Aiming for Sustainable Urban Development - Experiences with Growth Management Planning in the Seattle Metropolitan Region

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, the Seattle metropolitan area has witnessed exceptional increases in population and employment. Spurred by increased suburbanization and the consequent threat to the scenic and environmental quality of the area surrounding the Puget Sound, the Washington State Growth Management Act was passed in 1990, and both public agencies and nongovernmental organizations initiated a range of efforts to reshape urban development in more sustainable forms.

On the public side, planning by cities and counties, as required by the GMA, must start with identifying and protecting sensitive areas and resource lands, and defining urban growth areas outside of which development is severely limited. Land use regulation outside of this designated growth area requires lot sizes that support agriculture and forestry, and limits extension of infrastructure which must be provided before development may occur. The state law also requires localities to monitor development and the effectiveness with which plans are implemented.

Recent endangered species listing of salmon in the region require extensive buffers along rivers and streams, further limiting urban expansion in open lands. Meanwhile, nongovernmental groups seek development easements of key rural sites through contribution and purchase. This year, a nonprofit group has negotiated to acquire and manage a large forestry tract at the edge of current development, keeping it permanently in open use.

These several initiatives and more are coming together to form a systematic response to controlling urban growth with the specific objective of progressing toward sustainable development. They represent one of the most advanced set of actions undertaken by any major urban region in the U.S. This paper describes and assesses these individual approaches, evaluates their effectiveness, and discusses the ways in which they are and might be integrated. Many of these initiatives are serving as prototypes, being adapted by communities elsewhere, and suggest what is needed to make them work in other contexts.

Keywords: sustainable development, growth management, Seattle, Washington State

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I. Introduction

Over the last two decades, the Seattle, Washington metropolitan area has witnessed exceptional increases in population and employment. Spurred by increased suburban sprawl and the consequent threat to the scenic and environmental quality of the area surrounding the Puget Sound, the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) was passed in 1990, and both public agencies and non-governmental organizations have initiated a range of efforts to reshape urban development in more sustainable forms.

Cities and counties, as required by the GMA, have undertaken environmentally sensitive planning and systematic programs to implement these plans. Several non-governmental groups have developed programs to measure progress toward sustainability in the region, and efforts to acquire and preserve key tracts of land at the edges of urban development which have important open space and resource values.

These several initiatives and more are coming together to form a systematic response to controlling urban growth with the specific objective of achieving sustainable development. Together, they represent one of the most advanced set of actions undertaken by any major urban region in the U.S. (Freilich, 1999; Beatley, 1995; Nutley, 2000). This article describes and assesses planning under the Washington GMA and various approaches to implementing these plans, and seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts. Many of these initiatives are serving as prototypes for programs being adopted by other communities in the U.S., and provide a range of ideas which could inspire similar initiatives elsewhere.

II. Background and Context for the Washington Growth Management Act

Seattle and the surrounding metropolitan area, with a population of 3.3 million, is the major urban region in Washington State. It consists of four counties surrounding the southern portion of the Puget Sound, which is a major deep-water port serving trade with the Pacific Rim. Forested, snow-capped mountains to the east and west of this area, and numerous fresh-water lakes in addition to salt-water frontage for most of the major cities support many outdoor recreational activities and make this a highly visually attractive setting. These physical features and moderate climate have attracted many of the current residents and firms to the Seattle Area.

This region has grown in population by 36 percent since 1980, making its growth rate the third highest among metropolitan areas in the U.S. Between 1990 and 1995, regional employment has grown by 100,000 and population by 221,000. Aside from Pacific Rim trade, major employers include the commercial airplane design offices and production plants of the Boeing Company with about 90,000 employees, Microsoft with about 25,000 employees, and the University of Washington with over 23,000 faculty and staff. This region is considered as one of the four major high-technology centers in the U.S., and population is expected to increase by half again by the year 2020.

