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YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW | THE ECONOMY: FROM AEROSPACE TO THE TECH RACE
25 YEARS OF GROWTH MANAGEMENT | PARKS FIRST | ROLL ON, COLUMBIA



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Climbing the Mountain Called 'Growth Management'

Washington's State's 25-year-old law: outcomes and issues.

By Joseph W. Tovar, FAICP

WASHINGTON State's Growth Management Act has profoundly shaped the state and its planning practices through 25 years of dramatic growth. From a population of five million at the time the law was adopted in 1990, the Evergreen State has grown to almost seven million, making it the second most populous Western state after California. The law has also evolved—because of new legislation and court decisions—yet its fundamental framework remains unchanged.

The GMA mandates that all counties and cities protect environmentally critical areas and conserve agricultural and forestry lands. In the 29 counties that house 95 percent of the state's population, the Act provides planning goals and many additional statutory requirements; the other 10 counties are not subject to these provisions. Chief among the law's directives to local governments: They must agree on regional growth policies, designate urban areas that can accommodate 20 years of projected growth, and adopt comprehensive plans that will be implemented through regulations and capital budgets.

Has the law met its original aims? And what changes in the law or regional initiatives are needed to meet the challenges ahead? Answers to these questions begin with a brief visit to the Central Puget Sound region, starting at 30,000 feet over the Cascade mountain range.

Over view

Some of the answers are visible from the sky on the final approach to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. As airliners pass high above the shoulder of Mount Rainier, a landscape of forested mountains, rivers, lakes, and islands unfolds below. Farms and towns nestle in river valleys, and cities cluster along fresh- and saltwater shorelines. Sleek light-rail trains glide from the airport toward Seattle, the first leg of a system planned to extend east to

Redmond and north to Everett. Wakes from ferries and oceangoing freighters streak the waters of Puget Sound—a shimmering inland sea, highway of commerce, and namesake of this region.

Twenty-five years of growth management have sharpened the edge between city and countryside. A growing locavore culture helps sustain agricultural production districts in its rivers' fertile floodplains. Forests and rivers beyond the rural edge provide habitat for eagle, elk, and bear as well as glorious spots for recreation.

The four-county Central Puget Sound region, with Seattle at its center, is as large as Connecticut and Rhode Island combined, but its 3.6 million people are largely concentrated in just 16 percent of the land area. This region is also a global economic powerhouse.

With 55 percent of the state's people and more than 62 percent of its jobs, this region remains a magnet for the creative class and investment and talent from around the world. Its temperate climate attracts extreme weather refugees from across the continent. Deepwater ports at Tacoma and Seattle link world markets to the state's agricultural bounty.

A steep and rocky ascent

During the 1980s the state population surged almost 20 percent, from 4.1 million to 4.9 million. At the time, the dominant pattern of growth was suburban sprawl—with traffic snarls, inadequate infrastructure, degraded environmental quality, and a visual environment that was anonymous at best, unsightly at worst.

This landscape was the residue of fragmented decision making and the resulting conflict and competition among counties, cities, and utility districts. As late as 1989, more than half of all Washingtonians lived in unincorporated areas.

As the 1990s approached, a perfect storm of political forces converged. There was a public outcry about escalating property taxes, housing costs, traffic congestion, and the continued loss of wetlands, farms, and forests. A series of articles in the *Seattle Times* by urban critic Neil Peirce put the spotlight on Washington's broken land-use system and fueled calls for reform.

Several conservative county officials in seemingly safe districts were turned out by smart growth advocates in 1989. That set the stage for the state legislature to strike a grand bargain despite its sharp split along partisan and urban-rural lines.

The resulting Growth Management Act of 1990 took a middle path between the centralized, top-down model of Oregon and the

decentralized, bottom-up model of “planning enabling” states. Only fast-growing counties and their cities were required to fully plan under the GMA, and three regional appeals boards were created rather than a single appeals body in the state capital.

This middle path created a framework of state goals and requirements, but presumed that local government actions were valid upon adoption. Local decisions could only be reversed if an appeal was filed and a state appeals board, or a reviewing court, concluded that the action was “clearly erroneous”—a very deferential legal standard for measuring compliance.

The climb so far

The Washington Chapter of APA is working with other stakeholders to advocate for a comprehensive assessment of the state’s growth management program. Meanwhile, a number of indicators show that the GMA is a qualified success.

