

More and Better Local Planning

State-Mandated Local Planning in Coastal North Carolina

Academics, public officials, and citizens increasingly advocate more and better local planning as a central component of regional growth management. They assume that local plans will provide meaningful policy guidance to local officials when making land use-related policy decisions, and that local officials will implement their plans. This article presents findings from an evaluation of state-mandated local planning in coastal North Carolina during the mid 1990s. All 20 coastal counties and 72 municipalities were preparing plans consistent with the state's procedural requirements during this time, and many were using those plans to at least some extent when making land use-related policy decisions. Taken altogether, however, the plans were weak analytically and substantively, providing limited guidance for growth management, especially in terms of coastal area resource protection. The promise of state-mandated local planning for managing growth at the regional level is discussed in light of North Carolina's experiences.

RICHARD K. NORTON

Over the last decade or so, a reinvigorated call has gone out for more and better local planning. It has been made by academics (e.g., Burby & Dalton, 1994); professional planners (American Planning Association, 2002); land use lawyers (e.g., Freilich, 1999); broad-based political action groups (Smart Growth Network, 2002); a host of national, state, and local action groups; and citizen activists. More and better local planning is even promoted by such ideologically opposed groups as the National Association of Home Builders (2000) and the Sierra Club (2000). For the most part, this movement is not so much about improving local planning for its own sake as it is about using improved local planning to improve regional growth management. Widely popularized as "smart growth," this response to the unhappy consequences of "sprawl" stems in part from concerns about the inefficient use of public infrastructure, increasing traffic congestion, decreasing affordable housing, and declining central cities. But it is especially animated by quality-of-life and environmental concerns stemming from the ongoing loss and fragmentation of arable farmland, natural open space, viable wildlife habitat, and functioning wetlands; the continuing decline of water quality from nonpoint sources of pollution; and the decreasing resilience of communities to natural hazards such as catastrophic forest fires and coastal storms (see, e.g., APA, 2000; Burby, 1998).

Calling for more and better local planning to address these kinds of concerns makes sense; they are all a function of land use, and local government has traditionally had the prerogative in managing local land development (see, e.g., Peck, 1998; Porter, 1997; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1989). But advocates seem to be making some assumptions that ought to be clarified. First, they assume that more and better local planning

will yield plans that provide meaningful policy guidance for local officials as they make local development management decisions. Second, they assume that those policies will effectively address regional growth management concerns—especially quality of life and environmental concerns—as well as local concerns. Finally, they assume that local officials will actually use those plans for their decision making rather than leaving them on the proverbial shelf. Are these assumptions warranted?

This article reviews briefly the evolution of state/local growth management programs and recent scholarship addressing the successes and failures of local planning when required through those programs. Building on that scholarship, it then presents findings from a study of state-mandated local planning in coastal North Carolina, focusing in particular on the quality, policy focus, and use of local plans throughout the coastal region during the mid 1990s. It concludes by contemplating the promise of state-mandated local planning for regional growth management in light of coastal North Carolina's experiences.

More and Better Planning— For What and How Well?

The call for improved local planning as a way to improve growth management has in fact been made for some time. Since the dawn of a widespread environmental consciousness about four decades ago (see, e.g., Carson, 1962; McHarg, 1969), states and localities have been engaged in a complex, often contentious growth management debate, trying to find just the right balance between protecting the environment and promoting the economy (Bollens, 1992, 1993; Bosselmann & Callies, 1971;

er, 1997). While early approaches were animated largely by environmental protection concerns, growth management advocates now articulate an array of co-equal principles addressing economy, infrastructure efficiency, and quality of life, along with environmental protection (see APA, 2002).

Similarly, intergovernmental growth programs—particularly those incorporating state-mandated local planning—have evolved over time as states and localities have struggled to find the right process to balance competing policy goals effectively and equitably. Early top-down, coercive approaches are becoming more collaborative. Referred to variously as economic co-production, or state/local partnership approaches to growth management, the collaborative model generally entails the state prescribing broad local planning procedures (whether mandated or strongly encouraged) and establishing larger growth management goals, but leaving local governments great flexibility in deciding how much planning to undertake and which specific policies to adopt (see Berk, 1998; Bollens, 1992; Burby & Dalton, 1994; Burby & May, 1997; Gale, 1992; Weitz, 1999).