While growth of the sorts seen recently in the Seattle urban region has brought with it prosperity, it has also been seen as threatening the natural amenities and quality of life which has encouraged this growth. This wide-spread public concern spurred the state legislature to adopt the Washington State Growth Management Act (Chapter 36.70A RCW – Revised Code of Washington) in 1990, revolutionizing the procedures and content of

local land use planning (Burby and May, 1997; Porter, 1997). These changes include relating the timing and location of development closely to the provision of adequate infrastructure such as sewers and roads, requiring community involvement in developing plans and regulations, increased coordination among city and county governments, and defining urban growth areas inside of which higher-density development is encouraged and outside of which urban development is prohibited.

Amendments to the GMA over the last dozen years have served to strengthen it and improve its application (Tovar, 2000). By now, approximately 200 cities and counties across the state have adopted comprehensive physical development plans which respond to the goals and requirements provided by the GMA. While some jurisdictions have balked at some of these requirements (Rasmussen, 1996), strong public political support and occasional appeals to the regional Growth Management Hearings Boards have resulted in a high level of compliance.

Since cities and counties are established and empowered by the states in the U.S., the significance of the GMA is that it is state enabling legislation which stipulates that these local governments in high growth areas must undertake growth management planning, and that jurisdictions with slower growth may elect to do so (Burby, May and Paterson, 1997; May et al., 1996). Counties are large spatial jurisdictions, each commonly including several cities that are largely autonomous from it. The counties are the general-purpose governments with responsibilities that include planning and development regulation for areas that are outside of incorporated city limits. Washington State legislation in force before 1990 permitted but did not require cities and counties to make plans and regulate

land uses, and a number of counties with large rural areas had no zoning ordinances regulating land uses.

The Washington Shoreline Management Act and State Environmental Policy Act of 1971 increased the state's role in regulating development and guiding local planning, in part setting the stage for the GMA. Additionally, cities and counties in the Seattle metropolitan region were beginning to cooperate in making their plans fit together across jurisdictional boundaries, and the Puget Sound Regional Council which includes the four counties in this urban area developed a collaborative land use and transportation plan, as required to qualify for state and federal transportation funding (PSRC, 1990). Significantly, King County in which Seattle is located adopted a comprehensive plan in 1985 that was innovative in establishing an urban growth boundary around existing cities, identified and protected important rural resource lands, limited additional urban development to areas with adequate infrastructure capacity, and initiated an annual growth report to serve as a basis for assessing progress in carrying out the plan. This planning program became the prototype for the requirements of the Washington State GMA in 1990, demonstrated that these provisions were workable, and mobilized political support for the state enabling legislation.

This historical development differentiates the Washington GMA from similar programs in another eleven states which have growth management statutes (Gale, 1992; DeGrove, 1992; Nelson et al., 1995; DeGrove and Metzger, 1993). Also unlike approaches to growth management planning in these other states, the Washington act responds to regional diversity and strong traditions of local government control by decentralizing planning and decision making to the cities and counties (Porter, 1996; Deakin, 1989). Rather than

requiring that local plans be approved by the state, the Washington GMA requires collaborative development of regional policies by constituent local governments, sets deadlines for meeting state requirements for issues which local plans must address, and establishes a set of thirteen goals to be used in developing these local plans and implementing developing regulations. These goals include: encourage efficient multi-modal transportation systems, reduce urban sprawl, encourage availability of affordable housing, protect private property rights, encourage economic development, focus development in urban growth areas, process permits for proposed developments in a timely and fair manner, work to retain open space, secure broad involvement of citizens in the planning and regulatory processes, conserve lands in forestry and agriculture, protect critical areas, ensure concurrency for public facilities and services, and historic preservation.

