

Statewide Planning In North Carolina: Experiences from Other States and a Survey of Existing County Planning

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Can North Carolina resolve potential obstacles and successfully implement a statewide planning program? This article explores this question by examining three other statewide planning programs and their impetus. The paper then presents a survey of all 100 North Carolina counties to assess the status of planning in the state as seen by practitioners. Finally, the paper recommends a course of action for the state.

Origins of Statewide Planning Efforts

Early efforts

During the Depression era, many states experimented with state goals and plans, although few programs outlived the decade. The suburbanization of the 1950's and 1960's led to a number of state and federal initiatives, such as the Housing Act of 1949. While these programs did provide the framework for planning legislation, there were no truly comprehensive planning initiatives since each effort dealt with a single issue. For example, the state of Hawaii passed legislation in 1961 to protect pineapple-growing regions from development pressures - but the legislation did not address other land use and economic issues (DeGrove 1984:56).

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The "first wave"

According to many planning theorists, federal and state officials did not comprehensively consider the implications of hundreds of local plans and their statewide and regional impacts until the advent of the environmental movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's (DeGrove 1990). The federal laws and regulations that resulted from this movement substantially reordered the roles of federal, state and local government agencies. While these efforts focused on protection of clean water and air, they also paved the way for citizen-based, managed-growth movements in several states and were responsible for the nation's initial statewide comprehensive planning programs (DeGrove 1990).

The first statewide planning program was adopted by Vermont in 1970, but subsequent entries into the field have stolen the show. Florida followed Vermont with a statewide comprehensive planning program in 1972. Florida's program gained national recognition for its strong, centralized state role, and for the importance placed on the concurrent timing between growth and infrastructure needs. In 1973 Oregon created a goal-oriented statewide program that featured special consideration of farm and forest lands, and the designation of areas for urban service provision.

The "second wave"

New statewide planning programs waned along with the environmental movement in the middle to late 1970's. However, interest in statewide programs reawakened in the mid-1980's in a "second wave" of statewide planning initiatives (Sigel 1992).

The "second wave" states shared common

The phrase “statewide comprehensive planning” entered the jargon of government during the last quarter-century. The definition of the term varies from state to state, but statewide comprehensive planning may generally be defined as a program in which a set of statewide plans, goals, and objectives are produced in areas such as land use, economic development, housing, transportation, and other issues. In most cases, statewide comprehensive planning programs also provide a mandate for local governments to create or refine a local comprehensive plan, and/or ensure that the local plan conforms to the state’s adopted goals and policies. In some states, local plans are reviewed by regional or state agencies for conformance. The measures of compliance enforcement vary widely, from withholding of state-shared revenues to little enforcement at all.

concerns: high rates of population and economic growth, increasing suburban congestion, and infrastructure constraints. Florida began this phase in 1985 by strengthening its program. Between 1986 and 1992 New Jersey, Vermont (a follow-up program), Maine, Rhode Island, Georgia, Washington and Maryland created programs of their own.

Over the past quarter-century, a total of 33 states have adopted or considered programs to link state goals, policies and plans with those of local governments (Cobb 1994). As of 1994 twenty four states had some form of mandatory planning program. However, only nine (Vermont, Florida, Oregon, New Jersey, Maine, Rhode Island, Georgia, Washington and Maryland) of those programs could truly be defined as having a growth management function (Sigel 1992).

Case Studies from Other States

Florida (1972 to present)

It is not difficult to see why Florida was a likely candidate for state involvement in comprehensive planning. In 1950 the state contained 3 million residents, and coastal development was localized and sporadic. By 1970, the population had increased to 6.8 million, with a significant shift in population and development to coastal areas, threatening sensitive ecosystems. Destruction of wetlands and threats to drinking water supplies fueled the environmental movement in the state. A task force charged with examining the state’s carrying capacity called for management of water resources and conservation of special natural sites and critical environmentally sensitive lands. The legislature passed legislation to this effect in 1972 (DeGrove 1984:103-105).

A companion law enacted in 1975 required every local government to adopt plans approved by the State

Department of Community Affairs. The Local Government Comprehensive Planning Act mandated that local plans be prepared by July 1, 1976. All cities were able to comply with the deadline (five allowed the county to assume responsibility). However, only 11 of 67 counties had submitted plans by 1978 (DeGrove 1984:162).

While the 1972 and 1975 legislation addressed many concerns, the laws did not adequately account for demands on the state’s infrastructure, particularly roads, public water and sewer systems, and recreation facilities. The principal problem was a lack of funding for infrastructure improvements to go along with the provisions of state-mandated comprehensive plans, a concern cited by many local governments across the nation.

