

County-centric Planning for Southern New Jersey Proposed in New Paper by Rutgers-Camden Research Institute

Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs Encourages Greater Collaboration Among Municipalities

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

Release written by Fredda Sacharow

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CAMDEN -- With each of the state's 566 municipalities making planning and development decisions on its own, New Jersey faces the triple whammy of lost open space, increased traffic volume, and stressed water and air resources, warns a team facilitated by the [Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers-Camden](#).

"Municipalities working in individually rational ways often create regionally irrational outcomes," explains **Richard Harris**, director of the Rand Institute and a professor of political science, both at Rutgers-Camden.

Harris has facilitated a forum for builders, environmentalists, policy and planning experts, and elected officials to craft a blueprint for regional development that relies on a county-centric model rather than on the current system of multiple municipalities interacting individually with multiple state agencies.

Their vision, outlined in a white paper titled "County-centric Planning and Development for New Jersey," focuses on reining in sprawl while providing an adequate supply of housing within reach for middle- and lower-income residents of southern New Jersey, home to the state's fastest growing population.

The proposal also outlines mechanisms for coordinating state approvals by engaging all relevant regulatory agencies at the front end of a county planning process.

Meeting over a four-year period, the group that became known as the South Jersey Regional Development Forum created a model dubbed "Growth Fit Planning," which moves planning from the municipal level to the county level, Harris says.

The Rand Institute, which addresses issues facing southern New Jersey residents, served as a neutral convener in the process. It brought to the table groups whose agendas often differ, including the Builders League of Southern Jersey, the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, New Jersey Future, PlanSmart New Jersey, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Association, the New Jersey Farm Bureau, and officials from Burlington, Camden, Cumberland, and Gloucester counties.

The 35 committee members focused on such emotion-laden topics as the rising cost of housing in the state; the possibility of sharing police, fire-fighting, and other services across township lines; available water resources; and down-zoning, or the practice of mandating increased lot sizes for new housing.

Acknowledging the Garden State's long-standing adherence to home rule – vesting zoning and other powers in individual municipalities – Harris says that the group's thoughts put forth in the white paper goal seek to create an alternative framework that moves toward what he called “more rational development outcomes,” while respecting local interests.

“The planning and economic development people who were participating all recognized that leaving all development in the hands of municipal governments trying to manage relations with a variety of state agencies was going to be a road to turning South Jersey into what much of North Jersey is,” Harris notes.

The work of Rutgers and the South Jersey Regional Development Forum is on the right track. State Sen. Stephen Sweeney (D-3) is working to develop a bill establishing county-level planning boards as part of a statewide pilot program, says Andrew Hendry, the senator's director of policy and legislation.

Initially aimed at four counties, the measure would provide incentives for municipalities to buy into the voluntary boards, Hendry continues.

In the past, when Trenton has tried to tackle the issue of coordinated planning, it has often done so with what Harris calls a “command-control regulatory approach” -- in essence, telling local communities where they could and could not build.

Despite its well-meaning objectives, this perceived heavy-handedness tends to raise the hackles of local officials and their constituents, Harris notes.

“One of the things we tried to do with this county-centric model was create a forum on the county level where all the state and local players would come up with a county master plan, in effect, and everybody would buy into it. All the municipalities could opt in, or opt out,” Harris explains.

As a “sweetener” for local governments that decide to participate, the paper calls for coordination and predictability in the multi-layered process all development projects must go through on the state level before they receive a green light.

Among the document's creators is Jack Fisher III, former head of economic development in Gloucester County and now chair of the Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization and Consolidation Commission.

Known as LUARCC, the state-based commission came into being in 2007 to study and report on the structure and functions of county and municipal governments.

Fisher lauds the contributions of the Rand Institute, noting parallels between his commission and the goals outlined in the white paper.

"A lot of what's being talked about in growth-fit is really quite similar to issues that come up as part of LUARCC – for example, not taking power away from local, county and state planning entities, but pooling resources, coming up with more efficient ways to plan the development of an area," he says.

Tom Papparone, past president of the Builders League of Southern New Jersey, approached the Rutgers–Camden institute several years ago, seeking answers to the escalating costs of land development and the lack of coordinated regional planning.

He says the deliberations have allowed groups with varying interests to interact in a non-adversarial setting.

"The Rand Institute at Rutgers really became the vehicle by which various stakeholders could be heard, and a collaborative consensus could be reached," Papparone says. "Without them, nothing could go forward."

The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers–Camden delivers high-quality, policy-relevant research on public issues that cut across local, regional, national, and global boundaries; timely and meaningful technical assistance to governments and nonprofit organizations in southern New Jersey; neutral convening of stakeholders and citizens; and academic opportunities for faculty and students to connect classroom and scholarly objectives with public service and applied research in a service learning environment.