

Can California Manage Growth at the Regional Level?

During the 1990s, policy responses to major issues in California—including economic development, housing, traffic congestion, and open space preservation—were increasingly framed in regional terms. State-level reports called for regional planning reform, and government agencies and civic groups launched several innovative regional collaborations. By the late 1990s, California had become a laboratory for regional planning reform, and state policymakers were considering ways to consolidate and extend their successes in this area.

Although these efforts received a good deal of attention, such regional coordination is not a new concept in California. Throughout the 20th century, in fact, reformers worked to create stronger planning institutions at the metropolitan level. In *Metropolitan Growth Planning in California, 1900–2000*, Elisa Barbour traces the history of regional planning and growth management in California. Focusing on transportation, land use, and environmental planning, she divides the state's reform efforts into three distinct waves: the consolidation of planning activities under central city governments, the fragmentation of those activities during postwar suburbanization, and recent attempts to reintegrate them without changing the fundamental structures of political authority. Having identified the historical themes and variations that characterize California's regional planning efforts, Barbour assesses the state's current prospects for growth management at the regional level.

The First Wave: Home Rule Power and Urban Consolidation

Modern urban planning in California began during the early years of the 20th century, when business leaders and other reformers worked to consolidate “home rule,” or the ability of city governments to conduct their affairs without interference from the state government. These Progressive Era reforms allowed cities to raise taxes, issue bonds, and build large-scale infrastructure needed for urban expansion.

Ironically, these Progressive Era reforms hampered subsequent attempts to plan at the regional level. Even as home rule helped central cities marshal resources for urban expansion, it encouraged the creation and growth of suburban cities, which transformed the state's metropolitan areas into clusters of independent localities. This political fragmentation made later growth planning at the regional level more difficult.

The Second Wave: Single-Purpose Agencies and Fractured Regionalism

After World War II, state and federal programs mitigated many effects of that political fragmentation. Single-purpose state agencies, often aided by federal funds and mandates, took charge of transportation planning, resource management, and eventually environmental protection. This arrangement led to a new form of fragmented regional planning, however, because single-purpose agencies were not required to coordinate their plans or match them to an integrated set of state policy objectives. Also, regional transportation and environmental planning were divorced from land use planning, which remained a local prerogative.

During the 1960s and 1970s, some negative consequences of suburban development—in particular, racial and social disparities and environmental damage—became more visible. Reformers made the most headway in the area of environmental protection, especially during the 1970s, but residents rebuffed efforts to centralize land use authority and to create strong, multipurpose, regional planning institutions. Eventually, federal and state measures prompted the development of new regional planning bodies. These included Councils of Governments (COGs), which continue to coordinate planning on a voluntary basis across a broad range of policy areas. However, COGs have rarely been able to able to forge, implement, and enforce strong regional plans.

Thus, regional planning was fashioned by single-purpose agencies with narrow mandates and COGs with broad

policy purview but little clout. During the 1980s and 1990s, this fractured planning system was strained by rapid population growth, the decentralization of jobs and housing, environmental constraints, and government gridlock. Federal cutbacks and property tax reform also shrank local coffers, and many localities sought to avoid new service costs, including those generated by new housing. When housing production lagged and affordability problems began to affect the state's middle-class residents, policymakers began to consider ways to align state and local incentives and regulations to meet regional housing needs. To maximize the benefits of public investments, they also sought better coordination between land use and regional transportation planning. Environmental regulators also sought to integrate environmental, transportation, and land use policy at a bioregional scale. Finally, business leaders advocated regional reform in response to an increasingly competitive and global economy.

The Third Wave: Reintegrating Regional Growth-Management Policy

Beginning in the 1990s, a third wave of regional planning reforms was under way. Ironically, many of the reformers resembled their Progressive Era precursors. Whereas earlier reformers sought to empower city governments to meet the challenges of the industrial age, many third-wave reformers advocated a kind of regional home rule that would again allow metropolitan areas to respond to changing economic conditions.

Third-wave reforms share two features: policy integration across functional areas and an emphasis on collaborative decisionmaking. Many reforms originated with federal and state transportation and environmental programs that devolved authority to the regional or county level and called for closer links between these planning areas and land-use policy. For example, CALFED, a joint effort to address water-management concerns in the San Joaquin Delta, relies on federal, state, and local collaboration to balance economic and environmental water uses. Likewise, the Natural Communities Conservation Planning Program has brought together state and federal agencies, local governments, landowners, developers, and others to reconcile species preservation with urban development. Although these organizations use stiff policy mandates to focus planning efforts, they rely on flexible decisionmaking and implementation.

Other examples of third-wave reforms extend policy integration even further. Twenty-one “collaborative regional initiatives” now promote economic competitiveness, social equity, and environmental quality across the state. Riverside County organized an effort to integrate transportation, land use, and environmental plans, and the San Diego area COG is attempting to develop a comprehensive plan that uses regional infrastructure funds to promote “smart-growth” land use.

Assessing the Third Wave and Its Prospects

Third-wave reforms are well suited to California's home rule tradition. They have worked best at a subregional level—for example, within counties—where they frequently benefit from existing relationships among local government officials. They have also been effective where policy objectives are clearly defined, either by strong policy mandates or by mutual benefits from a shared resource, such as a transportation corridor. Collaborative planning has been less successful in solving complex problems in multicounty metropolitan areas, or where the parties have not established a clear basis for cooperation. Also, many third-wave reform proposals have yet to overcome long-standing political obstacles to integrated planning. For example, land use remains a local prerogative, transportation funding is still allocated largely on the basis of geographic equity rather than regional need, and fiscal stalemates between the state and local governments have persisted.

Barbour concludes that effective regional planning will require active support from Sacramento, largely because the state defines the regulatory environment and affects regional outcomes with its own programs and investments. To eliminate barriers to cooperation, the state could enact fiscal reforms to minimize counterproductive competition among local governments and between the state and local governments. To reorient local planning toward regional needs, it could reward jurisdictions that develop transit-oriented multi-unit housing. The state could also strengthen regional governance more directly by supporting a collaborative process to align state, regional, and local investments as well as performance-oriented plans based on regional growth management objectives. Finally, the state could promote “regional home rule” reforms, including efforts to raise bond revenue for infrastructure needs arising from collaborative plans.

This research brief summarizes a report by Elisa Barbour, Metropolitan Growth Planning in California, 1900–2000 (2002, 223 pp., \$20.00, ISBN 1-58213-063-9). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, non-partisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.
