

# Planner's Digest

## Increasing Interest in 'Smart Growth' Could Change N.C.'s Role in Growth Management

**Robin Zimpler**

The introduction this past spring of several growth management bills in the N.C. General Assembly, including two growth bills from lawmakers from Chapel Hill, suggests a dynamic change could be in store as far as the state's role in growth and development. Traditionally local governments in North Carolina have carried the responsibility of establishing land use practices tailored to their own regional issues and available resources. The Coastal Area Management Act of 1974 stands today as the only state legislation governing regional land use in North Carolina. Twenty-five years after the adoption of CAMA, the time appears right for a significant new state growth management model, especially in light of the rapid spread of development in North Carolina that is taxing roads and other urban services in metropolitan areas. Elsewhere in the U.S., states are increasingly getting involved in growth management — an approach which promotes a certain collaboration among state, regional

and local efforts, albeit within the framework of clearly defined statewide legislation.

### **Growth Management Bills**

In April 1999, State Sen. Howard Lee of Chapel Hill introduced Senate Bill 1123, an act to create a special legislative panel, called the Blue Ribbon Growth Study Commission, to address growth, infrastructure and development issues.

In May, Rep. Joe Hackney of Chapel Hill sponsored House Bill 1468, the Growth Management Act of 1999. The bill called for incentives for local government to engage in "effective growth management." A goal of the Growth Management Act sounded radical for these parts: Requiring growth plans to designate urban growth areas to create compact development accommodating both residential and nonresidential growth projected for the 20 years.

### **Study Commission Approved**

Following the introduction of the bills by the Chapel Hill legislators, and a third growth-management bill by a state senator from the coast, the General Assembly approved funding for a 30-member growth study commission. The commission, funded with \$200,000 in state money, is charged with examining growth and development issues. A final

report is due in early 2001.

The commission will examine ideas included in Hackney's bill. The panel will also look at growth management laws from other states, including the "Smart Growth" states of Maryland and Tennessee.

### **Governor Hunt's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communities Task Force**

In a parallel effort, Governor Hunt named a task force to elicit public participation and ascertain local opinions regarding growth management. In late August, the seven-member task force began conducting 13 public hearings throughout the state. These hearings focus on four core issues: open space and farmland preservation, coordination between land-use and transportation plans, utilization of existing community assets and coordination between state and local governments. The first meeting, in Johnston County, attracted just a dozen speakers, and only one of those was not associated with real estate development. Because of the lack of participation, that meeting ended early. The task force will report its findings to the Legislature's growth study commission, which begins work in October.

### **Outlook**

Although the creation of the growth study commission and the introduction of the Growth Man-

agement Act reflect increasing concerns for effectively planning and managing continued growth in North Carolina, growth management initiatives frequently meet stiff opposition. Many local governments remain wary of state-mandated programs that inherently limit their traditional control over land-use planning decisions. In addition, homebuilders and real estate interests generally favor allowing the marketplace to dictate growth. Moreover, as witnessed in the emerging disputes over managing growth in Chatham County, local farmers, perhaps the most passionate advocates of property rights, will undoubtedly resist controls imposed by state legislation. Some are happy the state is at least discussing the issue. Molly Diggins, state director of the North Carolina chapter of the Sierra Club, called the study commission "a good start."

"North Carolina's still not ready to take the big steps that Maryland and Tennessee have taken, but we're at least heading down that path now," she told *The (Raleigh) News & Observer* this summer. **CP**

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