Megaregions in California: Challenges to Planning and Policy

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Introduction

As the 21st century opens, a new scale of urban agglomeration is emerging across the world (Scott 2001; Hall and Pain 2006; McGee and Robinson 1995; Berube et al 2006; Lang and Dhavale 2005). These megaregions may contain tens of millions of people and extend for hundreds of miles. Integrated by global economic relationships, by transportation infrastructure and, increasingly, by new communications technologies, they imply transformation in scale of problems for public policy.

Research initiated by the Regional Plan Association and the Lincoln Institute has explored megaregional definition, yet policy implications of this new urban form are only now being addressed (Regional Plan Association 2006; Dewar and Epstein 2006). Much of the discussion so far has centered on federal government investment in transportation infrastructure, but many of the problems raised by the existence of urban megaregions are experienced and must be addressed at the state and local levels. Fifty years of urban policy in the U.S. suggests that institutions, governance, and intergovernmental relations critically affect problems of urbanization at the smallest as well as the largest scale.

This paper examines megaregional urbanization and its policy implications within California, which provides a good context in which to consider the role of the state and local government in relation to megaregional development. As the only state with two megaregions largely contained within its own borders, cross-state planning issues are less of a concern than for many other megaregions in the U.S. Historically, state government has played a huge role in California’s growth and development, but the strength and competitiveness of the state’s megaregions and its multiple metro areas has made a top-down state approach to growth management problematic, at least in recent decades.

In the absence of a strong state role in growth management, metropolitan regions became laboratories for innovation in the 1990s. For example, a new form of integrated planning emerged within metro regions called “blueprint planning,” which aims to integrate local and regional goals and objectives for transportation, land use, and the environment. Recently, some metropolitan regions in California also have recognized policy issues that demand megaregion-level coordination and governance, such as for goods movement. These cases, however, have been only ad hoc thus far. Recently, the state government has played a stronger role in growth management. Passage in November 2006 of $42.7 billion in state bond funds for new infrastructure signals a new era in state investment. Some of the bond funds will address megaregional concerns; funding to improve goods movement and transportation corridor mobility are examples. Also, for the first time, housing programs consider larger development issues; more than $1 billion will support infill and transit-oriented development. Nevertheless, few, if any, funds will go to programs specifically megaregional in scale. One megaregional issue debated for years was actually sidelined by the current bond issues — namely whether to fund a North-South high speed rail system for California.

Thus, except for a few ad hoc efforts, no planning and governance institutions exist at the megaregional scale in California. Is that a problem? Are policy and planning issues at megaregional scales effectively addressed by existing institutions? If not, what could or should be done about it?

This paper addresses those questions, beginning with consideration of the definition of megaregions in California. We then consider problems that arise at the megaregional scale and examine the institutional frameworks for addressing them, including innovations at the state and metropolitan levels. Finally, we look at the prospect for future governance in relation to megaregional issues in the state.

Megaregions in California

Virtually all research on U.S. megaregions identifies two megaregions within California — in the North and the South. The megaregions reflect both population and economic criteria, especially patterns of residence and employment, reflected in commuting patterns. Like all urban areas, these have evolved from initial nodes, followed by suburbanization and the creation of new nodes of urban growth, and subsequent infilling in between. Recently, exurban growth has been important to the process.

In California, long before megaregions, North and South were perceived as different (Starr 2005, pp. 105-6). They had different and rival economies, for example, entertainment and aerospace in Los Angeles vs. high technology and finance in the Bay Area. They have exhibited differing styles of development, with much more growth control in the Bay Area (Lewis and Neiman 2000). Their political and social cultures have also been the source of beliefs about contrasts—the North more liberal and the South more hedonistic, though Latino immigration has transformed these simple distinctions (Starr 1985). Those larger contrasts should not conceal differences within the regions. San Diego and Sacramento still tend to perceive themselves as separate from Los Angeles and the Bay Area, respectively, especially in their concerns about being over-run and engulfed by their larger neighbors. Nonetheless, the north-south distinction persists in the public imagination and in policy debates, for example, over water planning, with conflicts about how much Northern California water should be sent to the South and how it should get there.

