Land-Use Planning via MPOs

As a member of our metropolitan planning organization’s Regional Growth Committee, I cannot tell you how many times I have heard that land-use planning is the exclusive purview of local governments exercising zoning powers. This is a particular favorite comment by the representative of Utah’s department of transportation. Transportation agencies are just satisfying the travel demands created by local land-use decisions, or so they once said.

My earliest response to this statement, nine years ago, was to note the obvious: that highway investments affect development patterns, sometimes referred to as highway-induced development or sprawl. Transit investments do so as well, but in a much more benign way. When it came time to vote on amendments to regional transportation plans that would fund highway capacity projects, I was always on the losing end.

Then, about five years ago, I mentioned at an RGC meeting that some MPOs were setting aside relatively small amounts of highway money to fund local land-use planning, specifically planning to reduce the need for so much highway funding in the future. I was vaguely familiar with the practice in California and had heard it started in Atlanta. Why couldn’t we do the same in Salt Lake City?

Unlike my arguments about induced traffic and induced development, which raised hackles, this suggestion appealed to both MPO staff and RGC members. It was proactive rather than reactive. It allowed us to spend money on something shiny and new, not kill a spending proposal. The staff reported back favorably to the RGC at the next meeting, and what is now called the Transportation and Land Use Connection program was born. It has grown into a million-dollar program (still peanuts for the MPO). It is also wildly popular among local governments, many of whom are represented by elected officials on the MPO board and RGC.

From 2014 to 2017, the TLC program assisted communities with 54 planning projects with a total project valuation of $4.38 million.

It turns out we are part of a movement in metropolitan transportation planning to set aside funds for just this purpose. Graduate students at the University of Utah, Sadegh Sabouri and Amanda Dillon, just completed a survey of 25 MPOs, taking a stratified sample that is weighted toward larger MPOs. Of the 25, nearly half of the MPOs now fund smart growth-oriented local land-use planning.

San Francisco Bay

Actually, the San Francisco Bay region’s MPO, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, may have been the first to set aside transportation funds for local planning efforts under a program called Transportation for Livable Communities. This program was created in 1998, reportedly one year before Atlanta’s program. TLC helped set the stage in 2007 for the FOCUS program, which encouraged local governments to designate Priority Development Areas within their jurisdictions.

A PDA is locally designated land where future growth can be channeled at sufficient densities to take advantage of existing infrastructure and services, especially transit service. FOCUS provides funding support via capital infrastructure funds, planning grants, and technical assistance to communities.

In Plan Bay Area 2040, the most recent Sustainable Communities Strategy/RTP adopted by the regional agencies, nearly 80 percent of new housing is projected to be built within PDAs, helping the region
reach its state-mandated GHG reduction target by aligning new development with major transit investments. The MPO estimates that people living in focused, compact neighborhoods of the type envisioned for PDAs travel 20 to 40 percent fewer vehicle miles each day than those who live in the sprawling suburban tracts that typify the Bay Area’s post–World War II development pattern.

To implement Plan Bay Area, MTC prioritizes capital and planning funds for PDAs through its One Bay Area Grant program, which builds upon TLC and FOCUS. In addition to requiring that the majority of capital projects paid for through this package of funding are included in the RTP, the program supports local governments in adopting plans for PDAs. Together, PDA plans funded through FOCUS and OBAG have created zoning capacity for 90,000 housing units.

San Diego

Under the San Diego Association of Governments’ 2005 Smart Growth Incentive pilot program, the MPO doled out $22.5 million in grants for local smart-growth development projects. Funding originally came from the federal Transportation Enhancements program. The success of the pilot program led to the creation of a $280 million Smart Growth Incentive Program and a $280 million Active Transportation Grant Program funded by a half-cent local sales tax. Each of these programs amounts to two percent of the revenues generated by the sales tax. Not including the pilot program, SANDAG has awarded more than $50 million to more than 100 projects throughout the San Diego region.

To be eligible for these funds and receive priority for other funding, local governments designated almost 200 existing, planned, or potential “smart growth areas” to which dense mixed use development is being directed. The areas fall into seven place types: downtown San Diego, Urban Centers, Town Centers, Community Centers, Rural Villages, Mixed Use Transit Corridors, and Special Use Centers. These areas are shown on the accompanying Smart Growth Concept Map on the previous page. They currently house 22 percent of the region’s population and are projected to house 29 percent by the year 2030. Every single jurisdiction in the San Diego region was able to identify at least one smart growth area on the map, demonstrating region-wide support for the smart growth principles included in the regional comprehensive plan.

Infrastructure grants can cover streetscape or sidewalk enhancements, transit station improvements, traffic calming measures, or other quality of life amenities that support smart growth in that area. Planning grants can be used to amend general plans, prepare specific plans, or update zoning ordinances that will provide the institutional framework for smart growth development in these areas.

Dallas-Ft. Worth

Lest these examples be dismissed because they come from that perennial outlier California, Dallas-Ft. Worth’s MPO, the North Central Texas Council of Governments, has issued three Sustainable Development Calls for Projects. To be eligible, projects have to be located in “Sustainable Development Areas of Interest”—that is, within walking distance of current or potential rail stations; in areas with a concentration of unemployed persons, high-emitting vehicles, or low-income households; or in historic downtowns with multiple contiguous blocks of pedestrian-oriented development. Eligible projects are also required to have zoning in place that allows the project to be built by right.

Under this program, more than $173 million has been awarded since 2001. NCTCOG’s first call for projects funded 19 infrastructure projects and one planning project. The second call in 2005–2006 funded 29 infrastructure, four land-banking, and nine planning projects. The 2009–2010 Sustainable Development Call for Projects funded 27 infrastructure projects and nine planning projects. The 2017–2018 cycle funded six infrastructure projects, and a Phase 2 is anticipated at the end of the year or early next year.

Providing smart growth assistance to localities isn’t just the domain of large MPOs, either. The success of the Wasatch Front Regional Council’s TLC program in the Salt Lake City region shows how even relatively small amounts of money can go a long way toward finally coordinating transportation and land-use planning.

For those who want to learn more, the FHWA/FTA report, “Effective Practices in Planning for Livable Communities at Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs),” (planning.dot.gov/Peer/Atlanta/atlanta_2010.pdf) features seven of these smart growth programs. And a meeting each year prior to APAs National Planning conference, attended by about 40 MPOs, reviews progress so far in implementing them.

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