

Focus Group Discussion on Land Use Issues Suburban Detroit Mayors and Township Supervisors

Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University Detroit
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Summary

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants suggested the following approaches to meeting these needs:

Impact Fees. There was general agreement that new developments in greenfield locations should be required to cover their full public costs. An impact fee program might be combined with some type of urban area boundary, with full impact fees (and no public financial support) provided for new developments outside of the boundary. These policies would help to create a positive climate for inner city redevelopment.

Redevelopment Incentives. As a compliment to impact fees, some incentives to the private sector should be considered to encourage investment in central city locations. From a broader perspective, the cost of these incentives would largely be offset by savings on the public costs of providing additional infrastructure.

Brownfield Redevelopment. The existing state brownfield redevelopment programs were seen as a benefit to both the private and public sectors. There was a need for additional education and professional expertise in how to utilize these programs. The state was seen to have a role in providing this assistance.

Regionalism. A broader view of issues was seen as important but the approach should be cooperative, rather than controlling. More intergovernmental forums and opportunities for dialog and collaboration should be established. The adoption of joint services and other cooperative arrangements among municipalities should be incentivized. Financial incentives should be offered to municipalities that do cooperate. There was concern, however, that these arrangements should be equitable for all parties.

Infrastructure. Public investments in infrastructure, including school facilities, should be made to support economical and efficient development in metropolitan areas.

Transportation. Public transit was seen as a regional issue and a regional transit authority was supported for its impact on employment, air quality and the image of the southeast Michigan region. DARTA or similar legislation was supported. The ability of a community to “opt out” of any program was seen as contrary to the perceived importance of a comprehensive approach to regional transit.

Tax Base Sharing. There was little support for a Twin Cities style program of tax base sharing, or any other mechanism that created new mechanisms for mandatory transfers. This might be accomplished through the mechanism of state revenue sharing.

Annexation Reform. In part this was seen as a regional issue and in part as a fiscal issue. Revisions to current annexation regulations to prevent disputes such as those that occurred recently in Oakland County were favored.

Development Rights. This tool was favored as a means to preserve agricultural land and other natural resources. It was felt that some sort of state financial contribution would be required to make this effective.

ISSUES AND BACKGROUND COMMENTS

This focus group consisted of three participants who were mayors or supervisors of suburban Detroit area municipalities. Their major concern was with meeting the costs of basic infrastructure, including, roads, water and sewer, schools, and other facilities. In rapidly growing communities, the concern was that rapid or uncontrolled growth created circumstances where the demand for infrastructure outpaced the ability of local government to supply what is needed. Even in communities where growth is currently limited or non-existent, maintenance of the infrastructure is an issue.

This basic problem of providing and maintaining infrastructure is exacerbated by other state-level policies. The cap on local taxes, municipal as well as school, makes it difficult to meet infrastructure needs because local governments have little or no funds available for discretionary expenses. Without new development it is difficult to increase tax revenues sufficiently to meet the rapidly rising costs of public services. School district fragmentation and schools of choice options make it difficult for some school districts to meet needs.

The state must play a role in making redevelopment economically feasible. A number of approaches could be used, including directly providing financial incentives and helping to ensure that new greenfield development is required to pay its full public costs. Programs that continue to emphasize “core communities,” providing them with more favorable treatment and the ability to use targeted incentives, were favored.

Local control of land development decisions is important to local officials. With the exception of public transit, there was little support for new regional bodies which would erode local control; rather, the issues could be better addressed through voluntary cooperation and existing state and county mechanisms. Local governments need to be provided with the necessary tools to implement development controls when favored by local populations as well as to strike a balance between local and metropolitan concerns.

Transportation issues were seen as a primary example of where regional perspectives must be considered. This involves not only the approach to planning and investing in roads but the encouragement of public transit as well. The creation of a regional transportation authority without “opt out” provisions was favored.

Older communities face a number of interrelated problems. Abandonment and disinvestment, contaminated sites, and obsolete facilities not only contribute to higher

costs but also to visual blight. The necessity for higher maintenance and operating expenditures results in higher property taxes, further affecting the desirability of some of these neighborhoods.

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