Thus, advocates for improved growth management now embrace a policy-balancing, collaborative state/local approach that relies heavily on the use of more and better local planning to advance regional growth management goals. Yet something here does not quite square. During the very same decades when popular and political pressures pushed against the idea of managing growth primarily for environmental reasons, legislation accelerated at a remarkable pace, yielding the host of increasingly troublesome environmental problems noted above. Moreover, even while these same pressures have pushed states to adopt more collaborative growth management programs, there remains broad agreement that a key reason behind uncontrolled unmanaged growth has been the continued parochial attitudes and actions of local governments (Burby & May, 1994). So juxtaposing the growing call for yet more and better local planning against these seemingly remorseless trends and unyielding attitudes begs the question: Will more and better local planning really work?

In some states have been mandating local planning for regional growth management, and some researchers have been tackling questions about local planning outcomes since at least the 1970s (Alterman & Hill, 1978; Johnston et al., 1978), although collective efforts over time have yielded relatively limited practical results (Dalton & Burby, 1994). Despite the preeminence of Oregon's growth management program, for example, is known "about the program's impact, effectiveness, and implementation experiences" (Howe, 1994, p. 275). Moreover, most of the work that has been done in Oregon and other growth management states has been based largely on single case studies that have collectively lacked a conceptual coherence (Burby, 1997; Bollens, 1993; Talen, 1996). Finally, most research studies of growth management programs have generally compared different growth management approaches (e.g., Gale, 1992) or the administrative systems they employ (e.g., Weitz, 1999) or the land development patterns they appear to yield (Burby & Dalton, 1994; Burby & May, 1997; Gale, 1992; Weitz, 1999; Cruthers, 2002), not the quality and implementation of the plans they engender.

Even so, considerable attention has been focused recently on the evaluation of local plan making and implementation outcomes within the context of managing growth to mitigate natural hazards, improve environmental governance, and promote sustainability (see, e.g., Burby & May, 1997, 1998; Deyle & Smith, 1998; Godschalk et al., 1999; May et al., 1996). But the findings from this work regarding the successes and failures of local planning have been decidedly mixed. A research team led by Raymond Burby and Peter May recently conducted a multi-state assessment of local planning for natural hazards mitigation, comparing states that mandated comprehensive local planning prior to 1990—California, Florida, and coastal North Carolina—against states that did not—Texas, Washington, and the mountain region of North Carolina (see Burby & May, 1997, which summarizes this work in a single source). They concluded that state mandates for local comprehensive planning make a difference, improving the quality of both local plans and local development management programs (Burby & Dalton, 1994; Burby & May, 1997; Dalton & Burby, 1994). This finding in particular suggests that the widespread call for more and better local planning—and in particular state-mandated local planning—is not misplaced.

These same researchers also found that the state planning mandate that yielded the highest quality local plans was North Carolina's coastal area planning mandate, producing plans that were better on average than those produced under both Florida's more coercive and California's less coercive mandates (Burby & May, 1997, pp. 105–106). North Carolina's mandate was crafted as a collaborative "state-local partnership," under which the state puts great emphasis on local planning and specifies general procedures and goals, but leaves considerable flexibility to the localities themselves in preparing the plans, adopting specific policies, and implementing them (Burby & May, 1997; North Carolina Division of Coastal Management [NCDQM], 1986; Owens, 1985). In addition, along with other federal coastal zone management programs, it was expressly designed to strike a balance between economic development and environmental protection rather than emphasizing primarily the environment (see Godschalk & Cousins, 1985; Lowry, 1985). As such, it represents an example of the "mature" growth management programs that seek to balance the competing substantive goals of environment and economy through the use of collaborative state/local planning processes (see Bollens, 1992, 1993). North Carolina's approach to coastal area growth management, along with Burby and May's finding that it yielded the highest quality local plans, thus suggests that calls for more and better local planning through the use of collaborative, policy-balancing state mandates do indeed show the most promise for achieving improved intergovernmental growth management.

But the story does not end there. While the Burby and May research team found that North Carolina's mandate yielded the highest quality plans relative to the other states studied, they also concluded that none of the states with comprehensive planning mandates did "a very good job of addressing natural hazards," including North Carolina's plans, which scored on average only a 1.35 out of a possible 5 points on a standardized index measure of plan quality (Burby & May, 1997, p. 105). Moreover, since the

early 1990s, there has been substantial and growing evidence that North Carolina's coastal resources are continuing to decline despite more than two decades of local planning under the state's Coastal Area Management Act of 1974 (CAMA), not only in terms of coastal hazards mitigation but especially with regard to coastal habitat loss, wetland loss, estuarine shellfish bed closings, and coastal water quality degradation more generally (Mallin, Ensign, et al., 2001; Mallin & Wheeler, 2000; Mallin, Williams, et al., 2000; NC Coastal Futures Committee, 1994). This continued decline is attributable largely to cumulative impacts from ongoing low-density development occurring throughout the coastal region (see NCDCM, 1994).

