

GROWTH STRATEGIES: THE GEORGIA STATE PLANNING ACT AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PROGRAM

James L. Youngquist

AUTHORS: Assistant Director, Institute of Community and Area Development, The University of Georgia, 1234 South Lumkin Street, Athens, Georgia 30602-3552.

REFERENCE: *Proceedings of the 1995 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held April 11 and 12, 1995, at The University of Georgia, Kathryn J. Hatcher, Editor, Carl Vinson Institute of Government, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

Abstract. It has been called the best of all comprehensive statewide planning efforts in the United States because of its grassroots structure. It has been lauded by regionalists who value a growth strategies effort that recognizes the importance of a strong regional component to planning for the enhance future of their state. It has perhaps been studied and monitored by more scholars, planners, national associations interested in planning and development, and other state administrations than any other state planning effort.

Now in its fifth year of implementation, how successful has it been? Has it raised the consciousness level of the need to plan, brought about an understanding for the need of intergovernmental cooperation? Most importantly, has it done what Growth Strategies Commission set out to do when it worked for 18 months to devise programs to address quality growth in those areas of Georgia that are experiencing rapid growth as well as devise economic development strategies for those portions of the state in decline or stagnant?

This paper will examine the most recognized piece of legislation of the Growth Strategies Commission's efforts to enhance the future of the state of Georgia. A brief overview will be given on the mission given to the Growth Strategies Commission in the summer of 1987 to develop a blueprint for Georgia's future; the logistics of the State Planning Act itself and its current benchmarks; and, most important, what is *really* happening in its quest to accomplish what its supporters had hoped for in the molding of the program.

INTRODUCTION

It has been called the best of all comprehensive statewide planning legislation because of its grassroots structure. It has been lauded by regionalists who value a growth strategies effort that recognizes the importance of a strong regional component to planning. Planners, national associations interested in planning and development, and administrations from other states have consistently cited the Georgia State Planning Act of 1989 as a model of growth strategies legislation.

THE GOVERNOR'S GROWTH STRATEGIES COMMISSION

By the 1980s Georgia's status as one of the fastest growing states in the country had begun to raise concerns about its ability to handle growth in a positive way. Many leaders, including the Governor, realized that growth in the state was concentrated mainly in the metropolitan Atlanta region, to a lesser extent in the other urban areas of the state, and in the mountain and coastal counties. The Governor had as much concern about those areas of the state that were growing at a very slow rate, were stagnant, or in some cases, were declining in population and employment.

With that in mind, Governor Harris appointed his Growth Strategies Commission with the charge of creating a growth management program for those parts of the state that were growing so as to assure the continued quality of life in those areas and to devise an economic development tool for those parts of the state that were stagnant or declining, all within the framework of Georgia's strong home rule and local autonomy governance system. Quite the challenge. The Commission consisted of the leadership of the Georgia Legislature, key locally elected officials, environmentalists including the Georgia Conservancy, and many of the *true* private sector and corporate leaders of the state. It was indeed a commission consisting of "doers" that demanded results. It was also a commission that was carefully crafted to put conflicting interests on the table.

THE COMMISSION'S WORK AND RESOLVE

In the spring of 1987, Georgia Governor Joe Frank Harris appointed the Governor's Growth Strategies Commission. At first glance, the Commission might have appeared to be another "blue ribbon," all fluff and no substance, commission. It was clear from the start, however, that this indeed would be a "serious" commission.

In a matter of 18 months, the Commission solicited the input of as many Georgians as possible to develop a consensus approach on the best way to carry out the Governor's charge and to develop a blueprint for Georgia's future. The recommendations of the Commission resulted in

legislation calling for the development of a state reservoir system with particular emphasis on the water needs of North Georgia, the beginnings of a mountain protection act, the implementation of impact fees for development, and the best known of all the legislation, the Georgia State Planning Act.

The cornerstone of the Commission's efforts, was a desire to have the comprehensive planning process be more than a bureaucratic exercise with little or no meaning. It was the desire of the Commission to get THE public and private sector leadership of each region actively involved. It was their desire to have an entity that would be the regional linchpin making the comprehensive planning process relevant and a key component in designing a true blueprint for Georgia's future.

