

Land Use Planning and Growth Management in the American West

During the past two years, state planners in 13 western states have met in the Western State Planning Leadership Retreat, an annual event sponsored by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and the Western Consensus Council. Co-sponsors include the Western Governors' Association, the Council of State Governments—*WEST*, and the Western Planners' Association. The retreats provide a forum for state-level planners to compare their experiences, learn from each other's successes and failures, and build a common base of experience for planning in their states and across the region. Rather than promote a particular approach to planning and growth management, the retreats encourage planners to explore a range of strategies for responding to growth and land use issues in the West. This article summarizes what we have learned during the first two retreats in 2000 and 2001.

MATTHEW MCKINNEY
and WILL HARMON

The West is changing. New forces and trends are redefining the region's quality of life, communities and landscapes, directly influencing how we approach land use planning and growth management. One force that sets the West apart from other regions of the country is the overwhelming presence of the landscape. The West has more land and fewer people than any other region, yet is also very urbanized. More people live in urban centers than in rural communities.

The dominance of land in the politics and public policy of the West is due in part to the large amount of land governed by federal and tribal entities (see Figure 1). More than 90 percent of all federal land in the U.S. lies in Alaska and the 11 westernmost contiguous states. The U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manage most of the West's geography and significantly influence the politics of land use decisions. Indian tribes govern one-fifth of the interior West and are key players in managing water, fish and wildlife.

The West is also the fastest growing region of the country (see Figure 2). The five fastest-growing states of the 1990s were Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Utah and Idaho. Between 1990 and 1998, the region's cities grew by 25 percent and its

rural areas by 18 percent, both significantly higher rates than elsewhere in the U.S. As western demographics diversify, the political geography has grown remarkably homogeneous. Following the 2000 elections, Republicans held three-quarters of the congressional districts in the interior West (see Figure 3) and all governorships except the coastal states of California, Oregon and Washington.

Within these trends, western state planners recognize a variety of common challenges: pockets of explosive population growth, sprawl, drought, out-of-date legislation, a lack of funding, and a lack of public and political support for planning and changing the way development occurs in the West. They also point out many

differences in their states' approaches to planning. Oregon and Hawaii have long-standing statewide land use planning efforts, but planning in Nevada is a recent phenomenon, limited mainly to the Las Vegas and Reno areas. Vast federal holdings in Nevada, Idaho and Utah dictate land use management more than in other states, and Arizona and New Mexico share planning responsibilities with many sovereign tribal governments. Alaska and Wyoming—with small populations and little or no growth—do very little planning.

Major Themes

Based on the first two retreats, we have identified six major themes related to planning and growth in the West.

FIGURE 1 Federal Government Lands in the U.S.



Source: Center for Rocky Mountain West, The University of Montana, 1997, based on data from the U.S. Geological Survey.

Why plan? How can we build public and political support for planning?

Historically, planning was motivated by a concern to promote orderly development of the landscape, preserve some open spaces, and provide consistency among develop-



“This (the West) is the native home of hope. When it fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.”

Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (Penguin Books 1980, 38)



ments. These continue to be important objectives, but they are insufficient for building public and political support. Particularly during economic recession, planning takes a back seat—the public can focus on only so many problems at once. Today, the most compelling argument for planning is that it can be a vehicle to promote economic development and sustain the quality of life. People move to the West and create jobs because they like the quality of life in the region, and planners need to tap into this motivation.

In Utah, for example, quality of life is an economic imperative, so state planners tie their work to enhancing quality of life rather than to limiting or directing growth. It is used to integrate economic vitality and environmental protection. Several years ago, business leaders and others created Envision Utah, a private-public partnership. Participants use visualization techniques and aerial photos, mapping growth as it might occur without planning, and then again under planned cluster dev-

elopments with greenbelts and community centers. These “alternative futures” scenarios help citizens picture the changes that are coming and the alternatives for guiding those changes in their communities. As Utah’s state planner says, “Growth will happen, and our job is to preserve quality. That way, when growth slows, we will still have a high quality of life.”

