

Closing Essay [14]

“Regions Parishes *Must* Plan Together”

Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Tammany parishes are all drawing up new land use plans. Planning jointly could substantially reshape Greater New Orleans’ future. Planning independently – each rarely looking beyond its own bailiwick – would be folly.

Yet each has gone its separate way so far. “Do your own thing” is the American Way – except when somebody sets different rules of the game that require local governments to work together.

The Portland area has the USA’s strongest regional land use and transportation planning. How did it go about updating its 2040 plan?

At the very outset, Portland Metro, the elected regional planning agency, reviewed regional economic and population projections with the 27 local governments and concerned civic groups. Within the framework set by the region’s mountains, rivers, and wetlands, Metro offered various growth scenarios. Absorb all growth within existing communities? Allow constant outward urban expansion through conventional, low-density development? Funnel most growth

to regional “new towns”? Metro, local governments, and citizen groups debated alternative projections and strategies back and forth.

Finally, Metro settled on the most probable growth projections and proposed a consensus development scenario. Metro opted for only a small expansion of the region’s current urban growth boundary and for limited reliance on satellite new towns. Most new growth would be absorbed within the urban growth boundary, with any new offices, stores, and homes clustered along the region’s expanding light rail system.

Next, Metro designated where new light rail lines, highways, large industrial parks, and new parklands would go and negotiated minimum residential density targets with each city and county government.

Finally, the Metro Council formally adopted the regional plan. The 24 municipalities and three counties must conform zoning maps to the regional plan and achieve their agreed-to density targets. All zoning actions remain under local government authority but must be consistent with both local and regional land use plans.

That’s the way regional planning should proceed. However, it rarely happens voluntarily (and then only among cities and towns within the same county, like Lancaster County). *Indeed, the Portland area’s 27 local governments plan*

together only because the Oregon legislature – and Portland area voters by referendum – have mandated that they collaborate.

There is one existing regional body in Greater New Orleans whose very name suggests that it is suited for a strong regional planning role – the Regional Planning Commission. Its 26-member board is composed of five-member delegations (three elected officials and two citizen members) from Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany Parishes.

As the “metropolitan planning organization” designated by federal transportation law, RPC’s only real authority is over how federal highway, bridge, and transit funds are used. RPC has no power regarding local land use planning and zoning.

This spring RPC was awarded a three-year, \$450,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation “to undertake a comprehensive three year land use and transportation planning effort based on sustainable development and community preservation principles.” The grant will broaden RPC’s scope and capabilities.

However, the nationwide record of over 600 “metropolitan planning organizations” like RPC creates skepticism about whether RPC as currently

constituted and empowered can accomplish what greater New Orleans needs.

Such voluntary regional councils typically have four shortcomings.

First, their staffs are primarily highway planners with little interest in environmental, social, and economic issues. Transportation plans typically are the masters of, not the servants of, land use plans.

Second, their memberships don't usually reflect accurately their regions' population distributions; and, often times, counties that are part of the region are not members of the planning organization. (Within RPC, for example, Plaquemines Parish casts the same number of votes as Orleans or Jefferson Parish; and St. Charles, St. James, and St. John the Baptist Parishes are not members.)

Third, mayors, council members, and county officials serving on such regional councils understandably champion their own jurisdiction's short-term interests. They rarely agree to any local, short-term constraints that would be in the whole regional community's best long-term interests.

Fourth, and most important, voluntary regional councils' land use plans are only advisory. Unlike in the Portland area, local governments are not required to adhere to any proposed regional plan.

Louisiana law provides the New Orleans area's 23 municipal and parish governments with broad planning and zoning authority *within* each jurisdiction. Current state laws neither require nor encourage them to plan together as a region.

That is the challenge. Unlike transportation planning (where the federal government provides almost \$40 billion per year to state and local governments), Washington has virtually no influence over land use planning. It is Baton Rouge that must change the rules to require local governments to plan collaboratively (or to provide strong incentives for that purpose).

In several states a blue ribbon task force has guided successful reforms. These have been created either by the legislature or by the governor. Such a blue ribbon task force in Louisiana would analyze sprawl-related problems and recommend changes in state law or state agency practices.

On the facing page, I provide two sets of recommendations. The first deal with ways to improve voluntary planning under the guidance of the Regional Planning Commission. The second set forth the broad outlines of a new state land use law appropriate for Louisiana where popular support for anti-sprawl initiatives seem to lie mainly in the Baton Rouge and New Orleans regions.

A statewide Smart Growth law could face substantial opposition from legislators from the rest of the state. However, a state law might be enacted giving

Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and other interested metropolitan areas the power to plan regionally *by local option*. Local option could be triggered in two ways: by a sufficient number of local governments in the region, or by a direct, region-wide referendum.

In other words, if enough local officials will not abandon their turf battles, give the people the chance to act as *regional* citizens.

To champion land use reform proposals, one (or possibly two) additional community-based organizations will be needed. A broad-based coalition of concerned groups must help educate citizens and state and local officials to the imperative need for greater regional planning. The sponsoring organizations of this study, which range from grassroots church coalitions to regional business groups, could form the core membership of an on-going alliance.

Such a group must ultimately lobby the state legislature and state agencies to adopt specific reforms. If coalition members cannot agree on the reforms to push, the void needs to be filled by a grassroots group modeled after 1,000 Friends of Oregon or New Jersey Future.

For Greater New Orleans to “grow smart,” the state of Louisiana, the Regional Planning Commission, and concerned citizens must all work in tandem. The state legislature must change the rules to require local governments to plan

together. The Regional Planning Commission must learn to balance social, environmental, and economic needs with what cars need. And neither the legislature nor RPC will change unless aroused citizens demand reforms.

[1,150 words].