THE STATE PLANNING ACT OF 1989

The State Planning Act is a "bottoms-up," comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated planning process beginning at the local government level, then proceeding to the regional and state levels. To ensure uniformity and consistency, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) is responsible for the overall management of the planning process. Each of the seventeen (17) Regional Development Centers (RDCs) is given the responsibility of acting as the regional coordinator for local and state interests. The basis for the process required in the Act is that communities can only achieve their goals by addressing a comprehensive range of issues and coordinating with neighboring communities to assure the reduction of duplication or conflicting intent. When this occurs not only will the community be better, so too will their region, and the state. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was given the charge of developing the environmental planning portion and procedures for the State Planning Act.

As an incentive to local governments, DCA developed procedures for certifying cities and counties as Qualified Local Governments (QLGs). Once a local government's plan is approved by DCA as meeting the minimum planning standards and procedures, it is eligible for a host of state funded programs. Without the approved plan, the local government is ineligible for many infrastructure and other capital improvement funding programs.

Once all local plans are completed and approved in a RDC region, the RDC can begin the development of the region's plan based on the local plans within the framework of guidelines set out by DCA for regional planning and the Regionally Important Resources (RIRs) and Developments of Regional Impact (DRIs) developed jointly between the RDC and DCA.

Upon completion and approval of the region plans, DCA will begin the development of the state plan based in large part on the region plans. The Governor's Development Council is then given authority to implement the state plan.

THE IMPLEMENTATION TRACK AND SCHEDULE

With the Act in its fifth year of implementation, all of the local plans will be completed no later than September 30, 1995. As of December, 1994, over 575 local plans had been submitted to DCA for approval. Of the 575, 540 have been approved by DCA. By December, \$13.4 million in funding had been provided to the RDCs to complete and/or develop local plans and develop regional aspects of the process. Some of the RDCs which have completed all local plans are now into the regional planning phase of the program. From the procedural point of view, the process is well on target of the September deadline.

A PART OF ENHANCING GEORGIA'S FUTURE

An assessment of how the program is enhancing Georgia's future is purely subjective.

Looking strictly at the local planning schedule and the number of local governments that have received QLG status it has been successful and ahead of schedule in some regions of the state. In fact, at least one of the regions has already begun the regional planning process; something that was not scheduled to begin before the fall of 1995.

If you look at the *intent* of the Growth Strategies Commission it has, however, been a very frustrating five years.

RDC Membership and Composition

The Commission wanted to make the regional entity in the Act the linchpin in the process. There was much debate by members on the Commission as well as by other interested parties regarding the regional entity. Should it be an entirely new creation? Should Georgia's Area Planning and Development Commissions (APDCs) be reconstituted to become the program's regional entity? Should the regional entity be locally governed or should it be a substate office of DCA? Should membership of local governments in the region follow the historical pattern and be voluntary? Or should membership be mandated for all local governments since the law would require local governments to produce a plan to be eligible for all types of funding?

After a great deal of debate, the decision was made to reconstitute the APDCs into RDCs. Membership would be mandatory. There would be a minimum per capita dues assessment, with the local governments in each region given the authority to add an additional assessment if they so desired.

Because the Commission felt so strongly that the Act address local issues within each region the Commission mandated each mayor and each county chairperson be on the RDC Board. Additionally, because the Commission felt very strongly that key private sector participation was absolutely needed in order for the program to be a true success. The

specified that the composition of each board to be one-third city, one-third county, and one-third private sector. Membership was later approved to include additional minority membership if not accomplished by the trichotomy method. Addressing minority representation would keep the RDCs eligible for various federal programs that had benefitted local governments over the years through their APDCs. The full RDC board was to meet at least quarterly. Each RDC was to have an Executive Committee to oversee day-to-day operations, with at least one member from each county and with the "one-third" breakdown as a requirement.

On the surface the new board arrangement made a lot of sense. In reality, it did not work in many regions due to the large size of some RDC boards (several had near 100 members) and the fact that many small town mayors and in some cases, even the county chairpersons attended meetings infrequently, if they attended at all. Additionally, very few "key" private sector persons have ended up on RDC boards. In no more than a half dozen instances, the local leadership and the RDC staffs have come to realize the obligations of the Act and their roles, and have brought in their region's key private sector leaders as envisioned by the Growth Commission and are empowered as lead players in their region's future. Part of the participation problem was because it took nearly the first year to get into the process. Therefore, many local officials saw no change at the RDC, other than a name change. In some isolated cases, the leadership ignored or did not realize it was a new day. The first and foremost priority of RDCs was to implement the State Planning Act, then if the local governments chose to continue other support programs they had during the APDC era, such as economic development, aging, job training, historic preservation, etc., they had that choice. In every instance they carried the old programs forward.