Categorizing megaregions raises definitional issues reflecting myriad overlays and mismatches between functional regions (economic, social, and environmental) and political jurisdictions. Consider first the economic basis for defining megaregions; how urbanization is defined and experienced is a complicating factor that may imply different understandings of regional interconnectedness. A spatially disaggregated analysis tends to show a pat-
Figure 1: Urbanization in California, 2000
Population 33 Million
Source: Landis 2003

Current Urbanization of 33 Million
Figure 2: Projected Urbanization in California, 2050
Population 67 million
Source: Landis 2003
Figure 3: Projected Urbanization in California, 2100
Population 92 Million
Source: Landis 2003
Figure 4: U.S. Housing Density, 2000
Source: Theobald 2005

Urban (>0.6 ac per unit)
Suburban (0.6 - 1.7 ac per unit)
Exurban (1.7 - 40 ac per unit)
Rural (>40 ac per unit)
Undeveloped (>0.6 ac per unit)

Figure 5: California's Most Populous Regions
Sources: Regional definitions from Johnson (2002); Commuting estimates are authors' calculations based on data from 2000 U.S. Census Transportation Planning Package.

Hatch marks indicate counties in which 15% or more of residents who worked in 2000 commuted to a different region.
tern more fragmented and tenuous than that revealed on the basis of county data (Theobald 2005). John Landis’s analysis of California urbanization, shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3, suggests that megaregional development may be less developed than some suggest (Landis 2003). Urban development, as defined by Landis, exhibits a scattered pattern in 2000, though by 2050 megaregional integration should be fully fledged. In most megaregions, the interstitial urbanization between metropolitan cores, including suburbs, is comprised of exurban development. The two great megaregions of the eastern U.S., centering on New York and Atlanta, show this quite clearly in Theobald’s map of housing density in Figure 4 (Theobald 2005). The eastern megaregions are essentially defined by extensive exurban settlement, shown in yellow on the map. However, California has denser urban development overall than most eastern cities, a characteristic also evident in Figure 4. This implies that development, despite Los Angeles’ image of sprawl, is more compact than in other states. The result may be to reinforce localism and maintenance of state identity, rather than regional affiliation.

Figure 5 shows the state’s most populous regions based on a scheme developed by demographer Hans Johnson to define “areas that are similar, paying particular attention to geography, demography, and economic conditions” (Johnson, 2002, p.3; also see Johnson, 2005). The map highlights outlying counties that are becoming more integrated with the main urban regions. In the eight crosshatched counties, at least 15 percent of residents who worked in 2000 commuted to a job in one of the other regions shown on the map. As the map suggests, Californians have been moving inland, seeking affordable housing away from more expensive coastal areas. In the process, traditional regional distinctions have been breaking down. But although the Inland Empire has long been seen as an extension of the LA area, spillover growth in Northern California across traditional regional boundaries is a newer phenomenon.

The population shift inland is evident in Figure 6 – particularly the Inland Empire’s dramatic growth. In future, however, growth rates in the San Joaquin Valley – particularly in northern counties adjoining the San Francisco Bay Area – are expected to rival those in the Inland Empire, and the Sacramento metro area is also expected to continue to grow rapidly. As Hans Johnson suggests, in relation to growth trends, “Perhaps a more meaningful regional difference in California, rather than the traditional north vs. south dichotomy, is inland vs. coastal” (Johnson, 2002, p.5). This distinction does not refute the megaregional definitions – on the contrary, rapid inland development reflects megaregional growth dynamics. However, it also reinforces the notion that experienced reality is not necessarily such that individuals perceive they belong to a larger megaregion with shared growth concerns.

