

Sustainable Communities Strategies: A Tool for Equitable Regional Planning

By Paul Ainger and Jon Ellison for the Coalition on Regional Equity

Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, land use decisions and transportation investment patterns in the Sacramento region have often been made by a combination of people and institutions with vested interests, including real estate developers, banks and other lenders, auto manufacturers, oil companies and professional planners. Their efforts were supported by federal, state and local governments who developed policies and programs that helped create a built environment featuring large, highly-segregated, sprawling low-density subdivisions at the expense of the older inner-city neighborhoods. These policies and programs included substantial funding for the interstate highway system, federal housing guarantees that discriminated against low income people and people of color, and zoning laws that encouraged single family subdivision development.

These efforts produced unequal results, with low income communities receiving a marginal share of investment and attention. Over time, the built environment clearly advantaged wealthy interests who lived in low cost single family homes, attended the best schools, and had access to cars and jobs. On the other side, low income families and people of color lived in segregated, neglected, mostly inner-city and older neighborhoods with limited access to transportation and jobs. Further, these investments were decided without thoughtful evaluation of the potential impact on open space, air quality and natural resources.

At the same time, it has become clear that seemingly local land use decisions have an increasingly regional impact. For a simple example, the cities of Folsom and Elk Grove developed auto malls which produce attractive income streams for local government. These auto malls have led to flight of auto dealerships from Florin Road in the city of Sacramento, which in turn led to a decline in the tax base of southern Sacramento and created acres of empty lots in an area that houses a high percentage of people of color who earn low wages.

In recent years, many Sacramento area groups have taken notice of the problems that conventional land use policies have created in the community. These groups understand that people of all incomes deserve access to good schools, nutritious food, jobs, transportation options and services. People understand the link between sound and sustainable land use planning and social justice. They also understand that land use decisions have regional impact and deserve region-wide solutions. Several new planning processes give residents of the Sacramento region a greater opportunity to influence long range planning.

One of the initial region-wide approaches to correct this history of lopsided investment and to change the way land use decisions are made is the Blueprint¹ adopted by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG). The Blueprint, formally adopted in 2004, encourages regional strategies that promote compact, mixed-use development and more transit choices as an alternative to low density development. Coordinated, equitable, environmentally intelligent planning efforts can help ensure that the Sacramento region will grow in a way that benefits all residents, preserves natural and historical assets, and builds and sustains productive and healthy communities. Though far from perfect, the Blueprint has helped spur efforts by community groups to develop regional land use decisions that have smart, environmentally sustainable results and that promote social justice throughout the Sacramento region.

Background

SACOG's Blueprint for coordinated land use and transportation planning in the Sacramento region formed the basis for California Senate Bill 375 (SB 375)² in 2008. This bill encourages transit oriented development (TOD) that will create sustainable, walkable communities and reduce vehicle miles traveled and green house gas (GHG) emissions. This is to be accomplished, in part, by offering the developers of such sustainable communities exemptions from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and priority for approval of the development.

Several regional planning activities should be aligned to be effective, and SB 375 requires coordination of land use and transportation planning in each of California's regions. Each region must devise a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) alongside the development of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), every four years. In turn, the Housing Element and Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA)—the process by which a region and the individual jurisdictions in it plan for the housing needs of their residents for each jurisdiction—must be consistent with the MTP/SCS as well. In 2012, SACOG will complete its first MTP/SCS. If done correctly, the process and plan will merge land use decisions with transportation planning to reduce green house gas emissions as part of California's climate change legislation. This planning process gives people in the region an opportunity to engage in a truly regional discussion about how development and investment of transportation funding should occur.

The MTP/SCS and Housing Elements for the Sacramento Region are documents help direct hundreds of millions of dollars, both public and private, in transportation, housing and economic development activities. The projects and programs that are the result of these documents will direct where and when various transportation options will be available, where affordable housing will be constructed and where services such as schools, health care, healthy food options and job opportunities will be located.

The degree to which these documents produce positive results, however, will depend upon the political will to enforce real strategies that are reflected in the MTP/SCS and Housing Elements. Success also depends upon the community support that is garnered in the process of both

¹ For more information on the Blueprint, visit <http://www.sacregionblueprint.org/>

² For more information on SB 375, visit <http://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/sb375/sb375.htm>

developing the documents and implementing the transportation, land use, housing, employment and other strategies that are outlined in the documents.

Regional Coordination of Land Use and Transportation Planning

Regional planning is preferred for several reasons. Air and water know no boundaries. As we saw with the example of the auto mall, many businesses are portable and serve large, regional markets. Ideally, affordable housing can be constructed throughout all transit rich communities as opposed to concentration in a few.

Unfortunately, through the years, true regional planning has not occurred. Rather, developers and businesses have sought favors from communities thus creating a “race to the bottom.” Communities with lax environmental standards and no interest in affordable housing have been advantaged by the lack of a regional commitment to environmental or social justice.

Regional planning is one tool that if used wisely, can require all jurisdictions to meet land use and transportation planning standards that meet regional needs. In order for coordinated regional land use and transportation planning to be effective, however, there must be an economic incentive for the local government to comply with regionally-determined plans. The hope is that the MTP/SCS and the Housing Elements will contain and provide sufficient economic incentives for all local governments to comply with regional sustainability goals.

