

City Officials Think Regionally to Tackle Transportation, Housing and Environmental Issues

California's population, estimated at 37 million in 2010, is expected to grow to nearly 60 million people by the year 2050. As California grows, issues affecting cities are increasingly regional in nature. To help manage this growth and its associated challenges, city officials are participating more extensively in regional planning efforts.

Perhaps foremost among these efforts is the regional planning for sustainability currently under way in each of California's urbanized metropolitan regions. This planning effort is aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks, which contribute to climate change. In the process, regional planning can help local communities address shared challenges, such as improving air quality, meeting housing needs, fostering economic development and providing transportation networks to serve a growing population.

Greenhouse Gas Reduction and Regional Planning

Cars and light trucks account for about 30 percent of California's greenhouse gas emissions. When other types of vehicles are included, transportation, overall, accounts for 40 percent of California's greenhouse gas emissions.

California is seeking to cut carbon emissions generated by cars and light trucks in two ways:

1. Reduce the amount of carbon that each vehicle emits, through measures like fleet efficiency standards and a low-carbon fuel standard. These measures require vehicles to use less fuel and fuel to use less carbon (for more information, see the state's AB 32 Scoping Plan at www.ca-ilg.org/AB32ScopingPlan); and
2. Reduce the frequency and distance that people need to drive. In this vein, a recent state law (SB 375) modifies the regional planning processes for transportation and housing with the goal of creating transportation networks and land-use patterns so people will drive fewer miles in their cars.

Sustainable Communities Strategies: Linking Transportation, Land Use and Housing

The Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) in each urban region is charged with developing a Sustainable Communities Strategy as part of its regional transportation plan, demonstrating how changes in land-use and transportation patterns and investments can

meet regional greenhouse gas reduction targets set by the California Air Resources Board. This requirement does not apply to regional transportation planning agencies that are not within the jurisdiction of an MPO (for a list of the metropolitan regions and a timeline of SB 375 activities, visit www.ca-ilg.org/RegionalPlanning).

The Sustainable Communities Strategy provides each metropolitan region with a tool for synchronizing three state-mandated planning processes:

1. The regional transportation plan (RTP);
2. The regional housing needs allocation (RHNA); and
3. Updating the housing element of the General Plan for each city and county in the region.

A Sustainable Communities Strategy provides a regional framework for growth that identifies the “general location of uses, residential densities and building intensities” within the region as well as areas sufficient to meet the region’s housing needs and a regional transportation network adequate to serve that growth.

“We are in the midst of preparing a Sustainable Communities Strategy, and we have a special set of challenges in the San Francisco Bay Area,” said Union City Mayor Mark Green, president of the Association of Bay Area Governments, speaking to a gathering of local officials in October 2010. “We have a population of 7 million, a tremendous amount of economic activity, and 101 cities and nine counties — not to mention hundreds of special districts. The only way we can achieve sustainable growth is through partnership and collaboration.”

How Do These Regional Plans Affect Local General Plans?

SB 375 specifically provides that cities and counties retain ultimate authority over local land-use decisions. Cities and counties are not required to amend or update their General Plan to conform to the land-use patterns included in the regional transportation plan and the Sustainable Communities Strategy. However, because the regional transportation plan, regional housing needs allocation and Sustainable Communities Strategy are based on a common set of land-use assumptions, these regional plans offer a collective vision that may influence how local general plans evolve over time.

For example, to achieve the region’s greenhouse gas reduction target, the Sustainable Communities Strategy could include land-use patterns that differ from those previously envisioned in the region. However, the assumptions used in developing the strategy must be grounded in what the local governments are reasonably likely to include in their plans and approve.

In addition, the housing element of a city or county General Plan must include goals and policies for how the locality will provide for its share of the regional housing need,

including zoning and land-use policies. Because all general plans must be internally consistent, local officials may revise other plan elements (such as land use and circulation) to reflect the land-use assumptions contained in the updated housing element. Local jurisdictions may also decide to amend their general plans to be consistent with the Sustainable Communities Strategy and to help streamline the environmental review of development projects.

Involving the Public

The success of California's effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through coordinated regional and local planning will depend in large part on the extent of public support for the proposed changes to land use, transportation and housing patterns included in regional and local plans. Public support in turn requires that residents and stakeholders be informed, consulted, involved and heard as local officials make decisions about the future of their communities through the regional planning process.

Both state and federal law include requirements to facilitate public participation in the development of regional transportation plans. SB 375 includes separate, additional requirements for public participation in the development of sustainable communities strategies. In addition, state law requires local governments to make a diligent effort to achieve the public participation of people of all income levels when updating the housing element of the General Plan.

City officials can play a leadership role in developing regional approaches to help solve local problems by encouraging their constituents and other members of the public to actively participate in regional planning — and by participating in that planning process themselves.

Additional Resources

- [SB 375 and Regional Planning](#)
- [Planning Sustainable Communities](#)
- [Understanding the Basics of Land Use and Planning](#)
- [Participating Effectively in the Planning Process](#)
- [Land Use and Planning Websites and Organizations](#)