It is noteworthy that these goals, when taken together, constitute a fairly complete definition of sustainability (Owens and Cowell, 2002; Berke and Conroy, 2000; Sagoff, 1988). For example, the widely cited Bruntland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development typifies sustainable development as that which "…meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission, 1987). Sustainability is fast becoming a major paradigm of urban planning in the U.S. as demonstrated by its central role in a major American text (Kaiser et al., 1995), which notes that it addresses not only environmental concerns but social and economic dimensions as well. This is further illustrated by the three major goals in Toward a Sustainable Seattle, the recent comprehensive plan (Seattle 1994): environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic opportunity and security.

Basic to these and most other definitions of sustainability is the issue of social equity in at least three forms: intergroup, intergenerational, and interregional (Miller, 1999). Since these involve questions of social redistribution of resources, they constitute ethical concerns which often prove to be politically difficult to resolve (Miller, 1985). This suggests that there is more than one model for sustainability, and that these differing models depend on local conditions such as population composition and size, their incomes, existing environmental qualities, and economic structure. The challenge to planners is to incorporate these features into optional strategies for the future and to assess the implications of these to inform public dialogue and decision making (Howe, 2000; President's Council, 2001).

III. Requirements of the Washington Growth Management Act

The growth management enabling legislation specifies a number of activities that local governments in high-growth portions of the state must undertake. These provisions are structured as a number of steps in a planning process (1000 Friends, 2002).

1. Identification and protection of critical areas and resource lands

A first step in the growth management planning process is for cities and counties to specify environmentally critical areas and to develop regulations to protect them. These are lands that provide important fish and wildlife habitats, floodplains, wetlands, and aquifer recharge areas affecting domestic water supply. The law further specifies that best available science be employed in designating and managing these critical areas.

Similarly, local governments must identify important resource lands, defined as those in agriculture and forestry, and those with significant mineral resources. Cities and especially counties in high-growth portions of the state are required to adopt development regulations to conserve these resource lands. These provisions to map and protect critical areas and resource lands effectively remove them from the supply of space which can be used in planning for accommodating urban activities, and strongly address the environmental dimension of sustainable urban development (Rees, 1998; McDonald, 1996).

2. Developing and approving regional planning policies

The GMA requires the development of multi-jurisdictional planning policies by county governments in high-growth areas. These policies are intended to identify issues common among municipalities and with rural areas for which counties serve as the planning body, and to frame principles that address these issues. Development of these policies must be in collaboration with the governments of cities located in each county, but are finally adopted by the legislative body of the county: the county commission or council. In turn, these policies must be incorporated into the comprehensive land use and infrastructure plans of the cities and counties. State legislation further requires that these policies be reviewed and assessed on a regular basis. This step addresses the inter-area concerns of sustainability, and the necessity of dealing with ecologically defined regions such as watersheds (Beatley and Manning, 1997; Campbell, 1996).

3. Designating urban growth areas

As with county-wide planning policies, each county is directed to designate urban

growth areas (UGA), which incorporate all land within municipal boundaries and land already chiefly in urban use and served by urban infrastructure. This is undertaken collaboratively with the cities in the area but approval is the responsibility of the county government. The mapped boundary of urban growth areas must enclose enough land to meet the forecast demand for space for the next twenty years. The 20-year population projections which counties must use are supplied by the state Office of Financial Management.

Not only are counties expected to limit development to areas within the urban growth boundaries which they adopt, but they are prohibited from funding urban services and facilities outside of this boundary, and all annexations of areas to cities must take place inside of this spatial limit. The requirement that the urban growth area contain enough space to accommodate demand for space at planned densities over the coming twenty years is intended to avoid creating an artificial scarcity which would drive up the cost of land and thus of housing (Office of Community Development, 2002; Miller, 1986). The adequacy of UGAs to accomplish this is to be reviewed and possibly amended every five years.

4. Developing and approving comprehensive plans

The GMA specifies that cities and counties in high growth areas must prepare comprehensive urban development plans which deal with land use, housing, utilities, capital facilities, transportation, and in counties rural use areas. Other subject matter elements may be included, such as parks and recreation and economic development, and detailed subarea or neighborhood plans may also be adopted as part of the comprehensive plan.

