

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Boston, showing a river winding through the urban landscape. The image is dominated by green spaces and parks, with buildings and streets visible in the background. The overall color palette is a mix of greens, blues, and greys.

Smart Talk on Smart Growth

Douglas Foy Talks With
Randolph Jones AIA, AICP



DOUGLAS FOY is secretary of the Massachusetts Office for Commonwealth Development, a new cabinet-level position created by Governor Mitt Romney in 2002 to coordinate the state's environmental, transportation, and development programs. He was previously the president of the Conservation Law Foundation in Boston, a leading environmental-law advocacy organization. A member of the 1968 USA Olympic rowing team, he earned degrees in engineering and physics from Princeton and Cambridge and is a graduate of Harvard Law School.

RANDOLPH JONES AIA, AICP, is a principal in The Jones Payne Group of Boston, Providence and Monterey, where he heads the firm's urban design practice group. He served as the co-chair for the BSA's Civic Initiative for a Livable New England and the BSA's 2003 national Density Conference. He currently serves on the advisory group for the national AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee (RUDC).

RANDOLPH JONES: The Massachusetts Office for Commonwealth Development was created by Governor Mitt Romney as a hybrid vehicle for linking smart growth with transportation and the environment. It has been getting very high marks for its innovative approach to development. What makes OCD such a unique concept for state government?

DOUGLAS FOY: The first thing that makes it unique is that it has combined four different agencies to try to create a much more coordinated, strategic approach. Transportation, Environment, Housing, and Energy are now woven together in OCD. I don't think there's any state that's tried such a comprehensive combination, and only a few European countries that have combined housing and transportation.

The other special feature of OCD is that the governor has put the full weight of his office behind the effort to break down the barriers between the agencies. So it has the firepower and the capacity to actually make things happen.

The third element that's unusual is that it is an extremely streamlined effort. We haven't created a brand-new, large bureaucracy. What we've done is gather people from various agencies who work together as a sort of virtual agency under the guidance of Commonwealth Development.

RANDOLPH JONES: Is the governor's approach to smart growth really an effort to address our Balkanized cities and towns, our attitude that "all politics is local"?

DOUGLAS FOY: I think the governor's interest in smart growth grows out of a substantive concern about the Balkanization and the fact that we were sprawling across our countryside and chewing up a lot of our resources in ways that were unnecessary and, in the long-term, damaging. I don't think there's a political agenda here in the classic sense. We do have a Republican governor and a Democratic legislature, but I think there is uniform support for these smart-growth issues on both sides of the aisle in the legislature, and between the legislature and the governor.

Many of the major initiatives that we've undertaken in the first year were launched with bipartisan support.

RANDOLPH JONES: Prior to joining the Romney administration, you served for 25 years as president of the Conservation Law Foundation, garnering unanimous respect as one of New England's most formidable environmental advocates. The battles and your win-loss record suggest that you spent considerable time in the political arena. What were the lessons you learned there and how have you applied them to your new role at OCD?

DOUGLAS FOY: The role of an advocate is essentially the practice of the art of the pure. You get to take pristine positions on issues, and then go to battle for them. Over time, they get negotiated into the reality of what can actually be accomplished in terms of legislation or court proceedings or whatever. Government, on the other hand, is the art of the possible. Now that I'm inside government, I'm even more aware of the importance of advocacy organizations in both helping to frame the issues and helping to bring the necessary pressure on government to find the most thoughtful path.

RANDOLPH JONES: How are the old attitudes yielding to this new coordinated, organizational, policy-making approach?

DOUGLAS FOY: One of the things that has helped make the marriage more effective has been the physical and budgetary challenges that the state faces. There is a premium placed on efficiency, coordination, and strategic alignment, because with it you get more bounce from the ounce. It might have been

more difficult to fashion this structure if there was a huge budget surplus and no real incentive for anybody to climb out of their silos and work together.

RANDOLPH JONES: You mentioned transportation. Of all the public agencies, the Federal Highway Administration and to a certain extent MassHighway [Massachusetts Highway Department] have been particularly single-minded in their purpose and mission. We have a number of add-a-lane proponents who have had their way politically despite the obvious adverse effects that those investments make on land capacity and sprawl. How can you corral transportation needs so that we don't promote sprawl through our transportation investments?