Kent Briggs, executive director for the Council of State Governments—WEST (a regional association for state legislators), and Jim Souby, executive director of the Western Governors’ Association, acknowledge the difficulty of nurturing public and political support for growth management in the West. They agree that political power shifts quickly from one party to the other, and yet is a lagging indicator of cultural, demographic and economic change. Governors and legislators might be more convinced to support land use planning, they say, by using visualization techniques to help them understand the costs of existing patterns of development, and to picture the desired future of our communities and landscapes.

How much planning is enough, and who should be in the driver’s seat?

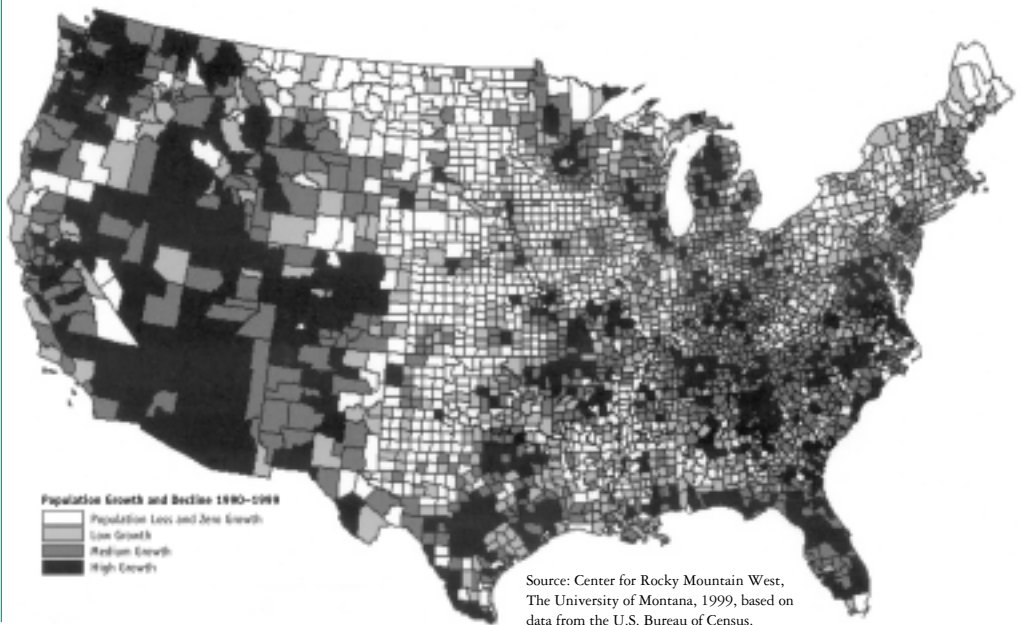
Arizona and Colorado have smart growth programs designed to help communities

plan for growth and preserve open space. In the November 2000 elections, citizen initiatives in both states introduced some of the nation’s most stringent planning requirements, but both initiatives failed by a 70 to 30 percent vote, suggesting that citizens want to maintain flexibility and freedom—and local control—when it comes to planning and growth management. The story is similar in Hawaii, where business profitability—not zoning maps—directs land use. In May 2001, Hawaii’s governor vetoed a smart growth initiative because it was perceived as being too environmental and would limit developers’ ability to convert agricultural lands.

This emphasis on home rule or local control is supported by a recent survey of citizens in Montana, conducted by the Montana Association of Realtors. In the survey, 67 percent of respondents said that city or county governments should have the power to make land use decisions, while 60 percent opposed increasing state involvement in managing growth-related problems.

In Oregon, citizens narrowly passed Measure 7, an initiative requiring state and local governments to pay private property owners for any regulations that restrict the use or reduce the value of real property. While the impacts and constitutionality

FIGURE 2 U.S. County Population Growth and Decline, 1990–1999



of this initiative are still being debated, it sends a strong message to planners in a state that has had one of the most progressive land use and growth management programs for 25 years. The message, according to Oregon's state planner, is to not rest on your successes, and to keep citizens and communities engaged in an ongoing discussion about the effectiveness of land use planning. He also stressed the need to balance preservation with appropriate development, emphasizing that "good planning doesn't just place limits on growth and development."



