

4. A Checklist for Evaluating Projects

The NGA Principles for Better Land Use were used to develop this checklist. The Appendix presents a more detailed discussion of the NGA Principles and their translation into evaluation criteria. For simplicity, questions are used for the format, but local communities and other parties may want to modify the checklist to reflect their own priorities. There is no intent to define what is “right” or “wrong.” The goal is to provide a more systematic approach to understanding and evaluating information. For some projects, all of the questions may be answered in the affirmative. This means that the project is fully consistent with the NGA principles for better land use and “smart growth” approaches to growth management. But many projects will not satisfy all the criteria, even though they have many features desired by a community and which may also be significant alternatives to conventional low-density, automobile-dependent, single-use projects. The challenge is not to lower the standard too much, so that places that satisfy only a few criteria are not misleadingly labeled “smart growth” or NCD.

It would be unreasonable to expect that all projects or communities would be completely consistent with all the criteria. However, it is also inappropriate to label a place as a “smart growth” or NCD community if only a few of the criteria are satisfied. Some of the most basic criteria, like mixed land uses, support other criteria. Criteria questions Number 1 through 15 are the most important ones; they correspond to the fundamental goals category of six Better Land Use principles discussed in the Appendix.

Incomplete information could lead to difficulties in forming declarative answers to some questions, prompting the user to seek more information. Alternatively, rather than a “yes” or “no” answer, some people might prefer using low, medium, and high answers for the level of consistency of the project, or even numerical scores for the questions. To illustrate use of the checklist, an actual project, still at the conceptual stage but approved by local government, has been evaluated with the checklist.

CHECKLIST FOR APPLYING THE NGA EVALUATION CRITERIA FOR NCDs

NGA Principle for Better Land Use	Criteria Questions	Project Consistency (yes or no)
Strengthen and encourage growth in existing communities	1. Is the location in an already-developed area? <i>The key need is to see if public services and infrastructure have already been created for the location.</i>	
Include mixed land uses	2. Is there a mix of housing, office space with significant employment opportunities, schools, retail shopping, outdoor recreation areas, and civic/public spaces and buildings? <i>For infill projects, it may be necessary to consider what is available in neighboring areas.</i>	

<p>Create a range of housing opportunities and choices</p>	<p>3. Does the housing include different types of homes, such as single-family detached, multifamily apartment buildings, and condos for purchase or renting; and do they cover a range of prices to address a full spectrum of income levels, including affordable housing?</p> <p><i>For infill projects, it may be necessary to consider what is available in neighboring areas. Distributed affordable housing in the 10-percent to 15-percent range is feasible.</i></p>	
<p>Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas</p>	<p>4. Does the project avoid converting working lands, such as farms and ranches, into development?</p> <p><i>Former working lands that are no longer being used and that are zoned for development are acceptable.</i></p>	
	<p>5. Does the project avoid fragmenting existing green space, especially natural habitats and forests?</p> <p><i>The need is to understand the original environmental setting and whether development will cause harm by isolating green spaces and block the ability of species to remain healthy.</i></p>	
	<p>6. Does the project design protect the local watershed?</p> <p><i>Water runoff and other factors should be examined to determine whether the development is harming the watershed. To minimize water runoff, the fraction of land paved over for streets and parking typically should not exceed 20 percent to 30 percent.</i></p>	
	<p>7. Does the project location avoid increasing the risk or negative impacts of natural disasters?</p> <p><i>Consideration should be given to what kinds of periodic natural hazards exist for the site and whether even the best forms of NCD would be inappropriate for a specific location that is vulnerable, for example, to flooding, wildfires, mudslides, beach erosion, or high winds.</i></p>	
	<p>8. Does the project use compact design to minimize the amount of land per dwelling unit?</p> <p><i>The average number of housing units per residential acre is the appropriate measure. The best greenfields NCD projects will have densities in the range of at least five units to 10 units per acre, and often much higher. Infill projects will usually have at least 20 units per residential acre. Much depends on the mix of housing; if only single-family detached homes are included, lower densities will prevail.</i></p>	