Another indication that the forces for a "status quo" role for the RDCs in some regions were still very powerful was evidenced by the inability of DCA to adjust RDC boundaries from those developed for APDCs in the late '60s and early '70s.

State Government's Relationship

As stated earlier, the Georgia State Planning Act calls for a bottoms-up, three-tiered comprehensive planning process (local, regional, and state). At the state level, the act called for two segments. First and foremost was the Governor's Development Council (GDC). Chaired by the Governor, the GDC was to consist of the major Executive Department Commissioners whose agencies most related to a comprehensive planning process of this nature (DCA, Transportation, DNR, Human Resources, Labor, Planning and Budget, etc). The major purpose of the GDC was to meet on a regular basis to discuss issues facing the state or its regions that might be addressed by a multiple agency approach, to eventually approve a state plan, and to be used as a sounding board for concerns of locals, regionals, and DCA regarding

various aspects of the process. Second, was the role of DCA. In addition to reviewing and approving local and regional plans, DCA was designated as the Executive Department charged with developing the state plan, staffing the GDC, and acting as liaison between the GDC and the other levels.

As a strong home rule state, local governments in Georgia have a great deal of independence. APDCs, the forerunner of RDCs, were very independent of the state although they contracted with the state for various programs. However RDCs were mandated by the Act to have a much stronger relationship and obligations to the state. State government in Georgia also has tendencies of home rule. Every applicable agency within the Executive Department is governed by an independent board with staggered terms, some appointed by the current Governor, and some appointed by a previous governor. This independence, particularly at the commissioner level, does not necessarily bring about the kind of coordination and cooperation envisioned by the Act.

In year two of the implementation, Governor Harris finished his second and last term as Governor. Zell Miller was elected his successor. Understandably, Governor Miller had his own agenda and while a supporter of the Growth Strategies Commission and its intent, he had higher priorities: most notably, education and a state lottery devoted to education.

From the highest levels (the Governor's Office, commissioner levels, GDC) the importance of the big picture of the State Planning Act was put on the "back burner." At the administrative level, DCA and RDC planners and other public or consulting planners began the local planning process and moved forward with a timetable for completing the local plans. But because the value of the program had diminished, it affected the importance that local elected officials, regional leaders, and statewide developers put on the program. The private sector, local elected supporters, and the environmental supporters of the State Planning Act failed to keep the program a high priority. Clearly, a strong expression of interest from these constituencies would have raised the entire Growth Strategies agenda higher on this Governor's agenda. The lack of support also allowed for the perception that "Growth Strategies" was not being effective and it was business as usual, particularly in the roles, responsibilities, relevancy, and effectiveness of the RDCs. For the most part, other state agencies have not had an incentive to work with DCA in any form of implementation of a coordination state plan or role for RDCs.

An Economic Strategy for Georgia

Prior to the Legislative session of 1993, Governor Miller presented the idea that with the ever increasing competition from a global economy he wanted to institute a bold economic development strategy. To do this he sought to bring the best talent in the state together in a way that would (1) represent the complexity of economic development in the 1990s, and (2) address the hard issues of development with

candor and conviction. He sought a comprehensive strategy for creating jobs, and enhancing the further economic development in the state.

The Governor reconstituted his GDC, changing it from governance by state agency heads to a true public/private partnership, using relevant state agency heads and influential business leaders from around the state. Governor Miller hired a CEO for the GDC and secured funding for the GDC's activities from the private sector.

The GDC's mission and objectives clearly mark it as a bold, creative initiative. It has a six point mission:

- To create sustaining public/private partnerships across the state for growth and development;
- To provide a focus for the many good economic development efforts occurring across the state;
- To prepare a statewide development strategy based on specific needs of the regions;
- To develop a strategy for aggressive global competition;
- To foster better cooperation and coordination among state agencies; and
- To help secure additional resources to meet the development needs of the state.

