices
4. Create Walkable Neighborhoods
5. Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place
6. Preserve Open Space, Farmland, Natural Beauty and Critical Environmental Areas
7. Strengthen and Direct Development Towards Existing Communities
8. Provide a Variety of Transportation Choices
9. Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair and Cost Effective
10. Encourage Community and Stakeholder Collaboration on Development (EPA 2006)

Although Hannigan, again, cited examples of success in the realm of Smart Growth, the greatest challenge to its implementation is the Political Marketplace. While his three-stage model and two-pronged presentation of the environmental factors provide both a sensible and linear diagram of how to proceed, and valid reasons for which people should support the movement, the third stage of consensus and contestation proves to be the most difficult to overcome in that it requires an adjustment in the public's perception. It's all in how the issue and policy is framed, as Hannigan noted repeatedly. As President Obama said in August 2009, we "need to fundamentally change the way we look at metropolitan development. For too long, federal policy has actually encouraged sprawl and congestion and pollution, rather than quality public transportation and smart, sustainable development. And we've been keeping communities isolated when we should have been bringing them together." Obama's rhetorical analysis of the need for smart growth parallels the story with which Hannigan opened his talk, a Tale of Two Cities.

The demise of Detroit's urban culture and downtown business sector beginning in the 1960s, if evaluated in light of Hannigan's model, happened because it failed to develop beyond stage one, convention and labeling. Where Toronto had city neighborhoods that identified as communities, and activists who sought its protection, Detroit's decentralized interpersonal nature

removed sentiments of ownership or attachment to the area; the related white flight was as much an expression of identity away from an anonymous existence as it was a search for better living standards. While both cities housed citizens with vested interest in the postmaterial values of clean air, open space, and better urban amenities, one succeeded in retaining, even growing its inhabitants, while the other did not. It is the result of the framing in the political marketplace – the public and culture and business were three separate entities in Detroit; they were one major pulse in Toronto. And beyond the concept of moral guidance, urban development must be portrayed as key to the entirety of the public, not just those in direct contact with urban function. As President Obama stated later in his speech, “Now, that doesn't mean investing in America comes at the expense of rural America; quite the opposite. Investing in mass transit and high-speed rail, for example, doesn't just make our downtowns more livable; it helps our regional economies grow. Investing in renewable energy doesn't just make our cities cleaner; it boosts rural areas that harness that energy. Our urban and rural communities are not independent; they are interdependent.” Hannigan’s ultimate argument is essentially that these investments must be defined as pertinent and related, framing it in a political context that appeals to the social behavior of the public. In order for Smart Growth to progress in the modern era, policy must be written with defined and clear relations between direct public interests and urban development patterns.

### **Works Cited**

"Excerpts from President Obama's Speech on Urban Policy (sidebar)." *Issues & Controversies On File*: n. pag. *Issues & Controversies*. Facts On File News Services, 21 Aug. 2009. Web. 31 Mar. 2011. <http://www.2facts.com/article/ib140422>

"Environmental Protection Agency Smart Growth Principles (sidebar)." *Issues & Controversies On File*: n. pag. *Issues & Controversies*. Facts On File News Services, 14 Apr. 2006. Web. 31 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.2facts.com/article/ib110185>>.

Hannigan, John A. *Environmental Sociology*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006. Print.

"HUD-DOT-EPA Partnership for Sustainable Communities | Smart Growth | US EPA." *US Environmental Protection Agency*. 3 Feb. 2011. Web. 31 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/partnership/>>.

Reindeau, Roger. "Canadian social transformation in the early 20th century." *A Brief History of Canada*, Brief History, Second Edition. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2007. *Modern World History Online*, Facts On File, Inc. <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE53&iPin=BHCA24&SingleRecord=True> (accessed March 31, 2011).