	<p>9. Does the project maintain or create green spaces throughout the new community for public and recreational uses, including continuous green pathways for biking and walking and pocket parks in neighborhoods?</p> <p><i>The best greenfields NCD projects will have 20 percent to 50 percent of the total land area as diverse and well-dispersed green spaces. Infill projects may have as little as 5-percent green spaces.</i></p>	
	<p>10. Does the project use energy-efficient designs and green building methods to reduce offsite land use?</p> <p><i>The goal is for construction materials and home design to be consistent with the highest energy efficiency standards, and not just for inside appliances.</i></p>	
Provide a variety of transportation choices	<p>11. Does the project provide convenient access to public transit? For larger projects, does transit operate within the community?</p> <p><i>Any form of public transit is acceptable. Convenience means that residents can walk to public transit within about 10 minutes to 15 minutes. Housing densities above 15 units per residential acre aid use of transit. The difficulty in having transit options for greenfields NCD projects places even more importance on the mixed-use criterion, particularly with respect to employment opportunities.</i></p>	
	<p>12. Does the street layout or grid provide multiple access points to and from the surrounding areas as well as multiple paths for travel through the community by vehicles and bikes?</p> <p><i>The measure is connectivity of streets and greenways throughout the community, so people can have convenient access to all parts of the community by walking, biking, or driving. Cul-de-sacs should not be part of the street design. Only one way into and out of the community is not desirable, because it will cause traffic congestion.</i></p>	

	<p>13. Is teleworking facilitated by broad-band capabilities in homes?</p> <p><i>Today, most telework opportunities require more than the use of the phone and mail. High-quality Internet connections are needed. Home designs now can include special attention to work areas. This complements the presence of employment opportunities and works toward the goal of minimizing dependence on cars.</i></p>	
Foster walkable, close-knit neighborhoods	<p>14. Do the design and layout of buildings and streets promote one or more real neighborhoods by facilitating interactions among residents, including diverse gathering places?</p> <p><i>The best NCD projects take every conceivable opportunity to promote neighborly interactions. Front porches and garages behind houses are hallmarks of NCD. Community centers, public spaces, benches on sidewalks in commercial areas and in green areas, pocket parks, and trails are key features.</i></p>	
	<p>15. Have the streets been designed with sidewalks, appropriate lighting, and connectedness, to promote easy and safe walking?</p> <p><i>Any design that lacks sidewalks on all streets is inconsistent with NCD. In the best NCD projects, landscaping along sidewalks makes them comfortable and attractive. Residential street widths are often in the 20-foot to 22-foot range (compared to conventional streets of 36 feet), and a 600-foot grid size is often preferred to reduce vehicles per day.</i></p>	
Take advantage of existing community assets	<p>16. Does the project blend in with the environmental setting and cultural features of surrounding areas?</p> <p><i>Good NCD design honors the original natural setting of the location and incorporates environmental assets into the design, in contrast to giving priority to using land for construction. From a visual and aesthetic perspective, the NCD place should blend harmoniously with the surrounding area, in both physical and cultural terms. Architectural features should be consistent with the surrounding community.</i></p>	

	<p>17. Has the project considered the use of existing brownfields or grayfields sites for some or all of the needed land?</p> <p><i>The goal of more efficient land use requires that NCD projects give serious consideration to using land that is abandoned or greatly underused because of environmental or other reasons. For brownfields sites, this requires attention to any cleanup requirements for using the land for residential purposes, unless the contaminated area is small enough to accommodate some nonresidential component of the project.</i></p>	
<p>Promote distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place, including the rehabilitation and use of historic buildings</p>	<p>18. Do the design, layout, and mix of land uses provide a distinctive style and feel to the place, with all elements blending together harmoniously?</p> <p><i>This is a qualitative judgment. In the best NCD projects, the designers and planners have carefully considered all the mixed uses and how their layout and architectural features conform to a well-conceived style of the community. The chosen style is often linked to the history of the site and surrounding areas, or to the style of the surrounding community in the case of an infill project. This does not at all imply dull consistency among homes. In good design, there is diversity within a consistent style.</i></p>	
	<p>19. Has the project committed to using older and historic buildings on the original site?</p> <p><i>For both infill and greenfields projects, the best NCD developers make creative and effective use of structures on the original site, especially ones with historic and architectural significance.</i></p>	
<p>Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions</p>	<p>20. Have the developer and local government agencies used the best techniques to fully engage all categories of local stakeholders in meaningful activities to guide the design of the community?</p> <p><i>The best NCD developers do not bring a fully worked-out community design to the public or government officials. Today, the best practice is to use new and advanced forms of digital technology tools, visual preference surveys, and highly interactive meetings that solicit local input in a collaborative design process. Meaningful activities are ones that provide for true participation in the development of the community design, not merely an opportunity for people to react to a developer's design.</i></p>	