How environmental issues apply to megaregions complicates the picture even more. In many of the state’s largest metropolitan regions, the designation of the air basin largely coincides with the urbanized portions of the region and the jurisdiction of regional planning agencies. Such jurisdictional matches facilitate integrated planning linking transportation and air quality. However, as metropolitan regions expand, air basin designations may not match growth patterns, requiring an extension of the megaregions past natural boundaries, largely mountains, and raising challenges for regional governance. Natural habitat, an important bioregional designation as a result of the Endangered Species Act, is the basis for conservation planning. However, habitat plans have generally followed existing political geographies more than bioregional des-

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1 Johnson’s regions do not coincide with U.S. Census definitions for “combined statistical areas” (CSAs). Johnson employs the traditional 9-county definition of the San Francisco Bay Area (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma Counties). However, the U.S. Census recently included Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties in the CSA. The Census combines the “South Coast” counties (Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura) with the “Inland Empire” counties (Riverside and San Bernardino) in the LA area CSA, and excludes Imperial County from the San Diego metro area.
Concerning political boundaries in relation to megaregions, we note the strong role of the state and local governments relative to regional institutions. At a large scale, we might ask why California itself should not be seen as a megaregion. California’s distinctiveness from the rest of the U.S., reflected in the earliest non-native Californians’ view of themselves as different, was codified politically by statehood, and this political geography has continued to shape development patterns. Action by the state government has co-mingled the fates of the two megaregions, with water systems perhaps the strongest example. Yet, there is a paradox; no matter how expansive state action has been, control of land use and development remains local. California has among the strongest “home rule” traditions in the nation. Thus, the state government has never been able to shape directly the pattern of urban growth. If anything, history shows local and regional interests shaping state policy in their favor. It is no accident that recent attempts to shape metropolitan growth through blueprint planning originated at the regional and local levels, only later being adopted by the state.

The challenge to governance presented by megaregions is to translate problems emerging at this scale into policy solutions at an appropriate scale with effective institutions for governance and implementation. Experience so far with metropolitan planning suggests that state action alone will not be sufficient, but local and regional action will be challenged by the sheer scale of emerging urban complexes. The federal government will be involved, but it is unlikely to act directly. Effective responses will depend upon both the nature of issues being addressed and the institutional frameworks for evaluation and implementation. Those are the focus of the next sections of this paper.

**Emerging Growth Concerns in California’s Regions**

By the late 1990s, growth concerns such as rising traffic congestion, overcrowded schools, and water shortages during droughts alerted Californians that infrastructure facilities were strained. Concerns about housing affordability drew attention to the need for integrated planning solutions. But as growth issues gained momentum, they were more likely to be framed in metropolitan than in megaregional terms. Emergent megaregional issues have often been framed as single-purpose concerns. Nevertheless, rising awareness of the inter-relatedness of planning concerns across functions and across jurisdictions in metro areas has also produced some incipient awareness of more comprehensive megaregional implications.

**Growth Issues in California’s Metropolitan Regions**

By the 1990s, public infrastructure systems were growing strained, as public investment had not matched growth in demand during the previous decade, a period of rapid population increase (Hanak and Baldassare, 2005). Policymakers called for massive new spending and voters responded, passing nearly triple the inflation-adjusted amount in state bond funds for schools, transportation, and water supply and quality from 2001 to 2006 as they had from 1991 to 2000. In 2006, state voters passed an unprecedented $42.7 billion bond package for transportation, schools, flood and disaster protection, housing, and water supply and quality. Housing affordability, in particular, altered the traditional dialogue about growth planning. Most of the nation’s least affordable metropolitan housing markets had long been in California, but rapid housing price spikes during and after the dot-com boom prompted a sense of crisis. Between 2000 and 2005, the median sales price for single-family homes in California more than doubled, exceeding $500,000 (sometimes substantially) in many urbanized coastal counties. Policymakers worried about low production rates for multi-unit homes, which fell to about one quarter of all units built during the 1990s from 45 percent during the previous decade.