Goals for the MTP/SCS

It is critical that the MTP/SCS achieve a balance between housing and employment at all prices and for all income levels. SACOG can pioneer a method to measure “jobs/housing fit,” which means residential housing is developed in sustainable communities that is affordable for all residents' income levels, allowing residents to be able to afford to live near where they work. This would reduce green house gas emissions, since people will not need to commute as far for employment.

Our MTP/SCS should model the additional benefits of more compact development, preferably infill as opposed to “sprawl,” which will improve air quality while providing increased physical activity, walkability and other public health benefits. Infill development should be promoted as a first choice over sprawl, to the extent that it doesn't compromise each jurisdiction's ability to meet housing needs and maintain fair and inclusive housing policies. Transportation planning and funding should be shifted to promote compact development, bicycle, pedestrian and complete streets improvements, and public transit early in the planning period over new road creation and road expansion, since these priorities will support reducing green house gas production.

The MTP/SCS should facilitate preservation of the region's natural assets including farmland, open space, rivers and other habitats by planning for a comprehensive and coordinated open space conservation plan for the Sacramento region for wildlife habitat, agriculture, recreation and education – a “greenprint.” This plan would create a connected network of parks, preserves, and

conservation easements on working farms and ranches, creating access to open space for education and recreation, protecting the unique biological diversity found in the Sacramento Valley, and conserving our agricultural heritage.

Revitalizing struggling communities should be a priority with a special focus on avoiding displacement of existing residents. The MTP/SCS should identify areas that have already gentrified and areas that are susceptible to gentrification. After reaching this baseline, the plan should adopt strategies to mitigate displacement of existing residents and evaluate and mitigate the land use scenario's negative impacts on low income communities and communities of color, including air quality and levels of particulates and other pollutants. These steps must be taken to achieve equitable solutions.

Local Implications

The SACOG Blueprint and the MTP/SCS should be used to help frame local discussions of housing, transportation and land use issues. While regional discussions are helpful in framing the sustainable communities debate, local governments still have decision-making authority, and will in the future. It is important that local groups organize and advocate for sustainable communities with local planning commissions, local housing agencies and at meetings with local elected officials.

One key area in which to promote sustainable community policies and programs is the update and adoption of local general plans. A general plan functions as the constitution for all land use within a jurisdiction. Through general plan advocacy, community groups can encourage an improved built environment that features mixed use and denser development close to a variety of transportation options with walkable streets.

Advocates can also use public hearings on zoning and general plan amendments as an opportunity to encourage smart and sustainable developments. Using the MTP/SCS as a framework, advocates can measure the impact that these zoning and general plan amendments have on low income communities and communities of color.

Connecting Local to Regional

While local governments will continue to play the lead role in land use decisions in the future, they need to be constantly reminded about the regional impact of these decisions. The focus, however, should be on the positive impact that smart, sustainable communities can have on the local jurisdictions. All jurisdictions must agree that clean air, reduced green house gas emissions, access to transportation, jobs, schools, services and affordable housing will benefit their own communities, and must be encouraged and supported.

Community advocates must be able to quantify these benefits because there are many forces at work that discourage planning sustainable communities. For example, California tax policies favor sprawling development and discourage regional solutions. It is still much cheaper for developers to build sprawling subdivisions than to build on infill lots. People continue to favor

the convenience of using their private automobile for transportation over public transit or active transportation modes, despite rising fuel prices.

The more we can identify and quantify the advantages of sustainable and equitable development the stronger our arguments against the countervailing forces which that continue to dictate unsustainable local land use decisions. Clearly, much work needs to be done to connect sustainability and equity issues to regional commitments.

The good news is that regional thinking has taken root in Sacramento. Now is the time to encourage local decision-makers to embrace the importance of the regional impact of their decisions on the built environment. The long-term impact of regional equity can be substantial if advocates and governments give it the attention it deserves.

Conclusion

The MTP/SCS will provide a framework for regionally-coordinated land use and transportation planning, and the subsequent development of sustainable, equitable communities throughout the region. These communities will have access to affordable housing, transportation options, employment and other amenities and opportunities. This framework can be used by community advocates to work with local decision-makers to implement important strategies for sustainable and equitable communities.

The success of regional planning and sustainability in the Sacramento region will be determined by the extent to which clear goals and accompanying strategies are outlined in the MTP/SCS, as well as the economic incentives and the political will to implement these strategies in local jurisdictions. Creating a jobs-housing fit in our communities, recognizing and achieving the benefits of infill development, preserving natural habitat, and revitalizing existing communities are the chief goals we must achieve to create an equitable and sustainable Sacramento region.

Community advocates, local decision-makers, and local jurisdiction staff must work together to achieve a sustainable future for the Sacramento region. Please join the Coalition on Regional Equity (CORE) in advancing regional equity in your community.

If you are interested in getting involved in sustainable and regional land use and transportation planning advocacy, please contact Kendra Bridges, Land Use Policy Director for the Sacramento Housing Alliance, at (916) 455-4900 or kendra@sachousingalliance.org.