<p>Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective</p>	<p>21. Has the local government adopted zoning codes that give as much support for a mixed-use community as for a typical single-use project (e.g., a sprawl housing subdivision, strip mall, or office park)?</p> <p><i>Developers and others who are advancing an NCD project need to take some responsibility for improving local codes that do not support NCD. Many NCD developers have been successful in obtaining new parallel or overlay codes that remove the need for obtaining high-cost variances from codes that do not by right support NCD.</i></p>	
	<p>22. Does the appropriate authorizing or regulatory agency have a process that prevents lengthy and unpredictable delays for developers?</p> <p><i>Here too, developers and others supportive of NCD can work for improvements in local ordinances and procedures, such as giving priority to NCD applications and guaranteeing decisions within a short time.</i></p>	
	<p>23. Has the developer made clear how the project may be constructed in different phases over extensive time periods, yet be mixed-use, and is it clear how the original plan will be followed?</p> <p><i>The best NCD developers make clear exactly how a project will be executed over time and how market uncertainties will affect decisions to implement the original community design and plan. It is important to be concerned about significant periods when there may be no authentic mixed uses or diverse housing.</i></p>	
	<p>24. Will impact fees or other measures reduce uncertainties about the ability or willingness of local government to pay for all needed public services and infrastructure?</p> <p><i>Careful attention should be given to whether the local government is empowered to levy some form of impact fee; whether any such imposed fees will cover all public services and infrastructure; and if those fees will match future costs. The major concern is that some public services and infrastructure, particularly schools, may not be provided for a new development, reducing the quality of life for residents and jeopardizing full build-out of all components of the original community design.</i></p>	

Opportunities for Using the Checklist

The checklist could be refined for particular applications. For example, for some uses, questions 1 to 15 might be sufficient, because a project was being considered at any early stage.

Charrettes, Workshops, and Public Meetings

Any type of public meeting that involves stakeholder participation could use the preceding checklist as a tool to evaluate a conceptual plan for a new community design project, or even a more advanced, detailed plan for one. By using the checklist, citizens would be able to structure their search for important information that they want from the developer or other entity attempting to obtain community support for the project.

Interactions with Realtors and Developers

People searching for a community with NCD or “smart growth” features could use the checklist when they visit new or older developments and talk to salespeople or residents already living in the community. Only with a systematic approach to getting information will consumers avoid places that are just prettier sprawl places, but not authentic NCD communities or neighborhoods they are seeking.

Local Government Agencies and Elected Officials

Developers often attempt to work closely with local governments very early in the process of gaining permits, approvals, and variances. Professionals and elected officials could use the checklist to ensure they obtain the best information about a proposed project and to understand whether it will satisfy public demand for authentic NCD places.

Businesses

Many types of business enterprises must make difficult decisions about whether or not to locate a retail establishment or an office in a new or existing community. Although a developer may market its project as NCD to meet consumer demand, the business could use the checklist to test the project’s consistency with NCD and “smart growth” principles. Will the project offer all the amenities and features wanted by workers seeking the NCD style of living?

Investors and Lenders

Sources of financial support for development projects will increasingly find it necessary to distinguish high-quality NCD projects from a multitude of ones that may be far less consistent with NCD and “smart growth” principles. As consumer demand becomes clearer to the industry, more and more developers and builders will attempt to capture some of the NCD market, regardless of their experience and expertise. Therefore, investors and lenders could benefit from using the checklist.