Florida Atlantic/International University professor John DeGrove, one of the leaders of the Florida effort, summed up the problem:

During the 1970s, Florida still dwelled in a kind of ‘fools paradise’, in which it believed that growth automatically paid for itself, and that sooner or later new growth would cause all the needed infrastructure to be put in place to support the impacts of growth. It was not until that notion was put aside in the 1980s that Florida began to face its growth management problems. [DeGrove 1990]

In 1985, the legislature adopted the State Comprehensive Planning Act of 1985 and the Omnibus Growth Management Act. These bills put “teeth” in the previous programs by requiring integrated and mandatory planning at the state, regional and local levels and by creating a set of requirements that addressed the quality of the plans and the provision of a “reasonable” means of implementation.

of the findings, all of which have been approved by the state legislature.

Oregon (1973 to present)

With a reputation as an environmentally conscious state, Oregon has long been noted for its interest in the protection of rural character and quality of life. This interest has prompted some to label it a “no-growth” state.

There are two potential catalysts for Oregon’s program: the influx of California transplants seeking refuge from that state’s urban transportation problems (Cobb 1994), and the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts. In 1973, a citizens’ group lobbied the state legislature to focus the state’s efforts in this area, and the state responded by enacting the Comprehensive Land Use Planning Coordination Act.

Goal-setting is a prominent feature of the Oregon program. Some of the program’s goals include:

- protection of the state’s quality of life (livability),
- protection of agricultural activities and managed forest land as open space,
- provision of adequate affordable housing,
- energy conservation, and
- broad-based efforts to control air pollution and traffic congestion.

The act created the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) and required each city and county to adopt a land use plan and implement the plan with zoning and subdivision regulations. The LCDC was charged with assisting local governments in the development of the plans and reviewing the plans for consistency with state goals. The plans are supplemented with inventories of existing land uses and are updated every two to seven years.

The state’s goals called for the inclusion of basic elements such as management implementation measures on building codes, sign ordinances and zoning. The act also required that the plans cover public facilities and annexation and include a capital improvements plan.

Perhaps the most noteworthy element of the Oregon program was the designation of Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs), an urbanization boundary

concept later borrowed by other governments (including some in North Carolina). Municipalities protect rural character and farming by providing incentives and adequate infrastructure for higher densities within the UGBs (Sigel 1992). Tom Harry is Associate Planning Director of Washington County, Oregon, a fast-growing county in the Portland metropolitan area. With the growth pressures in Washington County, Harry sees the need for the urban services boundary and describes it as “the best part of the program” (Harry 1996).

The Oregon program is arguably the most successful in the nation. According to some, the only real problem with the program is that it was untested in the first fifteen years. During that period Oregon had a relatively stable economy and a slow development market; conditions changed markedly in 1990s. Now some urban growth areas are running out of room because of an unwillingness to support very high densities (Sigel 1992). These jurisdictions may be faced with drawing a new urban boundary in the next several years.

Georgia (1989 to present)

In Georgia the initial push for statewide planning came from concern about both resource protection and regional economic development.

Unlike Florida and Oregon, the Georgia legislature remained somewhat skeptical of statewide planning, leaving the Governor to provide leadership (Youngquist 1990). In 1987 Governor Joe Frank Harris appointed the Growth Strategies Commission, whose recommendations led the legislature to adopt the Georgia Coordinated Planning Act of 1989. The act required all cities and counties to adopt

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comprehensive land use plans, implement zoning, and create minimum protection criteria for wetlands, aquifer recharge areas and watersheds. The act also created two new state agencies: the Governor's Development Council and the Department of Community Affairs (DCA).

The Governor's Development Council was charged with coordinating long-range state agency planning, including the construction and location of public facilities. DCA is charged with overseeing local and regional planning, and providing staff assistance where needed. Local plans must include community goals, an inventory of the existing situation, and an implementation strategy. The plans must also address six elements: population, economic development, natural and historic resources, community facilities, housing, and land use. However, the state has little authority in how these elements are addressed.

The sense of regionalism in Georgia is strong, with great diversity between the urban areas of Atlanta and Savannah and the rural areas of northwest and southwest Georgia. Because of this historic regionalism, the state act makes regions, through Regional Development Centers (RDCs), the primary level of planning. The RDCs review all local plans and provide technical assistance. The regional plans are prepared based on the submitted local plans. The RDCs also compile a regional database, review local actions of regional impact, and mediate disputes or conflicts among different jurisdictions.

One important difference from other statewide programs is that the Governor's Development Council will develop the state plan from the regional plans. While the state may eventually withhold infrastructure financing from local or regional governments that do not meet the new requirements, the state has little final say in the elements of local and regional plans.

Because the Georgia program has only been in effect since 1989, it is difficult to judge the success of its regional, bottom-up approach. However, the program has won praise for dramatically increasing the number of local governments involved in planning. As of December 1994, over 575 local plans had been submitted to DCA for approval. In addition, the program continues to be supported by both of Georgia's local government associations, lending further credibility to the process (Youngquist 1995).

