Readers of this journal probably are aware that the push for “smart-growth” development policies typically is accompanied by half-baked assertions, arguments from intimidation, and—shall we say—strategic creativity in interpreting events. Which makes it a standard modern cry for bigger government. The contributors to Holcombe and Staley’s volume of essays—all of whom are authorities on the topics of their contributions—would like to rain on this parade by doing something its marchers rarely do: stating facts, repeatedly, and with extensive citations. While the advocates of anti-sprawl policies are unlikely to heed their efforts, those interested in presenting to the world a more helpful (and hopeful) vision of land development will find their compendium a valuable source of anti-anti-sprawl factual slam-dunks.

You want facts? Here are a few, dipping randomly into the volume’s ample riches.

- **Is there a sprawl crisis?** Only about 5.4 percent of U.S. total surface area is developed (p. 15), and the data suggesting a recent rapid pickup in the rate of development are flawed, sharply biasing growth estimates upward (pp. 19–22). Sprawl in most U.S. cities is sharply decelerating, and in some is actually decreasing, due primarily to market forces (pp. 166–70).

- **Is sprawl gobbling up precious cropland?** The bulk of the cropland decline is explained by soaring productivity in the agricultural sector (pp. 17–18), not by development.

- **Is conventional wisdom about population densities correct?** Are trends unique to America? “Smart-growth” advocates promote policies that seek higher urban population densities. But the two cities condemned most by the movement—Los Angeles and Miami—actually were America’s two highest-density urban centers in 1990 (pp. 32, 160). Meanwhile, the “smart-growth” movement’s inspiration—New York City—continues a long-term decline in measured densities as its suburbs expand (p. 32). Internationally, suburbanization and auto use in Europe and Japan are similar to U.S. patterns, despite policies there that aggressively favor compact development (pp. 32, 161–66). Far from being distinctly American, auto-love and suburbanization are worldwide concomitants of prosperity.
Has traffic congestion worsened? Do new roads help? Most U.S. suburbanites do not have long commutes, partly since suburb-to-suburb commutes are replacing suburb-to-central-city commutes as job dispersion increases (pp. 39, 43-44). Nationwide, trip-time changes have been minor since 1980, and average U.S. highway speeds are rising, not falling (p. 43). Aggressive highway construction clearly eases congestion (studies finding to the contrary have ignored—among other things—how new freeway construction eases congestion on secondary roads) (p. 226). And traffic is much worse in Europe and Japan, due in part to the widespread adoption there of the policies advocated by the “smart-growth” movement (pp. 29-30).

Is mass transit the solution to congestion? Less than 2 percent of all person-trips are via mass transit (p. 47). Even a heroic doubling of mass transit’s market share still would account for less than 10 percent of commuters (p. 5). Calculated correctly, mass transit costs-per-rider in many cities are not even competitive with limousines (p. 49). Mass transit is spurned by most of those poor who “smart-growth” advocates claim to be helping (p. 53).

And there is much more along these lines. Smarter Growth is thus a valuable reference volume which lays out many of the facts—with citations—that give the lie to the “smart-growth” movement’s claim to a credible basis for its policies. But the book is more—far more. Meticulously interwoven through the volume are three basic themes. First (as described above) is a careful dissection of the basic facts which “smart-growth” advocates claim justify their movement. Second is theoretical critique: What basic economic and social premises are shared by this movement, and how plausible are these premises? Complementing these first two essentially critical themes is a third constructive one: What are the market-based alternatives to “smart-growth” policies, and how strong is the case for such alternatives?

Austrian readers will appreciate the consistency with which the various authors use the central insights of Mises and Hayek as a basis for arguments. Holcombe and Staley (Chaps. 1 and 14), Holcombe (Chap. 8), Staley (Chaps. 2 and 11), and Meiners and Morriss (Chap. 10), among others, give careful attention to the daunting information problem that land-use regulators face when seeking to craft policies of benefit to society. “Smart-growth” advocates prefer to assume that the planner’s problem is simple and easily solved. The four authors mentioned above convincingly demonstrate the contrary. It is interesting to discover that most urban planners refuse to think of what they do as central planning—a contention that Holcombe makes short work of by pointing out the closeness of Florida’s statewide planning to the old Soviet model.

The insights of Mises and Hayek regarding central planning inspire a number of market-based proposals which address the “smart-growth” agenda. Staley (Chap. 2) and Holcombe (Chap. 8) emphasize how the public sector, just by determining and announcing far in advance where new roads will go, would convey information to the private sector that would promote an efficient pattern of land usage through a market-based discovery process. Mildner (Chap. 7) explains how the inefficiency of one big regional government versus many small local governments is based in part on the Tiebout insight that people voting with their feet can use their own private, dispersed information to make informed choices. Meiners and Morriss (Chap. 10) emphasize how “smart-growth” recommendations such as greenbelts and setbacks cannot be