Growth Management Revisited, Again

My first-ever Research You Can Use column, published back in November 2006, was about the effectiveness of growth management measures in California. John Landis, AICP, then at UC Berkeley, now at UPenn, had evaluated five measures in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* article, “Growth Management Revisited: A Reassessment of its Efficacy, Price Effects, and Impacts on Metropolitan Growth Patterns.” Landis matched California communities with and without growth management measures and compared growth-related outcomes. Of the five growth-management measures evaluated—residential caps, adequate public facilities ordinances, urban growth boundaries, annexation controls, and super-majority voting requirements for rezonings—only caps and UGBs were deemed “consistently useful.”

But even this conclusion was qualified; their effectiveness depended on how these programs were designed and administered. “It all depends” was the point of that first column.

Fast forward to today. I haven’t written about growth management since 2006 because there hasn’t been much written about growth management since 2006. I began to wonder if academic planners had grown tired of the subject, or become disheartened by events like the demise of growth management in Florida.

And then I began seeing new research on the subject.

How effective is growth management?
It is almost existential for contemporary planners to believe in the following causal chain:

<table>
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<th>GROWTH MANAGEMENT measures</th>
<th>COMPACT DEVELOPMENT</th>
<th>GOOD OUTCOMES</th>
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The second link in the causal chain is shown with a solid arrow. We may quibble about the precise benefits of compact development (see “Making Sense of Different Results: Is Meta-Regression Necessarily Best?” *Planning*, January 2017: planning.org/planning/2017/jan/research), but the empirical evidence in favor of compact development is compelling (see “Compactness versus Sprawl: A Review of Recent Evidence from the United States,” *Journal of Planning Literature*, 2015).

What is less compelling is evidence of growth management effectiveness. Accordingly, the first arrow in the above diagram is shown as dashed. I will give you two recent examples. In 2017, Evangeline Linkous, AICP (University of South Florida), published “A Political Ecology of Exurbia in the Sunbelt: Lessons from an Award-Winning, ‘Unworkable’ Plan” in *Urban Affairs Review*, a well-regarded urban studies journal.

The “unworkable” plan, called *Sarasota 2050*, was adopted in 2002 by Sarasota County, Florida. As an alternative to sprawl, the plan envisions compact villages and protected open spaces outside the county’s urban growth boundary. Think of the master planned communities of eastern Orange County, California: Rancho Santa Margarita, Las Flores, Ladera Ranch. In exchange for the higher density allowed in villages, the *Sarasota 2050* plan set high bars for compact development, protection of rural character, and conservation of environmental lands. In 2003, the plan was awarded the Charter Award by the Congress for the New Urbanism. Yet, only one village-like development has been built under the plan. Linkous labels this case study “the derailment of a promising strategy for managing exurban growth.”

I have two reactions to the article. First, it is an impressive case study with a cautionary conclusion—best laid plans and all that. The author makes use of multiple data sources: semistructured interviews with key informants; archival and contemporary planning documents; and content from newsletters, blogs, social media sites, and community organization websites. It is a model of good case study research.

Second, I wouldn’t generalize the results to other applications of growth management. I have previously cautioned against drawing broad conclusions from a single case study (“Graduated Density Zoning—The Danger of Generalizing from a Sample of One,” *Planning*, August/September 2008). During the period studied by Linkous, the Great Recession intervened, and growth management in Florida was dismantled by the state legislature. These were extraordinary events.

The second article is more generalizable, but also provides a cautionary tale. It, again, is by Landis, 10 years after his original growth management effectiveness article. The new article, “The End of Sprawl? Not So Fast,” was published last year in *Housing Policy Debate*, another well-regarded journal I haven’t previously featured in this column.

The article asks and answers four research questions, two of which are relevant to this column: Is sprawl really declining at the metropolitan scale, as some urbanists have claimed? (“Is it possible that after 60 years and untold millions of acres of resource land converted to single-family subdivisions and suburban shopping centers that the age of sprawl in America is finally coming to a close?”) If so, is it the result of the growth management measures highlighted in this column?

It concludes that sprawl is indeed declining when measured by average population densities and density gradients, but that the decline has been much less widespread when measured in other...
ways. For every two metropolitan areas becoming more compact, one continues to sprawl.

More importantly for this column, Landis finds only weak evidence that growth management measures have had any effect on sprawl. The only metro-level factors to enter two or more sprawl models are the Wharton Regulatory Index and the share of available sites deemed difficult to develop. The WRI uses responses from a nationwide survey of residential land-use regulations to construct a measure of local land-use stringency. The fact that WRI coefficients are positive suggests that stringently implemented land-use regulations may in fact help reduce sprawl.

Meanwhile, at the University of Utah, our graduate planning students have been working for the past year on a comprehensive literature review of growth management effectiveness. It is a big job. There are many measures and many studies of each. Our tentative conclusion isn’t very different from Landis’s: Effectiveness depends on the particular place, the particular measure, and how it is designed and administered. In other words, “It all depends.”

Growth management isn’t a panacea for sprawl, but it’s certainly not the failure implied by the Sarasota 2050 case study.

—Reid Ewing