

Regional government won't do it

MAKE BETTER USE OF EXISTING TOOLS

by Claude Gruen

The Bay Vision 2020 Commission Report catalogued a list of regional problems and recommended the establishment of a Bay Region super agency, a major step toward a regional government. The prestigious commission also recommended that the state mandate the preparation of a regional plan and require all development be *consistent* with the plan; *concurrent* with the development of needed infrastructure; and *compact*. In calling for a regional plan, one that requires all land use growth to conform to the three Cs, the commission is following the lead of Oregon, Florida and New Jersey, which have already imposed such state-mandated regionally enforced land-use planning regulations.

The growth management and implementation history of these three states does not suggest they are solving the identified problems. Development consistent with regional plans has been limited by the political compromises hammered out when the plans were drawn; the promises of flexibility that would allow growth when future needs were identified have not been kept. Concurrency requirements have not been matched with equitable funding mechanisms to finance and build urban infrastructure on a timely basis and charge costs to those who benefit. Planning against the undefined but universally condemned sin of sprawl has driven up the price of housing much more effectively than it has encouraged compact development.

The Sierra Club reaction to the Bay Vision Draft supported the commission's call for urban limit lines, water quality control, waste reform, clean air, affordable housing, transit to displace auto use and granting the new regional commission the authority to deny local developments "inconsistent with regional needs." But the organization was also very clear in its distaste for one critical element:

"The Sierra Club adamantly opposes granting the Commission authority to

overturn project denials by local government or the electorate. Further, we oppose granting authority to the Commission of any independent permitting process not already exercised by existing agencies," the club stated.

It seems likely that the political opposition of powerful anti-growth environmental groups will ensure that the new regional government will not be an instrument for neutering NIMBYs. Yet that is exactly what the pro-business proponents of regional government suggest when they argue that a regional authority will permit additional development not allowed under the present home rule set-up. Unfortunately, neither the experience of other states, the history of similar land-use commissions nor the tenor of the Vision 2020 Report supports the notion that a regional agency will temper existing growth restraints. Any new agency is much more likely to add to rather than subtract from existing limits on growth.

While the commission's cures may be illusory, many of the problems they identify are real — and capable of being solved by alternative means. Traffic congestion can be relieved by the institutional and market structures we have now, if they are allowed to operate. People are trying to move closer to their jobs, and jobs are moving closer to people. If local governments are encouraged to allow these dual motivations to create new activity centers surrounded by relatively dense and economically diverse housing, average vehicle miles will decline for both work-trip and other purposes.

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But cities must be given a stronger incentive to encourage such new land-use patterns than a future promise of reduced congestion, energy use and pollution. What is needed is population-based sales tax sharing that will deliver fiscal goodies to NIMBY-rejecting jurisdictions. Priorities for highway trust funds and grants for transit improvements should also go to those communities where job/housing balance is more than a bogus policy.

The establishment of needed landfills, the licensing of hazardous waste incinerators and other rational steps to waste management can be facilitated if we encourage paying communities to allow location of disamenities within their jurisdictions. Because we have driven the cost of waste disposal up by limiting options, it is often possible to pay communities adequately to use their sites for landfill and other LULUs (Locally Undesirable Land Uses).

Government efficiencies are also much more likely to result from the adoption of performance-based budgets by local governments than from consolidating agencies within another layer of government. Our educational and service delivery systems are also much in need of improvement. But imposing an additional layer of bureaucracy over existing agencies will not make their task easier.

To bring about tax sharing, fiscal reforms and organizational efficiencies, it will take a re-energized partnership of local communities and agencies. The best result that could come out of the work of the Bay Vision 2020 Commission would be for the existing local and state governments to move for the needed reforms now as an alternative to regional government. Without tax sharing, state funding incentives to encourage transportation-efficient land-use patterns, payments for the acceptance of needed waste management facilities, and the enhancement of local service delivery efficiencies, no regional government can solve our urban problems.

With such reforms, there is no need for regional government. ■

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