The 2004 National Survey on Communities, conducted for Smart Growth America (a nonprofit advocacy group) and the National Association of Realtors, gave respondents a choice between communities labeled “A” and “B.”

Community A was described as having single-family houses on large lots, no sidewalks, shopping and schools located a few miles away, work commutes of 45 minutes or more, and no public transportation. In contrast, community B was characterized as having a mix of single-family and other housing, sidewalks, shopping and schools within walking distance, commutes of less than 45 minutes, and nearby public transportation.

Overall, 55 percent of Americans indicated a preference for community B, the smart growth community. Of those who said they were thinking of buying a house within the next three years, smart growth appealed to 61 percent. Commuting time had a significant influence. About a third of the respondents said they would choose the smart growth design if commutes were comparable, while another quarter preferred such a design if it also meant being closer to work. Bringing homes closer to workplaces is, legitimately, considered part of smart growth.

Housing preferences change with age, a factor that increasingly favors smart growth. In fact, when it comes to housing demand, demographics for planned communities that “foster togetherness and neighborhood life,” Smith said.

Nelson projects that by 2025, the demand for attached and small-lot housing will exceed the current supply by 35 million units (71 percent), while the demand for large-lot housing will actually fall short of the current supply. We have too much of the big stuff already.

Proving the point
With this as context, along comes a paper by Susan Handy of the University of California—Davis on the demand for smart growth. It is scheduled to appear in the Spring 2008 issue of JAPA. Handy has carved out a research niche in the area of active living, with groundbreaking work relating utilitarian walking and strolling to neighborhood design. Periodically, she delves into new subjects such as street network design. It is always worth reading her work.

Her latest piece is an analysis (with friends from the public health field) of the ConsumerStyles mail survey, conducted by the firm of Porter Novelli. The 2005 survey showed that 59 percent of U.S. adults now “support the development” of smart growth communities (defined in detail in the survey itself), and 50 percent said they would “want to live” in a smart growth community. Levels of support were high among all groups except rural residents.

Because this survey did not force respondents to choose among alternatives or to make tradeoffs among features, support levels may have been artificially high. This is a limitation of stated preference surveys compared to stated choice surveys, which pit alternative A against alternative B. And of course stated preferences aren’t the same as revealed preferences in the marketplace.

Still, the contrast between results for survey years 2003 and 2005, when smart growth communities were described identically, allows us to discern a trend. Between the survey years, the uptick in support for smart growth communities was a statistically significant 15 percent.

Whatever the limitations of any given survey, the weight of evidence from survey research—combined with home-buying trends—suggests a fundamental shift in favor of compact living.