The evidence taken altogether thus suggests that while collaborative, policy-balanced intergovernmental growth management programs can yield more and better local planning outcomes, especially relative to either highly coercive or minimally coercive programs, they are not yielding planning outcomes that are effectively addressing regional concerns, especially environmental protection concerns. It is not entirely clear, however, why this is so. Wanting to explore this and related questions in greater depth, I conducted a study of North Carolina's coastal area planning program.

State-Mandated Local Planning in Coastal North Carolina

North Carolina's coastal region, as defined by CAMA, encompasses the 20 coastal counties bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds. After 2 years of highly contentious debate, the state legislature enacted CAMA largely in response to impending threats to the region's resources from ongoing development (Heath, 1974; Heath & Owens, 1994). Designed expressly with the goal of striking a balance between the preservation of the coastal area's natural resource base and the orderly economic development of the coastal region (NCDCM, 1986), the program consists of four parts: a regulatory permitting program for statutorily defined "areas of environmental concern" (AECs); a state-mandated local planning program; a state-to-local grants-in-aid program; and a coastal area land acquisition program. The coastal region is the only region in the state where local planning is mandated. As of the mid 1990s, 72 municipalities and all 20 coastal counties were preparing CAMA land use plans.

The state addresses environmental protection issues under CAMA most directly through the regulatory permitting program for areas of environmental concern. AECs are formally designated on the ground in response to development permit requests and consist for the most part of the coastal water bodies themselves, coastal shorelines, relatively narrow shoreline buffers, and coastal wetlands (see NC Department of Environment, Health, & Natural Resources [NCDEHNR] State Guidelines for Areas of Environmental Concern, 2001). They comprise in total less than roughly 5–7% of the entire coastal region (Owens, 1985).¹ Local land use planning under CAMA, in contrast, is mandated for the entire coastal region. The state's Coastal Resources Commission (CRC), which administers the act, pre-

scribes the local planning process to be followed under administrative rules or "planning guidelines" (NCDEHNR Land Use Planning Guidelines, 2001). It is important to note that local planning is mandated in order to advance the state's full complement of growth management goals—including especially the goal of balancing economy and environment and to do so throughout the entire coastal region, including areas beyond the AECs (Heath, 1974, p. 371; Longest & Smith, 2000; NCDCM, 1986). However, because of a political compromise made during CAMA's enactment (Heath, 1974, p. 376), the Act specifically prohibits the CRC from compelling localities to actually implement their plans outside of designated areas of environmental concern (see Section 113A-111 of CAMA).

A state blue-ribbon commission released a report in 1994 that catalogued the continued decline of North Carolina's coastal resources and identified the need for more and better local CAMA planning as one of the key mechanisms to arrest that decline (NC Coastal Futures Committee, 1994). Building from that report, coastal environmental activists began pressing the state to demand more rigorous local plans and to compel local plan implementation. The program erupted in controversy in mid 1998 when the CRC temporarily refused to certify a local plan based on environmentalists' complaints. The CRC subsequently placed a moratorium on the local planning process and convened a stakeholder advisory group, called the Land Use Planning Review Team, to revisit its administrative rules (see NCDCM, 2000).² This turn of events, along with the prominence given to local planning in coastal North Carolina by the work of Burby and May and their colleagues, presented an ideal opportunity for study.

Methods

Research Questions and Design

Recent conceptual and empirical work on state-mandated local planning for intergovernmental growth management consistently points to several important and closely-related factors in explaining planning outcomes: the use and structure of planning mandates, the administration of those mandates by state officials, local fiscal and administrative capacity to plan, and local commitment (i.e., both to planning and to regional growth management goals; see Berke & French, 1994; Berke et al., 1996; Burby et al., 1993; Burby & May, 1997, 1998; Dalton & Burby, 1994; Deyle & Smith, 1998). Especially important, local commitment represents both an outcome of state growth management efforts and a key determinant of local planning outcomes, where higher levels of local commitment presumably yield more and better local plan making and plan implementation.³

Building on the conceptual and methodological work of Burby, May, and their colleagues, I addressed several research questions, including whether local CAMA plans provided meaningful policy guidance for development management, how those plans were actually balancing environment and economy—the express goal of CAMA (i.e., rather than focusing specifically on hazard mitigation)—and why local CAMA planning efforts were apparently not working to arrest the decline of the state's coastal

T
O
P
L
i
c
O
P
S
L
ti
F
F

Table 1. Six measures of local CAMA planning outcomes (see Appendix).

