

Land use problems facing fast growing region

Land Use Issues in the USA's Pacific Northwest, *Seattle, Washington, USA, 12 February 1997*

The purpose of the meeting was to determine the status of land use problems in the Pacific Northwest. (The USA's Pacific Northwest includes the states of Washington, Idaho, and Oregon.) The event was organized by The Henry M. Jackson Foundation which was established to honor the memory of United States Senator Henry Jackson of Washington State. Land use policy was one of his major concerns and so it has been central to the work of the Foundation. The Foundation makes grants to public agencies and non-profit organizations in

support of their activities. While the Foundation has traditionally maintained a national focus, it recently became interested in the Pacific Northwest because of the rapid growth occurring in Henry Jackson's home region. The Foundation called the meeting to help shape future grant-making decisions by itself and other foundations.

Participants were invited to represent various points of view and geographic areas. Eighteen regional leaders came together including public administrators and planners, elected officials, environmental leaders, policy analysts, consul-

tants, journalists, professors, and attorneys.

This report provides a synthetic overview of the themes that emerged from the meeting.

Organizations and institutions

Leaders should work more assertively against local parochialism and articulate the view that communities are interdependent. State governors should take advantage of their public visibility and their access to explain why states have an interest in local planning. Local leaders should do more to point out how the destinies of separate communities are linked to one another and why there is a local responsibility to promote the regional general welfare. One reason that some local leaders fail to promote the regional general welfare is that they are overtly dependent on special interests that fund their election campaigns. Campaign finance reform is needed, particularly at the county level.

Institutional capacity for land use program monitoring and information sharing also is inadequate. We must do a better job of measuring and reporting on whether we are implementing land use plans and whether these plans are resulting in desired outcomes. Mechanisms such as clearinghouses and internet discussion groups should be increased in order to facilitate information sharing among communities on best practices and innovations.

Several impediments to effective land use planning exist in state law. First, there is not always a legal requirement for regional and local comprehensive planning. Second, structures are weak for citizen input on regional issues. Third, state laws and constitutions sometimes block the use of innovative public financial tools.

A new look at citizen involvement is needed. Local leaders need better information and training on how to manage public meetings and on how to recognize when public involvement is getting too costly compared to its benefits. Opinion polling and focus groups should be used more widely to give local leaders information on what citizens think, particularly when it differs from views being expressed at

public hearings. New ways of talking simply about technical land use issues are needed as are methods for giving citizens clear, uncomplicated yet realistic choices about their future. Finally, a continuing public discourse should be promoted that enables citizens to remain aware of their adopted visions for growth, the reasons why planning is needed in the first place, how individual projects relate to comprehensive plans, and how well we are doing in achieving planning objectives.

Citizen organizations should be strengthened. Many of the tasks that need to be accomplished can be accomplished by these groups. They should be helped to be the innovators, the educators, and the conveners.

Education

Citizen activists, government leaders, children, and the voting public need to become better informed about land use issues. Myths and misinformation are causing people to take decisions that are not in their own best interest and to oppose projects that would further the goals of their own adopted land use plans.

Voter education is needed on a number of topics including how land use is linked to transportation, how suburban sprawl can create social and environmental problems, how urban, suburban and rural communities are interdependent, how regions work as environmental systems, how many public investments have significantly positive payoffs for taxpayers, how the tax effort and level of investment in public facilities and services is low in our country compared to most others we admire, how it is possible for citizens to make a difference, and how there are many success stories of good land use planning.

Environmental groups should be targeted with information. In particular, they need to be encouraged to focus on human habits as much as they focus on animal habitats. Environmentalism needs to be supplemented with 'urbanism' in which the virtues of density and diversity are recognized for their social and environmental sustainability.

A tremendous opportunity for long term betterment lies with educating our youth about land conservation and development. Programs are needed that expand the scope of environmental education in our schools in many of the same ways that environmental groups need to expand their scope of work to include urban and land use issues.

Finally, local elected officials need help understanding the complexities of land use systems and land use planning. Small city officials are making decisions about how their communities will grow into big cities in the near future without sufficient information on land use planning subjects.

Innovative co-development

A number of things should be done to facilitate the creation of new land use patterns that break with past practices of urban sprawl. Overall, they would move us away from adversarial and regulatory models of land development toward collaborative approaches based on the principle that everyone shares responsibility for creating better land use practices, that the development industry cannot innovate on its own without support from public agencies and citizens, and that the public sector will have to take a more proactive, collaborative, and less regulatory posture toward preferred development practices.

First, local leaders, citizens, developers, and bankers should be brought together to explore how they can resolve their differences and work together toward a common vision. Second, these groups should be supported in building demonstration projects that can be models for both physical plans and decision making. Third, excellent examples of better land use should be identified, described, disseminated, and celebrated with awards. Fourth, regulatory barriers to innovative housing and commercial development should be identified and removed. Fifth, public infrastructure, particularly for transportation facilities, should be built in locations and ways that reinforce desired land use patterns. Parks and other amenities should be used to create value and promote growth where it is desired. Governors

should guide their state spending patterns to be consistent with desired land use outcomes. Federal legislators should also be assisted in promoting similar policies at the Federal level. Sixth, the public sector should bring funds to the development table to support infrastructure that shapes and channels development, to prepare specific plans for growing districts, to help assemble land for development and redevelopment and to help finance projects that are otherwise too risky or expensive.

Paying for what we value

Most high priority land use goals require public spending to be achieved. Whether it is transportation systems that promote desired land use patterns or open space networks to preserve critical habitats, public financial resources are either necessary or beneficial.

To help finance public facilities and services public agencies should be made more aware of the variety of financial instruments and strategies that are available. Techniques for working with private parties, political organizations, commissions and other special groups are particularly underused and deserve dissemination.

Ultimately, the public needs to be convinced that it should exert greater 'tax effort' and make more public investments if it is going to accomplish what it values. This might be achieved if there is wider citizen involvement in

setting ballot measure priorities, if citizens are presented with a compelling case that we spend much less on infrastructure (roads, schools, parks, habitat, etc.) than other nations with regions we admire, if we produced more research and public education on how many investments are highly cost-effective, and if more attention were paid to accounting for outcomes delivered by public infrastructure projects.

New visions

In two areas, new visions are needed for what we want to accomplish in the future. In these areas, we seem uncertain of how best to proceed and either new thinking or better information is needed.

The first of these areas is how we should grow in the 'exurban' rural areas outside our urban regions. Rapid population growth driven by second home development, retirements and edge city commuters are being accommodated in low density land use patterns. These patterns are wanted by those in favor of rural character but they undermine our ability to retain open space systems and to grow in ways that can be efficiently served with infrastructure. New thinking is needed about land use practices that preserve rural character, reduce rural sprawl, reduce rural traffic, avoid natural hazards, protect open space systems and can be efficiently served by public services and facilities.

State and regional economic development strategies that harmonize with sound land use practices is a second area where new visions are required. Land use plans based on preventing unwise change do little to help those in desperate need of sustainable economic development. At the same time, new developments that undermine the character and quality of rural and small town places are detrimental to the very elements that draw tourist dollars, retirees, and footloose industry. New ways of both promoting the development and preserving or enhancing the character of slower growing areas need to be explored and adopted.

Conclusion

Since the conference adjourned, the Henry M. Jackson Foundation has been shaping its Pacific Northwest land use program. The information produced by the meeting will help the Foundation identify projects that are most worthy of support. It is hoped that by sharing these proceedings here, others will understand some of the land use problems facing one of the fastest growing regions of North America and perhaps even recognize issues existing or developing in their own cities and regions.

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