LANDLINES

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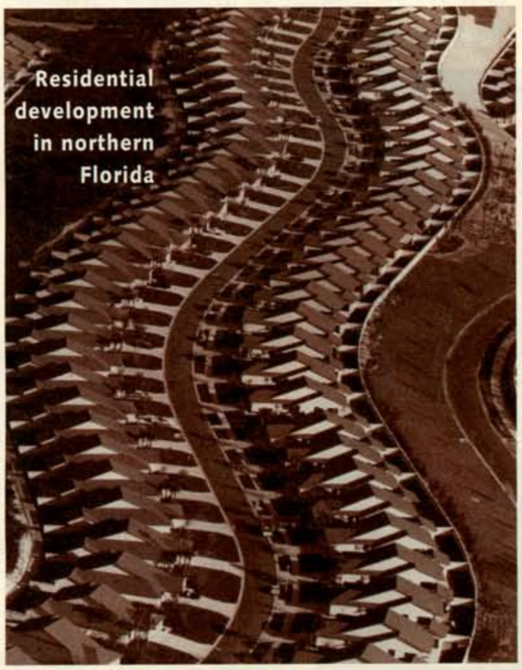
Taking Stock of Growth Management in the U.S.

by Gary Pivo, Ph.D.

Is growth management relevant to your community in 1992? Yes, it is. According to a recent national study, nearly every community in America is doing something to control the location, impact, character, or timing of development.

Growth management is an important issue in land policy despite the recent slump in economic growth nationwide. Seeking a broad perspective on development, the planning community has called for research into growth management that extends beyond the most well-known places.



Residential development in northern Florida

photo by Alex MacLean/LandSlides

The Growth Management Planning and Research Clearinghouse at the University of Washington is working on such a program. The study is based on mail and telephone surveys of senior planning officials from nearly two hundred randomly selected towns, cities, and counties, whose populations, growth trends, and social compositions reflect the diversity found across the nation. So far, we have learned how local governments are using growth management tools, what issues and goals the tools address, how effective they are, and what factors are associated with active and successful programs.

Problems and Politics

We began by studying the context of local planning. The leading problems planners face are economic stagnation, inadequate infrastructure, traffic congestion, and unaffordable housing. Respondents feel that economic and infrastructure problems will subside over time but that traffic congestion and unaffordable housing will get worse.

What interest group has been most significant in enacting growth management measures? We were surprised to find that the media is the only active and influential group in localities of all sizes. More traditional interest groups, such as planning commissions, businesses, neighborhoods, and environmentalists, are influential, but not in all types of jurisdictions.

Everyone's In the Act

Nearly every large and small town, city, and county we surveyed is managing growth in one way or another. Adequate infrastructure and neighborhood quality are by far the most common goals. The most popular tools—used by more than half of all jurisdictions—are adequate facilities requirements, planned unit development and cluster zoning, and subdivision controls.

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Strategic Urban Management in Mexico

Growth and change have brought a variety of problems to Monterrey, an industrial city of 2.5 million situated 180 miles south of Laredo, Texas, in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico. Recently, the city's improved access to American markets and the Mexican government's efforts to decentralize the nation's economy away from Mexico City have brought rapid growth to Monterrey.

Nuevo León's governor, Sócrates Rizzo García, is a former mayor of Monterrey who believes that the city's growth-related problems demand innovative policy approaches to encourage development in the urban center and discourage sprawl—especially "unofficial" housing on the urban fringe, to control air pollution from vehicles and industries and protect water supplies threatened by proximity to industrial and residential developments, to improve local government finance, and to enhance highways and mass transit. The governor's long-term vision, "growth with order," would foster economic growth while advancing environmental and

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Growth from page 1

Cities with populations over 25,000 use the greatest number of different growth management tools. In addition to the three noted above, large cities most often use zoning tools, such as critical areas regulations and downzoning; financing tools, such as local improvement districts; and land acquisition tools, such as fee simple acquisition.

Some highly publicized growth controls of the 1970s, including building permit caps, fair share housing, and regional tax sharing, are used infrequently today. On the other hand, certain innovations, such as planned unit development zoning, cluster zoning, and design review, are now used as much as traditional devices, like subdivision controls.

Is Growth Management Working?

Which tools are most effective in achieving their goals? Our respondents cited controlling access to public facilities (for example, temporary bans on sewer hookups), requiring adequate public facilities concurrent with new development, subdivision controls, and conditional zoning as highly effective. We observed that many of the most effective tools are used to pursue infrastructure goals. This may be because the public builds and owns infrastructure, making these facilities easier to manage than land and other resources that are privately owned.

We were also interested in tools that were rated low in effectiveness. Many innovations, including fair share housing, urban growth boundaries, and planned unit development, cluster, and performance zoning, were seldom rated highly effective. The same is true of several more restrictive growth controls, such as population caps and annual building permit limits. Still, some localities are succeeding with each of these devices.

This part of the survey revealed two important general patterns. First, less-populous jurisdictions report a high proportion of tools as highly effective. Second, popular tools are not necessarily effective, and effective tools are not necessarily popular. Thus, growth management can be improved generally by increasing the effectiveness of popular but less-effective tools, such as cluster development, and by increasing the use of unpopular but highly effective tools, such as fee-simple land acquisition.

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Are Communities That Manage Growth Different?

To answer this question, we studied the characteristics of jurisdictions in which the proportion of growth management tools being used is above or below average in effectiveness. Those who think their efforts are effective also rate highly their economies, infrastructure, and housing quality. In these communities, capital programs and development regulations must be consistent with comprehensive plans, and comprehensive plans are monitored and reviewed for compliance with state requirements. In fact, state oversight is the single most powerful factor we have found so far for predicting the effectiveness of a community's growth management tools. We found that jurisdictions with above-average numbers of tools are growing two to three times faster than others, have active and influential business, real estate, and neighborhood and environmental groups, and spend more on planning per capita than communities with fewer growth management tools.

Our findings provide evidence relevant to two common assumptions about growth management: first, that growth management reduces housing affordability, and second, that it is practiced today only by small, white, upper-class communities. We found no difference in housing affordability between jurisdictions with above- and below-average numbers of growth management tools. Apparently, having a large number of tools enacted is less important than are the effects of those tools on the housing market. We also found no difference in the population size, income, or racial composition of communities with above- and below-average numbers of tools.

What Have We Learned?

Although we know that our findings need follow-up, we learned a great deal from this survey. We learned that some innovative tools are now used as frequently as traditional ones, while other innovations have spread very little. We learned that the media is an important actor in the planning process (See article on journalists' forum, page 5). We learned that most tools are being used to meet infrastructure and neighborhood quality goals but that other leading problems are receiving much less attention. We learned that there are opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of popular tools and the popularity of effective ones.

And we learned some important characteristics of communities with effective growth management tools. For policymakers, perhaps the most significant lesson is that monitoring local plans for conformance with state requirements is the one factor that most strongly distinguishes communities with highly effective growth management programs from communities with less effective programs. This supports the statewide growth management laws in Oregon, Florida, and elsewhere. It also suggests that other states would benefit by adopting similar laws.

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