Builders

Firms that serve as developers generally find builders to partner with, and several builders may be involved for larger projects. As builders consider participation in projects, they too could benefit from using the checklist. They may have become aware of the growing market for NCD communities, but they too need to verify that a project has the maximum consistency with NCD and “smart growth” principles.

Evaluations for Awards

Governors, other elected officials, and various organizations, including trade associations, civic organizations and environmental groups, could use the checklist to evaluate projects and communities for awards to recognize outstanding designs that serve the public by providing alternatives to conventional sprawl subdivisions.

Researchers

As the national “smart growth” movement has expanded, there is increased emphasis on conducting research on many key issues, like transportation and health impacts. Inevitably, data are desired on “smart growth” communities versus conventional places. An important decision is how to define a “smart growth”-type place, and use of the checklist for this purpose could be most productive.

Case Example

Although this example is for an actual project and all of the information has been obtained from public records, none of the actual names of places are used. The proposed 1,000-acre, 3,200-home planned community illustrates many of the issues confronting NCD projects nationwide. It is a 20-year greenfields project about one mile away from a small historic town and county seat. The location is in a largely rural state near a major metropolitan area in another jurisdiction. The project location is in part of the state that in recent years has undergone major residential growth, because it attracts people working in the metropolitan area who are seeking lower-cost homes and, perhaps, a more rural setting. In the 1990s the county population increased 17 percent, and about 40 percent of county residents commute to the metropolitan area; this fraction may increase. The proposed project, with some 10,000 residents at full build-out, is triple the population of the nearby town. From its inception, there has been strong local opposition. Nevertheless, in May 2001, the County Planning Commission approved the project.

The developer has consistently described the project as “smart growth” and a form of New Urbanism. Opponents have called it “dumb growth” and “sprawl.” Applying the NGA checklist illustrates the complexities and difficulties in assessing a project’s consistency with “smart growth” principles. A number of sources provided considerable information, including transcripts of public meetings, legal documents, and local and regional newspaper articles.

1. Is the location in an already-developed area?

No. The site does not have any existing infrastructure.

2. Is there a mix of housing, office space with significant employment opportunities, schools, retail shopping, outdoor recreation areas, and civic/public spaces and buildings?

No. Although described as a mixed-use project, a key element is missing, namely significant employment opportunities. Although the developer has talked about the benefits of having an employment center, it did not include it in its plans. Nor is there any evidence that the developer seriously sought a company that might have been interested in the project because it saw the value of establishing an office in the area. This has been a local issue, because the county has had little economic growth, aside from the residential development associated with becoming a “bedroom” area for commuters to the metropolitan area. Some opponents have focused on the high costs to government and taxpayers of residential development. Moreover, the developer has indicated that the retail space might not be built for 10 years, while waiting for enough market demand within the new community. So, for some 10 years, the community

would not be mixed-use; this could stimulate construction in the area of conventional strip malls or big box stores.

On the positive side, the developer said: “Located in the eastern village and the central village centers, community-serving retail will be located at the ground floor of low-scale, appropriately designed commercial buildings fronting on major streets or civic spaces. Smaller-scale ‘corner markets’ will also be located near the center of several neighborhoods.”

3. Does the housing include different types of homes, such as single-family detached, multifamily apartment buildings, and condos for purchase or renting; and do they cover a range of prices to address a full spectrum of income levels, including affordable housing?

Yes. The plan includes mostly single-family detached homes and some townhouses and multifamily dwellings, and the intention is to appeal to mixed incomes, including rentals. The developer said: “A mixture of housing types, including single-family, townhouses and multifamily apartments will be woven into the neighborhoods, avoiding ‘pods’ of single-use development. The total number of residential units to be developed, over the 20-year build-out period, will consist of approximately 1,950 single-family units (on lots of varying size, ranging from 6,000 to 15,000 square feet), 800 townhouse units, and 450 multifamily units.”