Permit data show that the state has succeeded in reining in sprawl in the largest, fastest growing urban counties. Between 2001 and 2011, the ratio of those counties’ residential growth occurring within their urban growth areas increased from 85 percent to 96 percent.

Conflict among local governments has declined because the GMA clarifies the very different roles of counties, cities, and special districts. Most counties have ceased competing with their cities to provide urban services and have assumed responsibility for regional decisions such as drawing urban growth boundaries and allocating population and job targets to cities.

All this has resulted in the incorporation of 15 new cities and dozens of annexations since 1990. Sixty-five percent of Washington citizens now live in incorporated areas, up from 49 percent before the GMA. In King County, the state’s most populous (with Seattle as the county seat), the percentage of those living in cities has risen to 83 percent.

Less obvious is the fact that the GMA has been facilitating the construction of regional “essential public facilities” by insulating them from parochial vetoes or costly delays. No longer may a local government or NIMBYs block the expansion of an international airport, dictate the alignment of a regional transit line, or preempt the siting of a regional sewage treatment plant. All three facilities were built over the past dozen years in the Seattle region.

Wetlands, streams, and shorelines have been protected and the rate of loss of productive agricultural lands has been reduced. A 2009 GMA amendment prohibits the expansion of urban growth areas into the floodplains of Western Washington rivers.

Planning for growth is still controversial at the local and state levels. However, the GMA and comprehensive planning have gone mainstream. Voters rejected by large margins two property rights challenges to the Act—Referendum 48 in 1995 and Initiative 933 in 2006—and the legislature has rejected periodic bills to repeal it.

The state Department of Commerce estimates that over the last five years, 99 percent of local actions in the fastest growing counties comply with the GMA. The next round of comprehensive plan updates, required every eight years, is under way and due for completion by mid-2015.

Paths up the mountain

Washington State could add another two to three million people by 2040. That is double or triple the number who now live in the state’s

five largest cities combined. The stakes are high. The GMA provides a way to coordinate and leverage the plan-making and implementation actions of state, county, and city governments. The following are three looming public policy crevasses that must be spanned.

CLIMATE CHANGE. In 2008, Washington’s legislature adopted 1990 as the benchmark year against which to measure progress in reduction of overall greenhouse gas emissions. Statewide GHG reduction targets were set at 25 percent by 2035 and 50 percent by 2050.

However, there is still no way to link those targets to local plans, investments, regulations, or programs. Attempts to legislate GHG reduction as a planning goal or an element of comprehensive plans have been beaten back in Olympia and the courts.

Gov. Jay Inslee has focused attention on carbon tax policy even as a debate rages about the implications of shipping vast quantities of coal and oil across the Puget Sound region. Transportation and new construction are two of the chief factors in GHG emissions, so the state must find a way to link the adopted reduction targets to state, regional, and local plans and actions.

One possible GMA amendment would be to require governments to translate statewide targets into regional targets and local actions. Voters may well take up climate change as a ballot initiative in 2016.

A REGIONAL OPEN SPACE STRATEGY. Vision 2040, the multi-county planning policy for the Central Puget Sound region, states that the metropolitan urban growth boundary will not move significantly in the next 25 years. It also projects more than one million more people within the same land area. Creative, bold, and even expensive steps will be needed to maintain environmental, economic, and human health in the face of so much growth and change.

A major hope is the Regional Open Space Strategy, a collaborative effort of the University of Washington, the National Park Service, the Puget Sound Regional Council, county governments, the Bullitt Foundation, and several nonprofits. ROSS has begun mapping lands, both urban and rural, that serve multiple critical services. These benefits include ecosystem health; habitat and flood control; carbon sequestration; jobs in timber and other industries and recreational tourism; and a role in reducing obesity and stress.

Massive public funding will be essential, and voters have stepped up before. In 2008, for example, they approved a \$17.8 billion funding measure to extend the regions’ light-rail system.

NEW FISCAL TOOLS AND STRATEGIC COMPREHENSIVE PLANS.

For decades, local governments have lobbied the legislature for the tax-increment financing mechanisms available in other states. Voters from the state’s “red” counties, however, may be skeptical of any tax reform, while leaders from the large “blue” counties know about TIF abuses in other states.

The Seattle metro region is a world city that must compete with other city-states. A well-crafted constitutional amendment could explicitly recognize that imperative, limit the TIF option to county and city governments in that urban region, and impose safeguards to assure transparency and accountability.