These comprehensive plans also must address siting and accommodating necessary public facilities that are often avoided by localities, such as correctional facilities, airports, solid waste and sewage handling facilities, and major transportation facilities. For this and other reasons, cities and counties must identify lands useful for public purposes, and coordinate comprehensive plans with those of nearby cities and counties. State agencies are required to comply with local comprehensive plans, and must be notified sixty days in advance of a city or county approving or amending a comprehensive plan, or adopting related development regulations. These provisions, to accommodating siting locationally controversial facilities and to require that state agencies abide by the local plans, address major problems that local planning has confronted in the past in the U.S.; problems that raise fairness issues across jurisdictional boundaries (Howe, 2000; Burby and May, 1997; Ravetz, 2000; Deyle and Smith, 1998).

An explicit and important requirement of the GMA is that local governments provide for early and continuous public involvement in developing these comprehensive plans. This is intended not only to gain access to the knowledge and preferences of the parties who will be affected by plans, but to provide a forum by which citizens can influence and shape development decisions. Participation also serves to give the public a sense of ownership in the results, and consequently develops a political constituency in support of the plans. These outcomes are important to assuring that the plans are valid and to the process of implementing them (Glasbergen, 1998).

5. Design and adoption of development regulations and other instruments to implement the plan

Local governments must prepare and approve development regulations such as zoning and subdivision ordinances which are consistent with the comprehensive plan. They must also make their programming activities and capital budget decisions in a manner that conforms to the provisions of the plan. This is referred to as the consistency requirement: that the comprehensive plan is the governing policy document of a local government concerning physical development, and the other actions of that government must implement that policy (Ludin, 1994; Washington Research Council, 2001). Additionally, regulations dealing with environmentally critical areas which were adopted in an earlier stage of the planning process must be reviewed for their consistency with the approved plan and revised if they are not.

Similarly, once a comprehensive plan is approved by a local government, that government must adopt and enforce a concurrency ordinance which requires denial of any development which would result in the level of service for local roads or other transportation facilities to fall below the criteria approved as part of the transportation element of the plan, unless necessary improvements are made concurrent with the development. While local governments have discretion in setting the required levels of service for their facilities, this concurrency or 'pay as you grow' requirement makes these decisions an explicit part of the policy debate and in turn an explicit part of the development permitting process.

While plans prepared under the Washington GMA are not required to be submitted for review and approval by the state as in the case under the growth management acts of several other states (DeGrove, 1992; Burby and May, 1998), citizens and organizations participating in developing plans and their means of implementation may appeal their adoption to one of three Growth Management Hearings Boards. These appeals may be on a failure to meet one of the goals of the GMA, or one of the required steps in the planning and implementation process (Washington Research Council, 2001; Deyle and Smith, 1998). This gives added significance to the requirement that there be public involvement throughout the process (Common, 1995).

6. Monitoring, evaluating and amending comprehensive plans and implementing regulations

The Washington GMA requires local governments to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their comprehensive plans and the means of implementing them. Thus for the first time cities and counties have had to develop a set of indicators related to the major purposes of their plans, to use these indicators as the basis of collecting data on growth and its effects, and to apply these data in assessing progress towards these purposes. There had been little previous experience with this sort of monitoring. Fortunately, a non-governmental organization, Sustainable Seattle, had begun an open public process in 1990 for developing a set of sustainability indicators which provided public experience with developing benchmark measures and served as a prototype for several local governments in the Puget Sound region (Miller, 1999). Sustainable Seattle has used these indicators to

publish a series of report cards on various social, economic and environmental features of sustainability in the region (1993, 1995, 1998).

In addition to developing and employing a set of benchmarks to track growth and assess how well growth management is working, the GMA also requires six counties in the state to undertake a buildable lands inventory every five years to ascertain whether development is taking place at the densities prescribed in their plans and to appraise the remaining availability of land to accommodate forecast demand for residential and commercial space. These counties include King, Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap, which together constitute the metropolitan area centered on Seattle. This information is important in determining whether the urban growth boundary must be adjusted to maintain a twenty-year supply of land.