DOUGLAS FOY: There is no doubt that transportation investments by the Commonwealth — including roads and transit lines — have an enormous impact on how and where we grow. If you build a new road to a cornfield, there will be new structures built in that cornfield; there's simply no way around it. If you don't build a road there and the cornfield remains relatively inaccessible, the growth will go somewhere else. Clearly, targeting transportation investments to reinforce growth in town and

city centers and places where we have already built is enormously important as a policy agenda. That has been a fundamental element of this administration from the day we took office. In fact, the first press conference the governor held with the OCD was to announce the "fix it first" policy of transportation, which is a commitment to reinforce the existing transportation network we already have — rebuilding the bridges that are broken and the transit lines that need to be upgraded — rather than expanding into new places. We could spend virtually all of our transportation dollars over the foreseeable future simply restoring what we already have. We won't — we'll add some new capacity, mostly in transit.

RANDOLPH JONES: You've been labeled a smart-growth advocate, pursuing the benefits of more compact growth. Do you feel that the phrase "smart growth" somehow politicizes the agenda? Is there an issue in calling it that?

Some of our finest models of towns and small cities are not reproducible today because zoning forbids them — a Concord or Newburyport or Nantucket Town or Wellesley or Pittsfield or Northampton could not have been built under current zoning. And that's a huge problem. We need to be able to reproduce the best of the "paradigm towns" with modern zoning.

— Douglas Foy

DOUGLAS FOY: I actually like the term, and I think most people catch the idea pretty quickly. No one's really in favor of dumb growth, and there are a lot of really dumb things that you can do with state investments that everyone recognizes as stupid. What it means to me is wise investing. If you set schools aside, almost everything else that the Commonwealth spends capital dollars on is built by the four agencies that report to me — roads, bridges, transit, sewers, water systems, park systems, open-space acquisition for protection purposes, housing, energy systems. And investing that money wisely — about \$5 billion a year — to reinforce sustainable growth patterns is what I think smart growth is all about. It typically favors compact development over sprawl, primarily because sprawl is much more expensive to service. And if you're trying to be a wise investor, you want to invest your infrastructure dollars in a way that gives you the most return per dollar.

We're not telling people that they should build "back-to-the-future"-type New England villages. We are saying that the New England village is a more sustainable pattern and also one that most people prefer. But what and where you choose to build often depend upon where we decide to invest state and federal dollars. For us, smart growth is defined as the wise investment of limited capital.

RANDOLPH JONES: Do we need land-use reform in the Commonwealth?

DOUGLAS FOY: We certainly need zoning reform, whether we pursue it through a statewide legislative approach or work on a town-by-town, city-by-city basis. One of the reasons we have such a housing problem is that there's not enough land zoned for appropriate housing development, particularly compact and multi-family housing. Some of our finest models of towns and small cities are not reproducible today because zoning forbids them — a Concord or Newburyport or Nantucket Town or Wellesley or Pittsfield or Northampton could not have been built under current zoning. And that's a huge problem. We need to be able to reproduce the best of the "paradigm towns" with modern zoning. There are a lot of towns that are now pursuing town-centered zoning —



Northampton



Newburyport

efforts to bring multi-family, mixed-use development into their town centers in order to rebuild the classic village center, and then use it to help solve our housing problem.

RANDOLPH JONES: And what do we do about each community relying on its own tax revenue?

DOUGLAS FOY: Because the towns are so dependent on property taxes, there's no doubt that there is a certain pressure to grow and even to sprawl as a means of generating revenue. And again, this is why zoning reform is so important. If

you're a town and you're trying to grow to generate revenue to solve your property-tax problem, you have two options. You can grow by sprawling across your landscape and actually increasing your net long-term costs because of all the new infrastructure you have. Or you can grow by concentrating on places that are already developed, by rehabilitating existing buildings, or by reclaiming land in infill sites in the center of your town. And in that case, you can

actually generate revenue gains, because you won't spend a lot of money on infrastructure.

RANDOLPH JONES: The Commonwealth has recently unveiled a number of smart-growth initiatives. You have mentioned transit-oriented development [TOD] — the idea that new development should be directed toward areas around transit nodes. What has the response been and how are the politics playing out in terms of the locations that have been selected for your demonstration projects?

