

The Times

Change the State Plan

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Given the state's current economic crisis and the longstanding challenges that threaten our future, New Jersey desperately needs a new plan -- one that will provide a robust framework for directing all actions of government toward strategic results in multiple areas.

The fact that the long-overdue new state plan was not released in March as scheduled, and then the April State Planning Commission meeting was canceled, does not bode well.

The first two state plans, it must be acknowledged, did not provide this framework. Instead, they were packed with hundreds of platitudes that blurred into a confusing, even conflicting backdrop to where the real attention was focused -- the state plan policy map.

The map divided the state into five general planning areas, where growth was encouraged and where it was not. It seemed for a while that these areas were going to mean something, but not anymore: The plan and the map have both been eclipsed.

Several years ago, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) produced its own maps showing more limited areas for growth, and backed them up with its own regulations -- some of the most powerful in state government. The result has been the loss of a comprehensive state plan that would optimize results on multiple goals in a coherent fashion.

It has been replaced by a process driven at the state level by environmental regulation, in direct conflict with a process driven at the local level by zoning. Zoning steadfastly encourages the suburbanization of the landscape, driving an ever more urgent need to protect environmental resources. In this vicious circle, other vital goals -- such as creating jobs and housing, optimizing transit and reducing the concentration of poverty -- are lost.

In spite of this track record, PlanSmartNJ stands firm in our belief that effective statewide planning is the last and best hope for the future of New Jersey. What is needed is a state plan that is significantly different from the plans that came before.

In other words, an effective state plan would identify how much and what type of growth should go where to produce what results. Given the current constraints on statewide planning, however, it seems unlikely that the next plan will rise to this standard.

The plan has been handicapped for years by the lack of interest of successive administrations, the chronic lack of resources devoted to the process, the recent power struggles between state agencies and the loss of the environmental community as one of the plan's strongest supporters. Furthermore, the State Planning Commission and its staff have been bureaucratically demoted, with a significant loss in independence, stature and relevance.

The 1986 State Planning Act put the commission and its staff in the Department of Treasury. This location reflected commitment to several important principles:

- 1) Integration. It embraced statewide planning as an application of "good-government" practice. If land-use patterns are to change to produce better results in the future, government requires a comprehensive statewide framework -- sustained over time -- to reconcile the sometimes competing actions of all the state's agencies and its 566 municipalities.

2) Independence. It acknowledged the need to protect statewide planning from fads, partisan politics and power struggles between "line" agencies. Changing the trajectory of trends statewide requires steady guidance toward targeted, strategic outcomes over the long term.

3) Implementation. It placed statewide planning in the important role of husbanding the state's resources, making sure that public investments are used more efficiently and effectively toward intended results -- a clear directive from the enabling legislation.

Executive and administrative orders over the last seven years, however, have overridden the statute and cast aside these principles. The State Planning Commission and its staff are now a section of the Department of Community Affairs. In DCA, the State Planning Commission has not only been given a diminished status with other state agencies, but it now has an uncomfortable and unreconciled relationship with another section of DCA, the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH).

A statewide plan that has no strategic problem-solving function, no clear policy direction, no map of conditions or policy targets and no commitment from the administration has no relevance to any agent of government.

But a plan that is relevant to today's problems (one that provides a clear direction, useful performance standards and has the commitment of leadership) could pull coherent policy out of New Jersey's fragmented and convoluted land-use system. It would articulate a geography of existing conditions and desired improvements in regional economies, watersheds, natural resources, transportation, housing, concentrated poverty and infrastructure.

Such a plan would be created only with leadership at all levels of government. It will take leadership to select strategic, statewide priorities to build growth capacity and environmental quality into a gridlocked system. It will take leadership to change the tactics -- not the mission -- embedded in state agency regulations. It will take leadership to transform zoning and other entrenched land-use regulations at the local level.

And it will take time. Meanwhile, as the first step, PlanSmartNJ asks the governor to undo previous executive and administrative orders and put the State Planning Commission back into Treasury and fund the Office of State Planning to do its job: produce the plan that the state needs today.

Such a move will signal all sectors of New Jersey that the state is committed to shaping a better future and is willing to direct all agents of government to make their contribution count.

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