Finally, the Washington Growth Management Act requires all local governments to complete a review of their comprehensive plans and related regulations every five years and to revise them as necessary to satisfy the provisions of the state legislation. The first set plans were due in 1994, and jurisdictions in the Puget Sound region have recently completed their first round of reviews and amendments to these plans. Thus, while planning under the 1990 GMA is still new and changing as experience is gained, there is some current evidence concerning its effectiveness.

IV. Experience With Growth Management Planning in the Seattle Metropolitan Region

As noted in the last section, growth management in Washington State consists of developing plans at the regional and local levels, consistence and concurrency requirements,

open citizen participation throughout the process, and development regulations that protect critical areas and favor infill development where urban infrastructure already exists. Most of the measures discussed to this point, that are used to implement growth management plans, are some form of land-use control or legal constraints on development that must be met before building permits are issues. However, several implementing tactics used in the Puget Sound region employ incentives. These incentives, including transferable development credits and open space taxation, provide rewards to property owners for their voluntary actions in following policy guidelines contained in the plan. Research in settings as diverse as the U.S. and Korea indicate that the availability of incentives makes compliance with land use regulations much more acceptable to property owners (Lee, 2000).

Beyond incentives, acquisition of property for permanent open use, or acquisition of development rights which will leave property in private ownership but in open rural use are additional tactics. Finally programs that seek to concentrate future development, as illustrated by the urban centers policy and program in the Seattle urban region, are aimed at encouraging higher density growth at nodes within the established urban area. Accommodating part of future growth in these centers should reduce demand for additional land at the edges of the urban area, and shorten trip lengths.

A brief discussion of specific implementing measures used in the Seattle urban region can provide ideas useful in designing similar approaches appropriate in other urban contexts. This discussion will also help to show how these tactics complement each other in working to control sprawl, which consumes open space currently in rural uses and is expensive to supply with urban services and facilities.

1. Legal Constraints on Development

In the case of the Washington GMA, perhaps the most important tool to accomplish these ends is the designation and enforcement of urban growth areas, which prescribe where additional development is permitted. In the case of the Seattle metropolitan region, the urban growth areas specified in the plans of the four counties consist of 630,000 acres, or sixteen percent of the land within these counties, and account for 86 percent of the population. These growth areas include all incorporated cities and suburban lands in urban use, and are extensive enough to meet the estimated demand for land by urban development over the next twenty years.

These counties differ in their growth patterns, and some have substantial portions of the land within their boundaries in public ownership, largely in national forests. This is reflected in how their growth areas are defined. For example, the King County growth area accounts for twenty two percent of its land, and ninety one percent of its population. The more rural Kitsap County on the western edge of Puget Sound has a growth area which includes thirty percent of its land, but only sixty eight percent of its population. The Kitsap County growth boundary was appealed to the hearings board as being inconsistent with the GMA.

While it is important to assess how well the urban growth boundaries are working to concentrate development and protect rural areas, experience over the eight years since the first round of growth management plans were adopted provide a limited basis for doing this. This is because many property owners sought subdivision and building permits just prior to the adoption of these plans, and because previously existing legal lots outside of the urban

growth boundary must still be issued building permits. However, King County designated an urban growth area as part of its 1985 plan, providing a longer period to observe its effect in limiting development in designated rural areas.

The number of building permits issued is a useful measure for tracking where development is taking place. The number of building permits during the first half of the 1990s in the four-county Seattle metropolitan region remained largely constant, thought the number dropped significantly from the late 1980s in Snohomish and King Counties. Throughout the region, about 19,700 building permits were issued for residential units in 1995, of which 15,250 were within urban growth area and 4,450 in rural areas. In the case of King County, approximately 6,800 of the permits issued were inside the growth boundary, and 400 outside: a higher proportion in conformance with the plan than for any of the other counties.