4. Does the project avoid converting working lands, such as farms and ranches, into development?

No. The developer said that “this site is presently utilized for agricultural purposes,” but it is within the designated growth area established for the town. The loss of farmland in the area in recent years has been substantial, and the loss of traditional rural character in the county has been a major local issue.

5. Does the project avoid fragmenting existing green space, especially natural habitats and forests?

Yes. The location and the retention of green space appear to avoid major fragmentation.

6. Does the project use compact design to minimize the amount of land per dwelling unit?

No. The project is not a good example of compact design. At full build-out, the number of households per residential acre would be less than five, which is similar to many sprawl places. Green space is estimated at 18 percent, which is not overly high for an NCD community.

7. Does the project design protect the local watershed?

Yes. There is no information to indicate that the development will harm the watershed.

8. Does the project location avoid increasing the risk or negative impacts of natural disasters?

Yes. There is no information to indicate that the project would adversely impact the risk or effects of natural disasters.

9. Does the project maintain or create green spaces throughout the new community for public and recreational uses, including continuous green pathways for biking and walking and pocket parks in neighborhoods?

Yes. The plan does a good job of maintaining and using green spaces throughout the project area. The developer described the project as: “compact in design and layout, to preserve natural open spaces. Parks and other civic uses are located within a five-minute walk of all residents’

homes. Larger scale regional recreation open spaces (soccer/play fields, baseball fields, etc.) which will be available to all county residents, are located throughout the community as part of the project's connected and distributed open space system design."

10. Does the project use energy-efficient designs and green building methods to reduce offsite land use?

No. There has been no indication of a focus on energy efficiency or green construction.

11. Does the project provide convenient access to public transit? For larger projects, does transit operate within the community?

No. The developer has talked a lot about the benefits of transit-oriented development. It said: "Because you have two major rail lines...there are some opportunities, over time, to take advantage, we think, of those two lines as potential means of reducing the amount of travel, particularly by car, for those who would be traveling out of the county to get and from work." The developer also talked about the possibility of providing some shuttle service from the town center to the nearby train station. However, unlike many NCD projects, the developer has not made a firm commitment to doing something like this in its original plans and commitments. Its estimates of vehicle use are high, probably doubling local road use eventually, and local road congestion is already a big issue. This project posed a very good opportunity for designing a transit-oriented community at the very outset, because of the high probability that most residents would be commuting to the metropolitan area.

12. Does the street layout or grid provide multiple access points from and to the surrounding areas, and multiple paths for travel through the community by vehicles and bikes?

Yes. The street design conforms with NCD approaches. The developer said: "One hallmark of great neighborhoods is a hierarchy of well designed, pedestrian friendly streets. The streets...will vary in size and character from small, neighborhood tree-lined streets to a broad, central tree-lined park boulevard. Streets will have wide sidewalks, street trees, coordinated human-scale street lighting, and signage. Major and minor streets are designed for the pedestrian first, then the automobile, ensuring livability as well as mobility...The walking/biking paths will interconnect with the sidewalk network to make the entire community pedestrian- and bike-friendly."

13. Is teleworking facilitated by broad-band capabilities in homes?

No. There has been no mention of broad-band connections or special live-work housing designs to promote telework.

14. Does the project blend in with the environmental setting and cultural features of surrounding areas?

Yes. The plan does a good job of blending in with local environmental and cultural features, to the extent that a new greenfields community very close to an old, historic town can achieve this. The developer said that the project would be "designed as an extension" of the nearby town, "patterned" after the neighborhoods of five towns in the vicinity, and "cognizant of the site's rolling topography."

15. Has the project considered the use of existing brownfields or grayfields sites for some or all of the needed land area?

Yes. Testing confirmed some areas of toxic soil contamination, which the developer will address according to state requirements.

16. Do the design and layout of buildings and streets promote one or more real neighborhoods by facilitating interactions among residents, including diverse gathering places?

Yes. The developer has done a good job of including many features to promote six real neighborhoods around a town center.

17. Have the streets been designed with sidewalks, appropriate lighting, and connectedness, to promote easy and safe walking?