The initial objective of the GDC was to prepare, for the first time, a strategic economic development plan for the state. The plan was developed on a regional basis through grassroots participation in each region. It was intended to be a road map to take Georgia into the twenty-first century.

The Governor's Economic Development program sounded almost identical to the intent and hope that the Growth Commission had forged in its work. Two major exceptions were the lack of the environmental management/protection dimensions of Growth Strategies and, instead of identifying Georgia's regions by RDC boundaries, the GDC developed their own economic regions for the state based on centers of economy across the state. This resulted in some counties being in different regions for the Governor's initiative and the State Planning Act Program (RDC region). A major segment of the State Planning Act, locally and regionally, calls for economic strategies, leading to potential conflict for those counties.

In some circles, the prevailing sentiment was that if Growth Strategies was "working" statewide, there would never have been a need to start the Governor's Economic Development program. Additionally, RDCs were not automatically tabbed as the administrative or coordinating body in each region. Ironically, those RDCs who have played a significant role in the Governor's program, have also been perceived as carrying out the intent of the Growth Strategies Commission. It is also true that their region's boundaries are very close to being coterminous with the Governor's economic region. Whether right or wrong, the perception in some circles has been that this creation is a condemnation or at least rejection of the RDCs as a relevant accountable substate network.

The Need to Address the State of Uncertainty

At the encouragement of a number of the state's leaders, particularly statewide developers, efforts are now underway to address the lack of coterminous boundaries for planning and economic development.

The Governor and other leaders recognized that in this global competitive world, community and economic development cannot be on duplicative and/or conflicting tracks in competing for the enhancement of the state's future. On the one hand, with the exception of the environmental aspects previously mentioned, there is a state planning act which is law and whose intent mirrors overwhelmingly the Governor's Economic Development program which is not a law but only executive order. On the other hand, in defense of the Governor's program, an apparent apathy exists in many portions of the state as shown by the fact that the only interest in doing the local plan is to be eligible for capital improvement funding.

Not addressing these apparent duplications/conflicts will only make Georgia less prepared to be competitive globally, and make being competitive in the Southeast more difficult.

Therefore at the encouragement of the Governor, the Board of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs took action as it is authorized to do by Georgia law [O.C.G.A. 50-8-4(f)] to establish new territorial boundaries for RDCs. The Board deemed it appropriate to change the RDC boundaries to promote a more effective link between regional planning efforts and economic development, to account for shifting economic and demographic patterns, to address disparities in the ability of RDCs to provide needed services, and to provide for a more efficient utilization of state and local financial resources. This act calls for 13 regions as opposed to the current network of 17. The Governor's 11 economic development regions will be rearranged to be coterminous with the new RDC regions. It is anticipated that these 13 regions will become the new regions for all governmental organizations with substate districts. These actions will not only end duplicative efforts, but should rekindle Growth Strategies as the best vehicle for moving Georgia forward.

CONCLUSION

On paper and logistically, the Georgia State Planning Act is held up as a model for all future consensus, inclusive, comprehensive statewide planning in the United States. It has worked to date in forcing local governments in the state to look at their assets, their liabilities, and plan for how they are going to capitalize on those assets and deal with those liabilities, to plan for the future. There is no doubt that as the regional planning phase of the Act kicks in, the bureaucracy will create the regional plans called for by DCA's developed policies and procedures. How or in what form the state plan called for in the Act is dealt with, or if indeed it will be a

working implementable relevant document, remains to be seen.

In some cases it has worked beyond expectations in regions with strong *local* leadership (both public and private), using Growth Strategies to strengthen and expand their work programs.

With the move to make boundaries coterminous in Georgia, it is now clear that the Governor and his GDC are striving to make use of the Act and a strong economic development framework to make Georgia globally competitive — something that would never be realized if the duplicity of efforts continued.

CREDITS

This paper was developed through material obtained from the Office of Planning of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and its 1995 Board Resolution to change Georgia's RDC boundaries. Additionally, information was obtained from the Handbook of the Council of Economic Development Organizations of the Governor's Development Council.

The author was a facilitator for the Governor's Growth Strategies Commission and lead staff for its Infrastructure Task Force.