Outcome	Measurement construct	Data source
Process-related planning outcomes		
Local elected officials' commitment to planning	Commitment by local elected officials to planning as a function of government for land use-related public policy decision making.	Survey of local administrators; asked to characterize local elected officials collectively during mid 1990s (<i>n</i> = 36).
Overall plan quality	Quality of a plan in terms of its articulation of values, goals, factual analyses, and policies; land suitability analysis; relationship between analysis and policies; and implementation, monitoring, and evaluation provisions.	Content evaluation of local CAMA plans of record during 1993-1998 (<i>n</i> = 40).
Plan use	Extent to which the plan played a role in guiding local elected officials' land use-related public policy decision making (e.g., ordinance adoption, site-specific ordinance revision, capital improvement program decisions).	Surveys of local administrators and local attorneys; asked to characterize local elected officials' collective use of the CAMA plan during mid 1990s (<i>n</i> = 36).
Substantive planning outcomes		
Local elected officials' policy trade-off preference	Clear evidence of a policy preference by local elected officials for economic development over environmental protection or vice versa.	Combined responses from surveys of local administrators, local attorneys, and state planners; asked to characterize local elected officials' policy preferences (<i>n</i> = 36).
Local plan policy emphasis	Clear evidence of an emphasis in plan policies favoring economic development over environmental protection or vice versa.	Content evaluation of local CAMA plans of record during 1993-1998 (<i>n</i> = 40).
Plan use emphasis	Clear evidence that local elected officials tended to emphasize a plan's economic development policies over its environmental protection policies or vice versa when using the plan.	Survey of local administrators; asked to characterize local elected officials' collective use of the plan, adjusted for plan policy emphasis (<i>n</i> = 36).

resources. Also, given its pivotal importance, I focused especially on the question of local elected officials' commitment to CAMA planning. Finally, approaching planning as a mechanism to influence local decision making, I defined plan implementation as the role played by the plan (or use of the plan) when local elected officials engaged in land use-related policymaking (i.e., zoning and subdivision ordinance adoption or revision, site-specific decisions such as rezonings, and capital improvement program decisions), rather than as a factor influencing development management programs or land development patterns.

Thus, I focused on three process-related local planning outcomes, including local elected officials' commitment to planning, overall plan quality, and plan implementation (conceptualized as plan use). In order to better characterize how localities were striking the balance between economy and environment, I also focused on three substantive planning outcomes, including local elected officials' policy trade-off preferences, local plan policy emphasis, and plan use emphasis, all as between environment and economy. Table I summarizes the measurement constructs and data sources employed for these six variables, which are discussed in more detail below. Finally, CAMA requires localities to update their plans every 5 years, and a relatively recent review of the program suggested that local planning efforts had become well established, if not routine, by the mid 1990s (see Heath & Owens, 1994). Wanting

to evaluate the status of local planning in this settled state, but prior to the eruption of controversy over the program, I focused on the 5-year period between 1993 and 1998.⁴

Data Collection and Analysis

I employed two complementary data collection and analysis approaches for this study, both of which extended from late in 1998 through early 2001. First, I assessed systematically a cross-sectional sample of 36 coastal counties and municipalities, including 11 counties, 15 estuarine and inland communities, and 10 oceanfront or "beach" communities (referred to collectively as localities). Data were collected from several sources, including in-depth telephone surveys of local administrators and planning directors;⁵ systematic content analyses of the local CAMA land use plans of record during the study period for 40 localities;⁶ short mail surveys of the state's district planners and attorneys representing coastal localities; and demographic data for each locality collected from a variety of sources.

The measurement constructs and data sources used to operationalize the six key outcome variables summarized in Table I are detailed in the Appendix. Consistent with the Burby and May research team's approach, the local commitment and local plan implementation (plan use) variables evaluated for this study were drawn primarily from telephone and mail surveys

(see Dalton & Burby, 1994). In order to obtain information on these variables efficiently, a single local administrator from each locality was asked to characterize his or her local elected officials collectively (i.e., the city council or county commission) using an 84-item telephone survey. In addition, I conducted shorter mail surveys of local attorneys and state planners in order to triangulate data sources for increased validity (see the Appendix). All of the telephone and mail survey instruments were designed, pretested, and administered following protocols prescribed by Dillman (1978) and Fowler (1995).