Subdivision, Phoenix, Arizona

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recently presented the state legislature with a regional plan that emphasizes resolving growth issues locally rather than at the state level.

In New Mexico, the city and county of Santa Fe each recently updated their comprehensive land use plans. The plans were fine, except that they were stand-alones prepared with no coordination. Citizens demanded better integration of planning efforts and pushed for a new regional planning authority. Within 18 months, citizens and officials developed a joint land use plan for the five-mile zone around

What is the role of state government?

Douglas Porter, keynote speaker at the first retreat and a nationally known consultant on land use and growth policy, says that one of the most important state roles is to offset the lack of will to plan at the local level. He says that state programs should support local planning efforts, and should try to engage the "big players," such as transportation departments, to work with local jurisdictions. Porter also suggests that state governments can maintain their state's economic competitiveness by encouraging local communities to improve their quality of life through infill, redevelopment, and preserving the natural environment.

Oregon's state government attracted \$20 million in federal funding to help communities overhaul zoning ordinances and remove obstacles to mixed uses. Colorado created an Office of Smart Growth to provide technical assistance on comprehensive planning; document best practices for planning and development; maintain a list of qualified mediators for land use disputes; and provide grants for regional efforts in high growth areas. In Arizona, Montana and New Mexico, state planning offices provide a range of technical services to assist communities, such as clarifying state laws, promoting public participation, and fostering intergovernmental coordination.

Jim Souby suggests that one of the

most effective roles of state government is to promote market-based strategies and tax incentives. "Tax what you don't like, subsidize what you do like," Souby says. Other incentives might include cost sharing and state investment strategies—similar to Maryland and Oregon—to drive development in a positive direction.

How can regional approaches to land use planning complement state actions?

Regionalism allows multiple jurisdictions to share common resources and manage joint services, such as water treatment facilities and roads. In Washington, citizens recently rejected the top-down smart growth model popularized in Florida due to concerns over home rule and private property rights. In response, the state legislature approved a system of regional planning boards that instill some statewide consistency while allowing for regional and local differences.

Nevada, despite double-digit growth in the Las Vegas and Reno areas, does not have a state planning office. However, the legislature mandated Washoe County (home of Reno and Sparks) to create a regional planning commission to address growth issues jointly rather than in a piecemeal manner. Key municipal and county officials in Clark County (Las Vegas) formed their planning coalition *voluntarily*—compelled to cooperate by the highest growth rate in the nation. This coalition

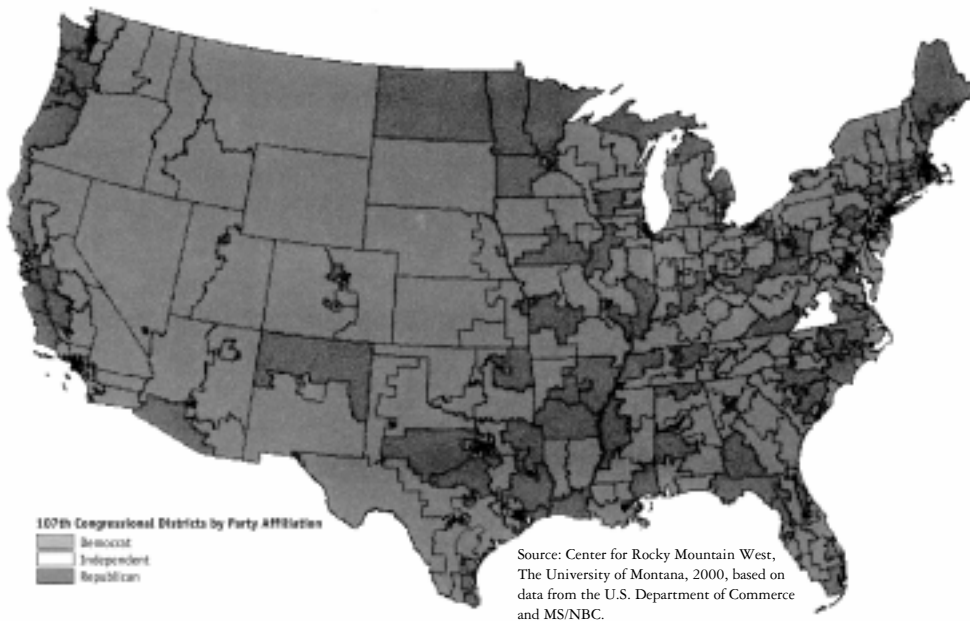
the city, and the regional authority is now developing zoning districts and an annexation plan. In Idaho, city and county officials in Boise voluntarily created the Treasure Valley Partnership as a forum to discuss policies for controlling sprawl, and to coordinate the delivery of services. They are also reviewing the possibility of light rail development.