Housing location had also become a policy concern. As Californians sought more affordable housing in inland areas, commuting pressures increased. The share of Californians with commutes of 45 minutes or more one way grew (Barbour, 2006). Even as transportation systems became overtaxed, rapidly developing areas on the urban fringe also experienced controversies about designing communities — for example, how and whether to implement urban growth boundaries, or to protect large areas of natural habitat. Longer commutes also raised concerns about air quality, with most of the state’s metropolitan regions out of compliance with federal air quality standards, and mobile sources (such as cars and trucks) forming the largest source of polluting emissions (California Air Resources Board, 2007).

This inland-coastal development pattern is expected to continue, with substantial growth projected statewide in coming decades, but more population growth inland, and more job growth on the coast (Figure 7). As a result, inland areas will continue to face challenges associated with rapid change, while coastal areas will face pressures related to densification in already developed communities. Meanwhile, projected worsening of the inland-coastal jobs-housing imbalance suggests that commuting pressures will also worsen.
Such concerns prompted calls for more compact, “infill” housing development in already built-up urban areas. The market for such development has become more attractive to homebuilders because of high housing prices and other factors such as reforms to condominium defect liability insurance law, and this housing has been growing as a share of units built. However, established communities sometimes resist change, and local governments complain they lack fiscal resources to provide facilities and services to support new development.

The housing issue is transforming California’s growth-conscious milieu. Facing fiscal and environmental constraint, the state and local governments have sought to invest more efficiently in infrastructure while also meeting environmental mandates. Promoting infill and transit-oriented development is now considered important for achieving these goals, and forms part of many recent state and regional transportation and environmental plans, such as the state’s plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by 2020 (California EPA, 2006). For the first time, state housing bond funds passed in November 2006 aim to influence the broad shape of development; $1.15 billion (40 percent of the total housing bond funds) will support transit-oriented development and local infrastructure for infill projects. The criteria for allocating funds are under debate; with this policy the state government will add a new element to its framework for strategic planning for growth.

Growth Issues and Megaregions

Only a few growth issues have been cast in megaregional terms. These tend to be single-issue problems (e.g. infrastructure or environmental problems) that cannot be resolved through existing regional planning frameworks. In a few cases, more comprehensive megaregional issues have emerged in regions facing intense economic change and in which large scale infrastructure is failing. Other concerns also have arisen not megaregional in scale – on the contrary they are perceived as localized issues – but that reflect emerging megaregional connections. Whether framed in megaregional terms or not, these issues reflect planning concerns and needs that exceed the boundaries of existing institutions.

Planning concerns framed at a megaregional scale generally relate to large-scale infrastructure – transportation and water supply in particular. Goods movement has become a major concern especially in Southern California, where international trade accounts for one of every fifteen jobs (Kern County Council of Governments et al, 2005). The goods movement issue sharpens awareness of megaregional challenges because it affects the region’s global competitiveness and its function as entrepot for goods traveling to and from other states. More than one third of all U.S. containerized international trade passes through Los Angeles area ports – the largest in the nation (California Business, Transportation, and Housing Agency, and Environmental Protection Agency, 2005). However, as transportation logistics jobs have replaced lost manufacturing jobs as a primary economic driver for the region, associated traffic congestion and air pollution threaten economic competitiveness and quality of life. With a possible tripling in the volume of goods moving through the ports expected by 2030, proposed solutions include improving intermodal transportation linkages combined with land use strategies such as inland warehousing and transloading facilities (Southern California Association of Governments, 2005 a and b). With regional improvements possibly costing $35 billion, regional agencies are calling for state and federal aid and private sector financing through user fees and other techniques (ibid). Greater awareness of megaregional economic issues – and their national and international context – could help in marshalling the resources needed to address the challenges.