DOUGLAS FOY: I think the TOD program has enormous promise. That was one of the programs that was rolled out in a bipartisan way, so from a political point of view, TOD is very much a bipartisan issue. We have identified at least 30 very interesting locations in the MBTA system alone. There are also a variety of locations on regional transit systems. Over the course of the next couple of years you'll see dozens of really significant projects around these locations. Some of them will be in suburban locations — such as Ashland, Newburyport, or Kingston. A number of them will

be in existing neighborhoods in urban settings, like Quincy or Revere. And some of them will be in relatively undeveloped urban settings, like Assembly Square in Somerville. All of them are very viable with a lot of interest among the development community.

RANDOLPH JONES: You've espoused a practical approach to achieving your goals. Can you give some examples of this approach?

DOUGLAS FOY: There are a number of initiatives that are underway that I suppose you could call practical. For example, the state owns a lot of surplus land. How we dispose of it — how it is sold, to whom, and for what purpose — has significant growth implications, not to mention revenue implications. So we are now working very hard on the surplus-lands process for the state — identifying where these lands are, what the development possibilities are, what the best uses would be, and how we can streamline the process.

A good recent example is surplus land near North Station in Boston that we are transferring to Massachusetts General Hospital. MGH has desperate needs and not much space around it. It's not going to move to Alabama, or even to Sturbridge; it's going to stay right where it is, in the heart of the city. It's an enormous economic engine for the city and the state, so it's very important to help it continue to thrive and to solve its problems in ways that help it and help us. It makes sense to allow MGH to expand in its current location, with the Red Line transit stop next door and North Station nearby.

RANDOLPH JONES: You're a person who votes with his feet, literally and figuratively, living an active, urban lifestyle. Recently, obesity and suburban traffic deaths have been on the rise, dramatically so. Compact development that supports walking and biking to work is increasingly in demand. But for decades, our suburban growth patterns have reflected an American dream that is counter to what the Centers for Disease Control says we should be doing.

DOUGLAS FOY: It's an interesting point. The CDC has very clear data now that correlate a walking lifestyle, even a modest 20-minute-a-day walk from the train to the office, with a reduction in obesity and a reduction in overall healthcare costs. Have you heard the rule of four? In this country last year, there were 4,000 pedestrian deaths — people hit by cars. There were 40,000 deaths in motor vehicles. There was \$40 billion spent on obesity costs nationwide. There's something interesting in that pattern. We're killing a lot of people with cars, we're killing a lot of people in cars, and we're killing a lot of people who are always in cars and not walking.

On the other hand, we can't get too preachy about it. We have built a landscape that makes it virtually impossible for people to do anything other than drive everywhere. I don't think the soccer moms want to spend all their time in their vans all day shuttling the kids around town. Ask those folks whether they think that's a fun lifestyle. They like living in their towns, they like raising their children there. And they hate the traffic congestion and the time they spend in their vehicles.

All of which feeds back to the notion that with obesity a rampant health issue in our country and a huge part of our healthcare costs, building our communities in more walkable ways will bring us all manner of benefits. Are people starting to recognize that? I think so. We see the trend of parents moving back into the city after their kids go off to college. We see enormous interest in living and working in town centers, in being able to walk to the train, in being able to get out of your car. There's only so much we can do to solve traffic congestion. The long-term solutions are transit solutions, and walking and biking solutions, that give people alternatives to the car.

RANDOLPH JONES: What kind of role can architects and other design professionals play in encouraging that shift?

DOUGLAS FOY: I'd like to throw kudos to the BSA, because in my experience it has offered an interesting amalgam of technically sophisticated advisors and advocacy. It's a very elegant, thoughtful form of advocacy for the whole notion of smarter growth and more thoughtful design.

RANDOLPH JONES: Are you getting any support from the federal government?

DOUGLAS FOY: The federal government doesn't really pay attention to any of this stuff on the ground. But that's OK. It does a certain amount of the important regulatory work. To a degree, it just sends money. It would be nice if it sent more money. But in terms of land-use, growth, and development, the federal government is really not a player. The state has an enormous role. The towns have an enormous role. One of the interesting things about Massachusetts is that we're missing the middle tier of government, which many states have in the form of county government or regional government. Here we have regional-planning organizations such as metropolitan planning organizations and regional transit authorities. And because there's no regional entity, the state plays a big role. The whole ballgame here depends upon local control, state investment, and state policy. Which means the state has to be really smart. ■