Yes. The developer has done a good job of promoting a fully walkable community, where important amenities are within a five-minute walk from homes.

18. Do the design, layout, and mix of land uses provide a distinctive style and feel to the place, with all elements blending together harmoniously?

Yes. The developer has done a good job of using “smart growth” approaches to achieve a specified style throughout the community, one that is consistent with the historical character of nearby towns.

19. Has the project committed to using older and historic buildings on the original site?

Yes. The developer has paid considerable attention to retaining and respecting historic buildings and locations, which are very significant for the general area.

20. Have the developer and local government agencies used the best techniques to fully engage all categories of local stakeholders in meaningful activities to guide the design of the community?

No. The methods used very effectively by NCD developers nationwide—such as charrettes, digital visualization technologies, and Visual Preference Surveys—have not been used. Instead, traditional public meetings have been used, where the developer and its team have shaped and dominated presentations. Rather than involve the community directly in the design process, the developer brought its design to the community. The developer’s Internet Web site had no information on the project.

21. Has the local government adopted zoning codes that give as much support for a mixed-use community as for a typical single-use project (e.g., a sprawl housing subdivision, strip mall or office park)?

No. The local zoning codes do not support NCD, nor is there evidence that the developer wanted a change in the code that would provide more support for the project. The developer acknowledged that “the project will be a ‘planned unit neighborhood development.’” Local officials have admitted that their requirements are typical of ones supporting sprawl, and the developer has acknowledged that some desirable features, such as smaller lot sizes and porches, are not permitted.

22. Does the appropriate authorizing or regulatory agency have a process that prevents lengthy and unpredictable delays for developers?

No. The county’s conventional legal process has caused significant delays and uncertainties. The project has gone forward under the planned unit development (PUD) approach. This means that it is being pursued through a variance process for a code that does not explicitly support NCD by right.

23. Has the developer made clear how the project may be constructed in different phases over extensive time periods, yet be mixed-use, and is it clear how the original plan will followed?

No. The developer has acknowledged that some features, such as retail, will not occur until supported by market demand, which may mean 10 years. There is also uncertainty about the construction of multifamily dwellings, because of uncertain market demand. The developer said: “The neighborhood retail and village scale commercial office components of the project will be developed as soon as market demand is present.”

24. Will impact fees or other measures reduce uncertainties about the ability or willingness of local government to pay for all needed public services and infrastructure?

No. Unlike three adjacent high-growth counties, this county does not, and legally cannot, impose impact fees, and the issue of high costs for public services and infrastructure for such a large project has been substantial. Some older residents, who have much lower per capita incomes than the people moving in from the metropolitan area, are already being compelled to leave. They cannot afford the rising property taxes and higher home costs stemming from the recent rapid rise in residential development. However, the developer has volunteered to pay an impact fee to support school construction and perhaps other needs. However, financial details have not been presented and no specific, legally binding commitments have apparently been made with government agencies, so uncertainties remain. The developer will donate 75 acres for schools and 10 acres for other public services within the new community, but school construction costs, aside from land costs, are high. Over-crowded schools are already a big local issue.

Conclusions

The project has many features that distinguish it from conventional sprawl places, and several important features that fit the NCD model. However, as the checklist evaluation shows, about half the criteria questions reveal inconsistencies with “smart growth” principles, including some fundamental ones. Should the “smart growth” glass be seen as half empty or half full? One person’s sprawl can be another person’s “smart growth.”

For most people already living in the county, who were attracted to its largely rural character, historic charm, and open spaces, and for local “smart growth” advocates, the glass is seen as half empty. For those who will profit from the project, some local officials who see inevitable residential growth as a regional bedroom area, and potential residents of the proposed community, the glass is seen as half full, and as a positive alternative to the more typical sprawl development already occurring in the county. Thus, this project illustrates the dilemma facing increasing numbers of Americans when developers label projects as “smart growth,” compact development, New Urbanism, or similar terms, and how the NGA checklist can help them understand to what extent such projects really are consistent with NCD and “smart growth” principles.