In the case of goods movement in Southern California, the impetus for identifying challenges and solutions has come mainly from within the region itself – in particular from business leaders and regional transportation planning and land use agencies, the latter because they are responsible for addressing related planning concerns. The goods movement issue has helped propel an effort by a consortium of Southern California regional organizations to delineate comprehensive megaregional concerns and strategies (Kern County et al. 2005). In the San Francisco Bay Area, a business coalition recently launched a similar effort to promote a megaregional conversation about economic competitiveness (Bay Area Council, n.d.).

In other cases, the impetus for coordinating solutions to megaregional concerns has come from the state and federal governments. One such case is water quality and supply issues in the San Francisco-San Joaquin Bay Delta region. The delta, a 700-square-mile region where the San Francisco Bay meets the state’s two biggest rivers, forms the hub of California’s two largest water distribution systems while also providing the largest wetland habitat in the western United States. A severe drought from 1987 to 1992 brought conflicts between environmental, urban, and agricultural uses of delta water to a head. A state-supported stakeholder negotiation process, CalFed, was established to develop a long-term plan for saving and restoring the estuary, but by the mid-2000s, it had found no workable solution (Lund et al, 2007). With worries about levee failure creating a sense of urgency, the governor established a new task force in early 2007 to reevaluate planning solutions.

Figure 7: Share of Total State Projected Population and Employment Growth in Populous Coastal and Inland Regions, 2000 to 2020
Source: California Department of Transportation (2006)
The state government has taken other action as well to develop coordinated solutions to planning concerns in the San Joaquin Valley. That has proved to be necessary because in the eight counties that form the valley, few public agencies are organized at a valley-wide scale, reflecting its history as an agricultural region with small, isolated urban centers. Private-public “stakeholder” groups such as the Great Valley Center have called for more coordinated planning within the region to address such concerns as improving major transportation corridors and severe air pollution. The state government, more so even than agencies within the region, has responded. Funds from a recent state transportation bond are targeted for improvements to the Valley’s main transportation corridor, and state legislation has recently mandated stricter policies to reduce smog, including a mitigation fee on new development implemented in 2005, the first such regulation in the nation (Krist, 2006). In 2006 the governor appointed a task force including eight cabinet members to develop comprehensive planning strategies for economic development, transportation, and land use in the region (California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, 2006).

Another type of planning issue related to megaregional development reflects “spillover” development between metro regions. In some cases, this may be a “bottom-up” issue not viewed as megaregional; on the contrary, it may be seen as a localized battle about growth, but it nevertheless reflects emerging megaregional connections. These planning concerns generally relate to housing development, and without an inter-regional framework for dealing with them, they are approached ad hoc. As an example, “ground zero” in recent battles about local growth policy in California might be the San Francisco Bay Area’s eastern edge. In two Bay Area counties – Alameda and Contra Costa – and one adjoining Central Valley county – San Joaquin – growth battles have raged for more than a decade within and between communities. Tactics and techniques have included ballot measures to cap growth or establish growth boundaries, coordinated growth plans among jurisdictions, lawsuits within and across county lines, a cross-county joint powers authority to implement a transportation mitigation fee system, an inter-county partnership to address jobs-housing balance, and a multi-species habitat plan.6

Other “spill-over” issues are framed as inter-regional because they pose problems for regional agencies held accountable for solving them. Transportation agencies in the north and south have organized cooperative planning ventures to address land use and transportation concerns for major corridors linking them.7 Air pollution is another planning problem that crosses regional boundaries. With a significant portion of Central Valley smog attributable to pollution drifting from the Bay Area, in 2002, the San Joaquin and Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management Districts sued the state air board, which led to stiffer smog check regulations for the Bay Area (Krist, 2002).

Planning Institutions and Megaregions

In California, regional planning agencies have been recent innovators in strategic planning for growth. They took on this role because by the late 1990s, the state government had done little to advance such planning, and regional agencies faced responsibilities making such an approach necessary. But although they have established a new framework for comprehensive growth planning in metro areas, no such framework exists for megaregions, and associated planning problems are starting to be apparent.

