

Sprawling

Urban growth considered priority for state lawmakers

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Bureaucrats, business suits, bunny huggers and lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle met in Traverse City recently to talk about the issue of urban sprawl and found something surprising... common ground.

The Michigan Legislative and Business Leaders Forum on Growth Management, sponsored by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce and Public Sector Consultants, brought together people from all sides of the sprawl issue for the first such state-wide discussion of the topic.

And state lawmakers present said they expect legislation to be proposed this fall to address the concerns. In fact, they expect it will be a priority for the coming session.

Exactly what form such legislation will take isn't clear, lawmakers unanimously agreed. They were using the conference as brainstorming session to come up with specific ideas for new laws.

Back to downtowns

What came of the conference

was that incentives, rather than regulation or prohibitions, should be used to direct development back toward the central cities, away from undeveloped areas.

Such a plan would have to make use of "the power of the purse string," essentially convincing the state budget to put in place the financial incentives to redirect growth back to the cities. Development in "greenfields" would not be banned, or even restricted, but those building in such areas would have to pay their own way without the monetary assistance now given by the state.

Road projects would be reviewed based on whether they encourage sprawl or redevelopment. Gov. John Engler, lawmakers agreed, would have to be on board with such a plan, although he did not attend the conference.

It's everyone's problem

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Nor is it just an environmental issue. David Walters, co-director of the Charlotte Community Design Studio, labeled it a financial issue.

"The primary purpose is to reduce the property tax burden," he said. "If you are, as I am, in favor of having as much money the hands of taxpayers as possible and only as much in the government purse as necessary, then we need to make the most efficient use of the existing infrastructure. If we make more efficient use of our infrastructure, it will take less money to maintain and improve it and that money can go elsewhere. That is why local governments need to get involved in the smart growth equation."

There was also little disagreement about the severity of urban sprawl in Michigan. Paul Hillebrand, president of Detroit Renaissance and former speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives, emphasized the concern in his remarks at the close of the conference. Portland, Oregon expects to see a 50 percent growth in population in the next 20 years, but only 8 percent of the land in that region is anticipated to be developed as a result, he said.

Compare that to growth in southeast Michigan, where a 4 percent growth in population over the last two decades has led to urbanization of 53 percent more land.

Some controversy

No, the seminar was not a love-in. Some issues quickly produced controversy. For example, State Sen. George McManus (R-Traverse City) only halfheartedly proposed a state-wide ban on zoning ordinances which require residential lot sizes of one-acre or more, knowing it would meet with quick resistance. It did. But the idea pointed out the nearly universal sentiment among conferees that large lot requirements in the suburbs only exacerbate sprawl.

Seen by many municipal planners as a way to preserve open space, large lots simply spread development out further and leave green space only in private hands.

The Michigan Environmental Council's Julie Stopeman called for the creation of an Office of State Planning, which was met with the response, "Careful, you might get what you ask for."

Still, the idea pointed to the fact many conferees see the lack of coordination in planning among cities and townships as one of the leading contributors to urban sprawl. But local government officials are likely to see any intrusion into planning on the part of the state as a viola-

tion of their home rule. Stopeman quickly amended her idea to creation of an Office of State Planning Assistance.

Rep. Jack Minore (D-Flint) broached the same issue when he jokingly said he was glad to see his break-out group was not only one to propose the elimination of township government. Michigan's tradition of leaving planning and development in the hands of local government is a big part of the problem, conferees agreed. But that led to a serious proposal to state revenue sharing for cities and townships to participation in cooperative regional planning efforts.

Growth issues named

Still, the controversies were relatively minor points. The tone of the conference was set by Carol Guardino, president of the Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group, who gave the opening speech. As he outlined how his organization has contributed to regional planning in California, he said members had agreed to "work on the 95 percent we can agree on and ignore the 5 percent of the issues where we don't agree and probably never will agree."

Growth management, Guardino explained, has to address four areas to be successful: providing adequate affordable housing to accommodate the population of the region; provide the necessary transportation, either by roads or mass transit; provide adequate education to all residents; and protect the environment.

He said the "about the door" mentality used by many no-growth advocates when it comes to housing development only means that residents will seek homes elsewhere, actually encouraging sprawl. Likewise, one the main factors why people move to outlying suburbs is to find school districts which provide a better education for their children, he said. Making sure all districts have good educational programs will discourage sprawl, he argued.

John Frece, special assistant for smart growth to Maryland's

governor, explained that state's growth strategy. Local governments are asked to designate "growth districts."

State resources are applied developments in those growth zones, while the state budget has been coordinated to withhold financial aid from development outside those regions. The strategy is applied to everything from roads to water and sewer lines.

Good ideas in short supply

Rep. Susan Tabor (R-Delta Township) said she is frustrated with the urban sprawl issue. Good proposals have been in short supply and she is eager to propose and pass legislation addressing the issue this fall.

Rep. Patricia Goodhaug (R-Birmingham) said it's "a no-brainer" that the sprawl issue has to be addressed, but feels valid proposals have not been offered in the past. Typically, prohibitory in nature, she agrees incentives must be used instead.

Rep. Valde Garcia (R-St. John) said he's not sure that he's heard those good ideas yet. He proposed hearings across the state to take input from local officials on what they would like to see as incentives for regional, coordinated planning.

A group of lawmakers came to the conference with a set of "guiding principals" on what they would like to see in the way of legislation. The coalition included Tabor and Reps. Patricia Birkholz (R-Saugatuck), Jon Jellema (R-Grand Haven), William Byl (R-Grand Rapids), Jason Allen (R-Traverse City) and Stephen Ehrt (R-Lexington).

Among their principals were that legislation must respect private property rights, link land use policy with infrastructure development such as road improvement and utility construction, provide sufficient housing, preserve and even enhance local control while encouraging intergovernmental cooperation, and encourage redevelopment of so-called "brownfields."

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