Regional approaches are gaining momentum, but they also create new challenges. For example, the city of Reno has been reluctant to join the neighboring city of Sparks and Washoe County in revising their regional plan. With no enforcement or penalty at the state level, the other jurisdictions can do little to encourage Reno's involvement. Likewise, New Mexico has no policy framework for regional planning and thus no guidelines on how to share taxing authority, land use decision making and enforcement responsibilities.

Foster effective planning and growth management through collaboration.

Collaboration can be defined many ways, but most planners agree with the premise that if you bring together the right people with good information they will create effective, sustainable solutions to their shared problems. Collaborative forums allow local officials to weigh and balance competing viewpoints, and to learn more about the issues at hand. According to

FIGURE 3 107th Congressional Districts Political Party Affiliation



Jim Souby, local efforts should incorporate federal land managers because they play such a dominant role in the region's political geography. Kent Briggs agrees that collaboration, when done correctly, allows the people most affected by land use decisions to drive the decisions. Collaborative processes, when they include *all* affected interests, can generate enormous political power, even when such efforts do not have any formal authority. While it may be appropriate in some cases to have national or state goals, it is ultimately up to the people who live in the communities and watersheds of the West to determine their future, according to Briggs.

How do we measure success?

In 1998, the Arizona legislature passed the Growing Smarter Act, which was amended in 2000, and created a Growing Smarter Commission. The act reformed land use planning and zoning policies and required more public participation in local planning. The commission recommended that the state should monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of land use planning on an ongoing basis. The governor recently appointed an oversight council to continue this work, but council members say that

clear benchmarks are needed against which to evaluate the effectiveness of land use planning—a percentage of open space preserved, for example, or a threshold on new development that triggers tighter growth restrictions. Arizona law, however, simply identifies the issues that must be addressed in comprehensive land use plans. It does not set specific standards or expectations, making meaningful evaluation impossible. This brings us full circle to our first theme—Why are we planning?

The Three Cs of Planning

Three recommendations emerge from the western state planners' retreats that can be implemented throughout the country.

First, identify the most **compelling** reason to plan in your community. What are you trying to promote, or prevent? Be explicit about the values driving the planning process. Emphasize the link between quality of life, economic development and land use planning as a way to sustain the economy and the environment. Remember that people must have meaningful reasons to participate constructively in the planning process.

Second, rely on **collaborative** approaches. Engage the full range of stakeholders, and

do it in a meaningful way. A good collaborative process generates a broader understanding of the issues—since more people are sharing information and ideas—and also leads to more durable, widely supported decisions. Collaboration may also be the most effective way to accommodate the needs and interests of local citizens within a regional approach and when the state's role is limited.

Third, foster **regional connections**. Recognize that planning is an ongoing process, not a product to be produced and placed on a shelf. Link the present to the future using visualization and alternative futures techniques. Build monitoring and evaluation strategies into plan implementation. Encourage regional approaches that build on a common sense of place and address transboundary issues. Emphasize that regionalism can lead to greater efficiencies and economies of scale by coordinating efforts and sharing resources. **□**

MATTHEW MCKINNEY is executive director of the Western Consensus Council in Helena, Montana, a nonprofit organization that helps citizens and officials shape effective natural resource and other public policy through inclusive, informed and deliberative public processes.

WILL HARMON is the communications coordinator for the Western Consensus Council and a freelance writer based in Helena. Contact: mmckinney@state.mt.us or wbarmon@ixi.net.

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