In 1998, over 13,400 residential building permits were issued inside of the urban growth area for King County, of which three-fourths wee issued in cities within the county, while 829 were issued for development on existing lots outside of the growth boundary. Thus while about fifteen percent of new residential growth took place in rural parts of King County before growth management was instituted, by 1998 that number was reduced to six percent (King County, 2000a).

The new King County plan interprets these results as indicating success for the urban growth area policy and supporting programs, and of weaknesses as well (King County, 2000b). Documentation identifies 12,000 vacant lots that exist outside of the urban growth boundary, and that 8,000 more lots could legally be created through subdivision. Many of these buildable lots are in areas where development would conflict with forestry and

agricultural uses. Zoning for minimum lot sizes of 10 and 20 acres, depending on location, is a partial solution, but development must still be permitted on existing smaller parcels of record. Rural Area zoning controls lot sizes for future subdivision of property, and seeks to encourage resource use of these lands.

2. Incentives: TDR Credits, Tax Relief, and other innovative programs

While urban growth boundaries are a clear expression of public policy and are enforced by regulations such as zoning and limitations on extending urban infrastructure to areas outside of them, incentives and public land acquisition are important means for protecting rural areas as well. An innovative incentive program being used by King County involves transfer of development credits. Using this program, which was initiated in 1999, owners may sell rights to development of their rural property to owners of land inside of the urban growth area, which the buyer can use to increase the density at which that property can be developed. When these development credits are transferred, a permanent conservation easement is placed on that property. For example, an owner who might subdivide a property into four parcels can elect to build one house on the property, and sell credits for the possibility of building three additional units, thus keeping the balance of the site in permanent open use.

An incentive program somewhat similar to using transferable development credits is the current use assessment program, permitted under the Washington State Open Space Taxation Act. Under this program, private land owners are offered direct property tax relief for retaining natural features of their property in an undeveloped condition. Thus, rather than being taxed on the basis of the market value of their property, they are taxed on the

basis of the lower use value of their land so long as they agree to act as stewards of the natural resources on all or part of their property. Often, a technically based public benefit rating system is used to identify and select lands that qualify for this incentive program. This rating system is being used by several counties in the Puget Sound area, especially in connection with their efforts to implement watershed protection goals and objectives (Rubey, 1999).

Watershed protection has become a major concern since the 1999 listing of Puget Sound chinook salmon runs as threatened, under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. This act prohibits modifying the habitat of a listed species in a manner that threatens its injury or death, and provides for stringent enforcement. Preliminary assessments suggest that this will require buffers of natural vegetation 200 feet deep along all streams in the region, and will possibly require that no storm water runoff be discharged into these streams. This set of development constraints, imposed by the federal government, makes environmentally sound watershed protection a necessary activity of local governments, and makes participating in incentive programs such as open state taxation especially attractive to owners of property located along streams.

A third innovative incentive program, also in King County, invites proposals from builders for urban development projects outside of but adjacent to the urban growth boundary, with the provision that for every acre of the property that will be developed, the owner deeds four acres of this property to the county in permanent open space. In many cases, the land transferred for open space has been identified as part of a critical area either in environmental terms, because it is unstable and thus expensive to build on, or both. Since the beginning of this program in 1994, 200 acres of developed land and 8000 acres of

dedicated open space have been added to the urban growth area of King County, and applications for about 1000 additional acres are under review. A limit of 4,000 acres has been placed on this 'Four-to-One' program.

In contrast to these incentive programs, acquisition programs seek to purchase land for public ownership and use, or to purchase the development rights to privately owned land. Purchase of development rights are sometimes also called purchase of conservation easements, since the land continues in private ownership and management, but it can no longer be developed for urban uses. As an illustration of how these tactics can complement each other, once a property owner donates or sells the development rights for a parcel, that land is taxed on the basis of use value rather than speculative or development value.