Jim Youngquist, Assistant Director of the Institute for Community and Area Development at the University of Georgia, has watched the Georgia

plan unfold and believes the program has been successful in involving local governments in a coordinated planning process. However, there are concerns about the relative success of the Regional Development Centers. The lack of private sector members on RDC boards and the independent nature of some local governments has made the RDC's role more difficult. In addition, the "going through the motions" approach of some local governments - viewing plans only as a vehicle to qualify for state funding - has posed problems in creating a plan that can be sustained at the next level (Youngquist 1995).

This view is confirmed by Lee Carmon, AICP, Director of Local Planning for the Northeast Georgia RDC. "Joint plans have been beneficial for smaller jurisdictions that don't have their own staff. But only about 20% of our counties are using the plans that have been created. We've had success stories, but some have been frustrating because of failure to implement the plans." Carmon cites the lack of implementation as the program's most significant drawback:

Overall the program has been good. The local governments would never have done plans if not for the statewide program. But if I could change the program, I'd do three things. First and most important, I'd require implementation of the plans. Next, we need to develop different standards for different size jurisdictions. Finally, we need more information on protection of resources through environmental standards. [Carmon 1996]

North Carolina in 1994: A Survey of Counties

In addition to the experiences of other states, information about the current status of local planning can provide valuable insight into the scale and type of statewide program that would be most effective in North Carolina. To this end the article presents and analyzes the results of a survey on the level of planning and attitudes toward a possible statewide effort among the state's 100 counties.

Survey Methodology

The survey of all 100 counties was conducted from January to May, 1994. If the county had a Planning Director, he or she was the call target. In other cases, managers, assistant managers, county

clerks—and in a few cases, elected officials—were respondents. All 100 counties responded to the survey.

Individual responses to questions about local attitudes toward planning and the possibility of a statewide planning program have been kept confidential to allow for candid appraisal of public and elected board opinions.

Analysis of Survey Results

Most counties do employ some type of planning staff; almost two-thirds (64%) of the 100 counties have at least a Planning Director. In addition, most counties have also adopted some type of county plan. Seventy percent of North Carolina counties have a basic land use plan, but less than one in five (18%) have what could be termed a multiple-element comprehensive plan. The majority of the counties with full comprehensive plans are located in the Piedmont, although there are counties with comprehensive plans along the coast and in some mountain areas.

As of 1994 none of these plans were over 25 years old, with the oldest dating from 1971. Many counties have plans which were made prior to 1971, but have updated or rewritten versions currently in place. The survey also revealed that 28 of the 70 counties with plans (40%) have adopted updates to their plan since 1990, and another 11 updates are in progress.

Just over one county in three (36%) had countywide zoning in 1994, and most of these counties are located in the state's three metropolitan areas of Charlotte, the Triad or the Triangle. Only 41% of the counties have zoning in place in over half of their jurisdiction, and almost one-half of the counties (47%) apply zoning in less than 25% of their jurisdiction. Over three-quarters (76%) regulate land subdivision activity.

However, it should be noted that while many North Carolina counties have zoning, there is a wide disparity in the degree which the tool enforces a local plan. Only 17% of the counties responded that zoning districts must be consistent with the plan. Some respondents indicated that the plan is more likely to be amended on the basis of a rezoning request rather than the reverse, possibly indicating that a large

number of county plans may be “shelf documents” with little impact on land use decisions.

Respondents were asked to rank citizen attitudes toward planning issues in general. Eighty percent felt that their county citizens are either slightly negative or ambivalent toward land use planning policies, while 19% ranked their constituencies as somewhat positive to positive in their response to planning programs.

When asked “How would current elected officials in your county likely react to a state program which offered assistance in local economic development and planning, and coordinated counties, regions and the state,” 43% of administrators felt that their elected

officials would respond positively. Another 41% projected a wait-and-see response from elected officials, while only 15% expected a negative response.

Seventeen administrators added the same thought: adequate funding by the state for such a program would play a key role in eliciting a positive response from elected officials.

Administrators themselves were even more positive

about a potential statewide program. Asked how they would respond to the same question, 79% responded positively, with only four percent negative.

Regional Analysis of Survey Results

Planning Directors are more common in the Piedmont (85% of counties) than in the other two regions (approximately one-half of the counties). Not surprisingly, this pattern applies to plans as well. Almost one-half of the mountain counties (43%) and almost one in four eastern counties (23%) have no plan at all, whereas in the Piedmont 91% of counties have a plan of some kind.

The pattern does not extend to comprehensive plans; 22% of mountain counties, 29% in the Piedmont and 16% of counties in the east have comprehensive plans. The fact that fewer eastern counties have taken the step to comprehensive plans is noteworthy, since 20 of the 43 counties in this region are required by the Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA) to have a land use plan. This may indicate that mandating land use plans in the coastal

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region has served to discourage plans of a more comprehensive nature.