Finally, the land-use and capital budget focus of GMA comprehensive plans is disconnected from the operating budgets, declining revenues, and escalating expenditures facing counties and cities today. Thus, there is keen interest in economic development

and priority-based budgeting. Cities can and should mesh these visions, priorities, and budgets into more strategic comprehensive plans—ones that go beyond the requirements of the GMA by linking the community's environmental, economic, and social sustainability to the local government's fiscal sustainability.

Major takeaways

While each state must chart its own path up the slopes of growth and change, there may be value in considering lessons from Washington's journey.

- Recognize that land-use policy is rooted in politics. Elected decision makers adopt state and local laws, capital and operating budgets, comprehensive plans, and regulations through a transparent, inclusive, democratic process. However, even the best informed and best intentioned must operate in a political environment.
- Cultivate relationships with key legislators and with other stakeholder groups. APA Washington's credibility with legislators is founded on our collective expertise and professional commitment to serve the public interest above other interests.
- When considering statewide legislation, recognize the importance of regional diversity. Some rules may not apply everywhere, or they may be politically infeasible for the entire state. Most states have east-west or upstate-downstate diversity that must be respected.
- Recognize that while land-use regulation is an important tool in plan implementation, it is just one tool. A broad range of capital projects and programs can be equally important in achieving good results.
- It is vital that planners become advocates for sensible regulations needed to achieve important outcomes that the market alone will not produce, while also guarding against regulations that overreach.

As statewide experiments in managing growth and change, Washington and Oregon have truly been the laboratories of democracy. The growth management frameworks of these two states may provide national models for others seeking to attack the pressing problems that beset our nation and our very planet.

The people and leaders of the Pacific Northwest may be the 21st century heirs to those of the Upper Midwest who, at the turn of the 20th century, gave birth to the Progressive movement, which brought needed social, economic, and institutional reforms to this country—improvements that endure to this day. ■

Joseph Tovar is a planning consultant and affiliate associate professor of urban planning at the University of Washington. He participated in drafting the Growth Management Act, was appointed by governors to two terms on the state growth management appeals board, and has worked with the legislative committee of the Washington Chapter of APA to advocate for several successful amendments to the GMA.

RESOURCES

ONLINE Details about the Growth Management Act: www.commerce.wa.gov/Services/localgovernment/GrowthManagement/Pages/LawsRules.aspx; <https://mrsc.org/subjects/planning/compplan.aspx>.

Learn more from the Washington Chapter of APA: www.washington-apa.org.

ON RELATED TOPICS

TACOMA TACKLES THE BIG ONES

By Dan Bertolet

On the shores of Puget Sound, 32 miles south of Seattle, Tacoma is Washington State's third largest city and the most important business center in the South Sound area. Its port is the state's largest (by tonnage), and Sea-Tac International Airport is nearby.

With world-class arts, cultural, and educational institutions; robust transit infrastructure; and a spectacular natural setting, downtown Tacoma is certainly positioned to meet the region's rising demand for walkable urban neighborhoods. It is also a designated regional growth center, targeted for accommodating new residents and jobs to support the state's Growth Management Act.

Things aren't entirely rosy. Suburbanization and industrial decline have both hit Tacoma, and today the recovering downtown, like many downtowns, must overcome the slow pace of economic development.

In taking up the challenge, Tacoma in October 2014 completed a coordinated, multiyear planning effort to produce a subarea plan paired with an areawide environmental impact statement for each of the three subareas that comprise the 1,424-acre downtown. According to census figures, downtown had 13,360 residents and 31,502 jobs in 2010. The city's goal is to capture 60 percent of Tacoma's projected growth downtown—an additional 76,200 people and 67,900 jobs by 2040.

The overarching intent of the downtown planning efforts is to promote economic development, and thereby further local community goals for livability and regional goals for sustainable growth. To achieve that outcome, key planning strategies include:

- Exploring the upper limits of growth to maximize future potential for economic development
- Coordinating city actions to best leverage opportunities for private investment
- Establishing preapproval for state environmental review
- Applying an integrated, areawide approach to increase value throughout downtown
- Meshing Tacoma's ambitions with regional planning efforts
- Partnering with downtown's two major academic institutions, the University of Washington–Tacoma and Bates Technical College

In Washington State, areawide environmental impact statements eliminate the need for subsequent environmental review of individual development proposals so long as they comply with the subarea's development regulations. This preapproval means project predictability and reduces developer risk by limiting appeals. In addition, to avoid jeopardizing the viability of riskier "trail-blazer" redevelopment projects, a phased scheme specifies future mitigations that are triggered as downtown is built out over time.