An important application of this means of controlling growth is the agricultural lands protection program of King County, one of the first and most ambitious such programs in the U.S. (Lee, 2000). Realizing that two-thirds of its prime farmland was consumed by suburban development from about 1950 to the late 1970s, county voters approved a $ 50 million bond issue to buy development rights from farmers who wished to participate in the program. Over the next ten years, two hundred farming families sold conservation easements for over 12,000 acres of agricultural to the county. This land will remain permanently in open, agricultural use, and helps to establish a boundary between urban and rural areas.

In a current initiative, unique in the U.S., a non-governmental organization called the Evergreen Forest Trust is in the process of purchasing the Weyerhaeuser Snoqualmie Tree Farm, a 104,000 acre tract of primarily third-growth forest in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, at the eastern edge of the Seattle urban area. The Trust plans to sell tax-exempt

bonds to make the purchase, and to log the land on a sustainable basis to pay off these bonds. Nearly 20,000 acres of this forest land will not be used for timber production, but kept in natural environment to protect important habitat areas. Bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress to allow the sale of tax-exempt bonds for this purpose. Outright ownership of this land by the Trust means that it will remain permanently in forest use, and managed for timber production only long enough to retire the bonds. This exceptional project is attracting the attention of communities across the U.S. as a possible prototype for similar open space conservation efforts.

3. Concentration of Development: 'Urban Centers'

A final tactic used to reduce growth pressures on rural lands involves aggressively pursuing concentrating growth through an urban centers strategy. This has involved cities in the region, working together through the Puget Sound Regional Council, to designate twenty one urban centers, especially as locations of employment. Five of these are Seattle neighborhoods, including the downtown business district, and others include the downtown areas of suburban cities and several job centers located next to regional shopping malls.

While these centers represent two percent of the area within the urban growth areas for the four counties in the region, they currently are the location of 29.7 percent of the employment, and 4.7 percent of the population. Regional policy, which is also included in local plans, aims to accommodate 31.8 percent of all employment in the area in these centers by 2020.

While primarily intended to provide locations for concentrated employment growth, regional goals also call for these urban centers to accommodate as much as sixteen percent

of the population growth in higher density housing. Since most multi-family housing currently is located in Seattle and older suburban city centers, this policy will result in distributing this housing type more widely through the region. There are several reasons why this is desirable. Higher density housing provides residential options sought by many households, is one means of providing affordable housing, and can reduce the commutes of those who live and work in the same urban center. In addition, these urban centers are intended to provide important nodes in planning for the regional transit system. Thus seventeen of these centers are planned to be a bus transit center, commuter rail station, or light rail station within a decade. These concentrations of housing and jobs are a means of reducing the demand from future growth for adding land to the urban growth areas, and a means to make regional transit work better than it does in a largely low-density urban form.

4. Conclusions

The Washington State Growth Management Act sets forth thirteen goals, which together provide a creditable definition of sustainable urban development. As described in the third section of this article, the GMA sets out a planning process, consisting of a required set of steps, intended to assure that both the preparation of the plan and its implementation guide urban development in a sustainable manner.

Cities and counties in the Seattle urban area completed the first round of land use and infrastructure plans in 1994, as required by the GMA. Even though it is too soon to completely assess the effectiveness of this new planning system in achieving sustainable urban development, evidence that is available indicates significant progress towards this objective. Furthermore, new and often innovative means of implementing these plans – of

concentrating growth and protecting critical and resource lands at the edges of the urban area – are providing exciting results. As a consequence, these planning and implementation programs are among the most advanced in the U.S. and are looked to as prototypes by other American communities.

Since every community is unique, no one approach to growth management is likely to be appropriate to them all. Recognition of this informed the design of the Washington GMA. For this reason, while the state government prescribed how local governments would undertake planning and implementation, it also gave these local governments broad discretion in shaping these provisions to respond to local conditions. By the same reasoning, the general planning system and the innovations developed by these local governments in the Seattle metropolitan region are more valuable as sources of ideas for designing programs for other communities than as models to be adopted by them.

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