A look at these 20 counties provides more evidence that the state mandate has not encouraged planning on a larger scale. While expected positive responses from elected officials ranged from 42% to 52% in the three regions, the coastal counties show only a 25% expected positive response. One in five of those surveyed expected a negative response, while over half (55%) expected a wait-and-see approach. Compared to the rest of the state, the response from administrators was lukewarm; almost one in three (30%) were noncommittal or negative toward the possibility of a statewide program. Despite the existence of land use plans, only 60% of CAMA counties have a zoning ordinance in place, and less than half (45%) were active with their council of government.

Conventional wisdom would predict that mountain counties are likely to be opposed to planning initiatives, and would locate the relative strength of local planning in the Piedmont (Holman, 1991). Surprisingly, the strongest support of the three regions is found in the mountains, where respondents in 52% of the counties expected positive feedback from elected officials in 1994. Conversely, the strongest negative response is found in the Piedmont counties, where 21% expected that elected officials might not support a statewide program. The Piedmont, with its longer experience with local planning, had the lowest "wait-and-see" response at 25%, indicating that perhaps experience with local planning programs has provided a clearer perspective.

The Partnership for Quality Growth

On May 3, 1991, the North Carolina General Assembly adopted Joint Resolution 1157, authorizing the Statewide Comprehensive Planning Committee (SCPC) "to study and develop a state-mandated comprehensive planning program." In its deliberations, the SCPC received presentations on other states' programs and held several regional meetings and public hearings across the state. On December 15, 1992, the Committee completed its initial work and adopted a draft bill to create a blue-ribbon task force called the Partnership for Quality Growth. The task force would be composed of equal appointments made by the House, Senate and Governor and would be charged with identifying state goals and needs and addressing the specifics of a growth management program. The proposed bill

expanded the focus to include economic development and identified a number of issues:

1. The need for local governments to have the ability to plan according to their own needs in a statewide process.
2. Financial and technical assistance and incentives to plan.
3. Coordination and oversight.
4. Educational forums to enhance the public's understanding of the need for statewide planning.
5. Caution about increasing levels of bureaucracy.
6. The need to complete a balanced and thorough study of statewide planning.

However, the very formation of the Partnership is very much in question as a result of political changes since 1991. Most recently, the defeat of SCPC co-chairman J.K. Sherron in the 1996 primary left the effort without a legislative leader, although former House co-chair Tim Hardaway will return to the General Assembly and may pick up the issue. The General Assembly failed to enact the bill in 1993, remanding it back for further research that did not occur. In the 1994 session, a General Assembly with a substantial number of new members lumped the issue into the "State and Local Government Fiscal Relations and Trends Study Commission" as one of 13 issues for research.

Charting a Course for North Carolina

The lessons from the experiences of other states and information from the survey of counties point to several recommendations as North Carolina considers statewide planning.

Provide Adequate Funding and Staff

The Partnership for Quality Growth will need to address a variety of issues left by the Statewide Comprehensive Planning Committee. A lack of staff resources clearly made their work more difficult. The Legislature should provide at least two full-time staff persons and enlist academic experts on a contract basis.

Inventory the Status of Planning in Cities and Counties

A survey of the status of city and town planning may reveal a significant disparity between the planning resources of the state's cities and counties. In addition, a follow-up survey of the state's counties may prove instructive to assess political changes in the last two years.

Provide Public Education and Conflict Resolution

One of the most acclaimed aspects of the Georgia approach has been the role of the Regional Development Councils as mediators between feuding jurisdictions. North Carolina Councils of Government could perform a similar role. In addition, the public education component was a key part of the process outlined by the Statewide Comprehensive Planning Committee. Educating local elected officials of the mission and mutual benefits of the effort should be the first phase of the program.

Balance Resource Protection and Economic Development Goals

The North Carolina *Economic Development Strategy*, created in 1994, offers an excellent opportunity to engage the private sector in dialogue about a truly comprehensive program. An integrated, coordinated approach that balances economic development goals with sustainable development and resource protection would enhance the chance for a successful program.

Strengthen and Utilize the Regional Councils of Government

Much can be learned by examining all of the statewide planning programs. Because of its dispersed settlement patterns, diverse regions and historical skepticism of planning, the Georgia approach appears to be the best model for a program in North Carolina. North Carolina currently has 18 regional councils of government (COG's) that serve as the focus for regional cooperation. However, membership in many COG's has been fluid, with some local governments unwilling to participate consistently. Over one-third (38%) of North Carolina counties do not consider themselves active with their regional Council of Government. If a modified Georgia model is to work in North Carolina, mandatory participation in the

COG's may be needed to ensure that interjurisdictional concerns are addressed. **CP**

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