The local plan quality and policy emphasis variables were evaluated through plan content evaluations. In designing the evaluation protocol, I started with the conceptual framework employed by the Burby and May research team (see, e.g., Dalton & Burby, 1994). Drawing from this work and related studies, a plan can be characterized as a high-quality plan if it does the following:

- demonstrates a strong factual basis;
- provides clearly articulated goals;
- employs a land suitability analysis (LSA) that clearly identifies natural and built environment opportunities and constraints for development;
- establishes policies that are consistent with the LSA and that are directive rather than exhortative, are spatially specific, and that appear to be reasonably efficacious;
- satisfies several kinds of consistency (horizontal, vertical, internal, and implementation [see Weitz, 1999, pp. 198–205]);
- facilitates meaningful ongoing public participation; and
- designates implementation responsibilities and incorporates ongoing monitoring and implementation evaluation procedures (see, e.g., Berke et al., 1996; Burby & May, 1997; Kaiser et al., 1995).

I synthesized these general criteria with the specific requirements of North Carolina's CAMA planning mandate as of the mid 1990s, yielding a 400-plus-item evaluation protocol. Again, consistent with the Burby and May work (see, e.g., Dalton & Burby, 1994), plans were scored for the presence and strength of specified items, and indices were constructed to yield overall measures of plan quality and policy emphasis (see the Appendix).

The second data collection and analysis approach I employed entailed attending 20 of the 24 meetings conducted by a Land Use Planning Review Team, attending most of the Coastal Resource Commission's bi-monthly two-day meetings held throughout the region over the 18-month period spanning 1999 into 2001, and engaging in ongoing interviews and conversations with state officials, local officials, local government association representatives, chamber of commerce representatives, and local activists during that same period. I also reviewed a variety of reports, newsletters, memoranda, and other documentary data from a variety of sources. My involvement with the Land Use Planning Review Team in particular shifted over time from being merely an observer to a participant observer, as I provided comments and some limited analysis in response to conversations and specific requests for assistance. I used the ob-

servations I gained from these interactions to test and the more quantitative measures of planning outcomes reflecting concurrently.

Findings

The findings presented here include a detailed assessment of the six planning outcomes noted in Table I, which are then used to address the larger research questions noted above. Before discussing these results, a preliminary finding should be noted. At least some critics of the local CAMA planning program assert that one of the reasons for the program's problems stems from it being "consultant driven." Consultants do play a very large role in local CAMA planning efforts across the region. Thirty of the 40 plans evaluated for this study were prepared entirely or in part by private consultants, and the same firm prepared half of those. Several Councils of Government, effectively serving as consultants, prepared an additional five. Consultants are used so heavily because many of the localities in the region do not have large planning staffs, if any at all, and budgets for planning efforts appeared to be limited despite the availability of State-to-local grants (which averaged only \$15,000 per community during the mid 1990s based on records provided by the State). Several of the larger localities with their own planning staffs also employed consultants for their technical specialties.

One of the clear results of this reliance on consultants was that many of the plans, when compared across localities, were formulaic in presentation. Even so, variation in use of consultants was so limited that it was difficult to discern a clear relationship between that use and variation in the quality of local planning efforts and outcomes. More significantly, a locality's decision to use a consultant was apparently less important than its decision of which consultant to use and why. Several local administrators commented during interviews that their local officials, in the words of one, "knew what they wanted out of the plan and they knew which consultant would give it to them, so that's who they used." The relationship between the use of consultants and planning outcomes across the region thus appears to have been a function of local capacity and commitment as much or more than a key causal relationship by itself. While deserving of more in-depth analysis, the issue was not addressed further for this study.

Planning Process: Local CAMA Planning Outcomes

Figure 2 presents frequency distributions for the three process-related local planning outcomes, including local elected officials' commitment to planning, overall plan quality, and plan use.

Local elected officials' commitment to planning. Local administrators generally indicated that their local elected officials were committed to land use planning and plan implementation. This finding is consistent with the perception of many State and local officials throughout the region but runs counter to the perceptions of many local environmental activists, who tended to see local commitment to CAMA planning as low or, at best, a calculated kind of commitment. Administrators' comments made