The EIS analysis addresses not just the potential negative local impacts of large-scale growth, but also the many positive impacts of growth, including those that extend beyond the subarea. Well-planned redevelopment in downtown Tacoma can be expected to promote a range of environmental and community benefits, not least at the regional scale, primarily because of reduced development pressure on the urban fringe. Transportation modeling has projected that regional greenhouse gas emissions would decrease



with high-intensity redevelopment in downtown Tacoma.

The action-oriented subarea plans emphasize regulatory changes and public improvements designed to accelerate private investment downtown, and have already led to concrete actions:

- A major rezone and restructuring of the density bonus and transferable development rights systems
- Reduction of off-street parking requirements and designation of pedestrian streets
- Adoption of countywide affordable housing policies
- Issuance of requests for proposals for catalyst redevelopment sites
- Coordination of utility upgrades, including a new initiative to bury power lines
- Support for funding a light rail extension and the relocation of the Amtrak Station
- Grant applications for complete streets and transit-related improvements

The first project to obtain environmental preapproval is the UW-T/YMCA Student Center, a \$20 million, 73,000-square-foot student life and recreation facility, to be completed in early 2015. Other ongoing development: a 161-unit mixed use residential project under construction on the Foss Waterway; an expansion of the MultiCare and St. Joseph's hospital campuses; new office space for State Farm Insurance; and a proposed new \$40 million, 70,000-square-foot Health Science Center at Bates Technical College, which will provide space and equipment for eight existing and four new health science training programs and foster partnerships with regional health care agencies.

Building on the success of the downtown plans, the city is about to embark on a planning process for the 485-acre Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center. By following a systematic, proactive approach to planning focused on economic development, Tacoma is poised to deliver the win-win outcome of vibrant local communities and sustainable regional growth.

Dan Bertolet is an urban planner at VIA Architecture in Seattle.

BEYOND SEATTLE

By Joseph W. Tovar, FAICP

The Seattle metropolitan region consists of Washington State's three most populous counties, but the fourth and fifth, Spokane and Clark, are regions unto themselves. Both of these urban counties have been planning under the state's Growth Management Act, and they have seen major annexations and incorporation of a new city. Both, too, have unique relationships to bordering states, as well as ongoing debates among their local governments.

Spokane (pop. 212,000), in eastern Washington, is the state's second largest city. It began as a center of the forestry and mining industries and remains the economic and cultural "heart of the Inland Northwest." There are now 14 cities in Spokane County; together, they are home to 71 percent of the county's population.

Spokane County has expanded its urban growth area a dozen times over the past decade—prompting many appeals to the state GMA hearings board. So far the communities within the region have reached no mutually acceptable agreement on land use, revenues, utility extensions, and governance.

Vancouver (pop. 167,400) is Clark County's largest city and the seat of county government. Clark County, in the southwestern part of the state, is functionally a part of the Portland, Oregon, metro area. The county's population has grown by 86 percent since the GMA was adopted, far surpassing the growth rate in the rest of its metro area. Vancouver alone has tripled in population, largely reflecting an aggressive annexation program in the 1990s.

Despite urbanization, Spokane and Clark counties still use a government system like that of the state's 34 rural counties—with three county commissioners in control instead of a chief executive and up to nine council members, as in the three urban counties in the Puget Sound region. In Spokane and Clark counties, this rural form of government has fueled interjurisdictional competition and disputes over land use, service delivery, and governance.

Rural Washington

Favorable climate, rich soils, hydropower, and large-scale irrigation make central and eastern Washington the heartland of the state's \$49 billion agricultural industry. Some 300 crops provide 160,000 jobs and account for 13 percent of the state's economy. Three of these "interior" counties were required to plan under the GMA because of their growth rates, while another five opted in.

Counties dependant on fishing, forestry, and mining tell a different story. While state population has been rising, some eastern Washington and coastal counties have been shrinking. Some blame these population declines on the GMA, but the sharp drop in resource industries in those counties has been a major factor.

Still, some counties have chafed under the law, particularly the restrictions on conversion of agricultural land to other uses, limitations on the extent of urban growth areas, and rules governing small rural commercial and residential settlements.

Because they have far less growth to manage than the urban counties, rural counties have asked for greater flexibility in administering the Act; they also want to update their plans less frequently. An opt-out bill passed in 2014, although it was limited to several small counties with declining populations.