

Revisiting Growth Assumptions through ROI Analysis

By Rob Voigt, contributing editor

For all the discussions about the benefits of open data, new ways of measuring and developing statistics, and engaging the public through mobile technology, we need to remember that progress can also result from changes in perspective on how we use what is already at hand. The following briefly describes a research project that does just that by examining available data to provide significantly important, if not critical, new insights for municipalities. Specifically, the research used a GIS-based return-on-investment analysis to understand the relationship between built form and tax revenues and the limitations of zoning provisions. The results are significant and can contribute to the ways planners and municipalities undertake effective placemaking, community development and economic development.



Robert Voigt

Raw material

To help frame this important discussion we should think of a community's land base as its raw material and the tax base its product. When a community supports, facilitates and regulates development it should consider the impact on property tax revenue it receives from this limited resource. After all the success of a community is dependent on this revenue for the services, infrastructure and assets that it funds.

Planners know that the form a development takes directly impacts walkability, placemaking, economic development, accessibility, affordability and community health. Done well, all are characteristics of successful, healthy, smart communities across the continent. However, there is still a prevailing assumption among municipalities that growth and new development, which replaces older forms of development, inherently creates wealth, by generating property tax revenue for the municipality.

My planning associate John Douglas and I have been reexamining these assumptions by looking at the tax productivity on a per unit of land basis, as opposed to a per unit of development or cost of development basis. To do this we have been comparing sites within a community that are generally the same in all aspects except for the form of development by conducting GIS-based ROI analyses.

Reframing built form assumptions

Taking data that is already available we compared sites and examined various relationships such as those between form of development, tax revenue, unit density and lot coverage limits, as

set out in the zoning by-law. The findings are clear and consistent with those of numerous other similar studies across the United States featured on the [Strong Towns website](#). In each case, the traditional more urban form of development far exceeded the tax revenue of the suburban mall-type development for the local context. Even residential buildings that had been adapted to commercial uses at the edges of downtowns outperformed the nearby suburban-type developments with the same land use designation.

Sites, all within walking distance to each other, were selected based on their built form characteristics, relative to the community context. These ranged from higher density traditional downtown multi-storey buildings, to less dense sites that are auto-centric in design, such as strip malls. Residential sites are examined in a similar manner. The results are quite staggering. Consistently, our work demonstrated that traditional developments that are less than ideal, in that they arguably need improvements, generate hundreds of percentage points more tax revenue per hectare annually than sites that have been relatively recently redeveloped into an auto-oriented mall only blocks away.

Regulations that direct development to forms which generate a lesser productivity (per hectare) than others, have a significant impact on those communities' capacities to meet their long-term servicing and infrastructure replacement obligations. In its simplest terms, these forms of development cost far more to service than they generate in tax revenue.

From the results of this project it is clear that assumptions about new development need to be reframed in terms of built form—rather than cost of construction or investment—impacts on community wealth generation and required lifecycle infrastructure investments. The information provided by the ROI analysis is potentially critical to the planning for healthy, sustainable communities.

Considerations

Add to these findings measures associated with other well-known indicators of community health, well-being and economic vitality and it is clear that significant value judgements need to be made and assumptions about growth equaling wealth that need to be reexamined.

Yes, there are nuances to this discussion that need to be explored, but this analysis highlights the importance of updating the way planners view community design and development.

As municipalities gain knowledge through ROI analysis they become better equipped to determine the long-term impacts of growth and development on the tax base and to improve official plan policies and zoning by-laws to maximize wealth building potential. It will enable them to define strategic initiatives that will build on the strengths of the most valuable forms of development for municipality-owned lands to maximize ROI and community benefits.

Robert Voigt MCIR RPP is a professional planner, artist and writer. He is recognized as an innovator in community engagement and healthy community design. Robert is the chair of the OPPI Planning Issues Strategy Group, member of PPS' Placemaking Leadership Council, writer for Urban Times and publisher of the CivicBlogger.

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