

# Local development often at odds with regional land use plans, experts say

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Regional planning for residential development is successful only to the extent it aligns with local development priorities, say Arnab Chakraborty and Dustin Allred, University of Illinois researchers in urban and regional planning. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A land use plan adopted for the Sacramento, California, region aimed to

get local governments to plan together for development in a way that discouraged sprawl.

But the plan did little to check growth on the fringes of cities, and [local governments](#) continued to make [development](#) decisions based on their own economic self-interests, said University of Illinois researchers Dustin Allred and Arnab Chakraborty.

Voluntary regional land use plans have little impact on development for a number of reasons, said Allred and Chakraborty, a lecturer and a professor, respectively, in the U. of I. department of urban and regional planning. "Local jurisdictions will likely support regional plans only to the degree that they match local development priorities or align with local needs," they said.

Their findings are outlined in an article, "Do local development outcomes follow voluntary regional plans? Evidence from Sacramento Region's Blueprint Plan," published in the current issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association.

The Sacramento Region Blueprint was created and adopted in 2004 by local governments in the region, with the aim of guiding the region's growth to encourage development in high-density areas served by [public transit](#), decreasing sprawl and preserving natural resources. It imagined a region built more compactly around existing population centers and near public transit, and it predicted a 46 percent decrease in land consumed by urbanization if the scenario was followed.

The plan has been held up as a model for regional planning efforts, Allred and Chakraborty said. Although regional planning had been going on for decades, particularly with regard to transportation systems, the Blueprint plan was on the forefront of plans developed in a collaborative way and that included land use planning, which was typically left to local

governments, they said.

But there was not much analysis of how such plans actually affected development once they were adopted. Allred and Chakraborty studied residential development in the Sacramento region and found that much of the development was not aligned with the goals of the plan, with suburbs continuing to be built on the fringe of urban areas or on "greenfields" not contiguous to existing cities.

Some of the principles of the plan – development in high-density areas, for example – make more sense for cities such as Sacramento with public transit and an urban core available for redevelopment. They don't work as well in smaller communities without much land available for infill, Allred and Chakraborty said.

Consideration also must be given to the preferences of residents, some of whom want neighborhoods with a suburban feel. And there are not always good quality choices for housing or schools in urban areas, they said.

With economic competition between cities in the region, a plan that favors infill over expansion at the fringes can be seen as a threat to growth.

"Urban politics and the competition for growth among local jurisdictions may limit cooperation," Allred and Chakraborty wrote. "Local jurisdictions ultimately retain control over development priorities and are likely to act in their own self-interest, thus selectively supporting or adopting ideas from regional plans that best suit their interests."

Additionally, there are rarely any regional organizations with the authority to enforce the development principles of a plan. And attempting to give a regional entity such authority is not politically

feasible, with concerns about property rights being infringed upon, Allred and Chakraborty said.

On the positive side, such [regional planning](#) efforts provide a forum for local governments to talk about planning and how to solve issues such as congestion and blight.

Allred said planners should look at how to make new suburbs perform better, with less traffic congestion – for example, by locating residential development near regional transit or locating amenities closer to neighborhoods so they can be reached without driving.

"We can maintain that suburban feel that people want and do it in ways that are smarter and have less of an impact," Allred said.

**More information:** "Do Local Development Outcomes Follow Voluntary Regional Plans? Evidence From Sacramento Region's Blueprint Plan." *Journal of the American Planning Association* Volume 81, Issue 2, 2015 [DOI: 10.1080/01944363.2015.1067574](https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2015.1067574)

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