The Traditional Planning Framework

The state government’s quiescence in strategic growth planning during the 1990s seemed historically out of keeping. After World War II, California had gained wide recognition for its large-scale infrastructure systems built under the direction of the state government. But by the 1970s, the state government had retreated from its role as master builder, although it still managed large-scale infrastructure investment. The state also took on regulating environmental quality, but left land use policy to local governments. In the process, growth management became fractured, not just among levels of government, but also even for the policy areas under state control, because those were regulated by single-function agencies that rarely coordinated plans carefully.

As growth challenges increased by the 1990s, regional agencies stepped in to fill the void. This was prompted in part by federal and state devolution in transportation planning that promoted more integrated planning. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) were required to take the lead in developing long-range regional transportation plans. MPOs, designated under federal law for regional transportation planning, generally coincide with Councils of Government (COGs), established in most urban areas in the state as voluntary forums for local governments to consider common concerns. In addition to their new carrot – programming transportation investments – MPOs also faced a new stick as transportation plans were required to conform to regional air quality plans, effectively establishing a “pollution budget” in non-attainment areas.8

The nexus between transportation and air quality planning has been a key driver of more integrated growth planning in California regions. The approach exemplifies a recipe that has characterized innovative programs in recent years; clear regional outcome-oriented (in this case, health-based) standards for performance are combined with flexible implementation techniques determined through collaborative processes. However, a key to success of this model is a good match in the jurisdictional reach of relevant agencies. For example, the San Joaquin Valley air district has a harder time coordinating plans with eight county-based transportation agencies in the region than do air districts in the larger metro regions in the state.

6 For more on these developments, see for example Fulton 2000, 1999; Fulton and Shigley, 2004; Shigley 2005, 2003; Sokoloff, 1999, 1997; Newman 1997; CP&R Staff, 1994.

7 These include the San Diego-Riverside I-15 Inter-regional Partnership, Otay Mesa Binational Corridor Plan, and the I-80 Capitol Corridor Smart Growth Study (Metropolitan Transportation Commission, 2006; San Diego Association of Governments, 2006; Kern County Council of Governments et al., 2005).

8 Federal policies prompting this devolution were the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act and 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act. The state passed SB 45 in 1997; further devolving long-range capital planning for transportation in urban areas to the regions. In most parts of the state, COG boundaries coincide with Census designations for metropolitan or consolidated metropolitan areas.
Innovations in environmental planning during the 1990s also helped set the stage for integrated growth planning. For example, the state established the Natural Communities Conservation Planning Program (NCCP) in 1991 to help overcome legal conflicts over development that threatened habitat for endangered species. The NCCP exemplifies the same recipe as the transportation-air quality programs described earlier—combining outcome-oriented performance objectives and flexible implementation. The program develops large, multi-species habitat preserves through cooperative agreements among federal and state agencies, local governments, environmental and homebuilder groups, and others (Pollak, 2001a, 2001b). Although NCCP plans can provide more certainty both for landowners and for the status of the environment through coordinated mitigation and regulatory relief, the plans have been protracted in development and have not always secured adequate funding. A recent lawsuit throws basic premises of the program in doubt once again (Krist, 2007).9

The Basics of Blueprint Planning

Provided with new authority and responsibility, COG/MPOs in California initiated a new form of more integrated regional growth planning by the late 1990s called “blueprint planning.” Long-range regional and local plans for transportation investment, air quality, and housing are coordinated, sometimes also with energy and habitat plans. Alternative regional development scenarios are tested in relation to performance outcomes such as traffic mobility, transit use, air quality, housing affordability, jobs-housing balance, and preservation of open space. Through local and regional workshops often lasting more than a year, invited stakeholders and members of the public help to distill development options from which a final, “preferred scenario” is ultimately chosen as the basis for long-range development plans. Blueprint plans incorporate denser infill housing near transit than is generally called for in current local land use plans.

Blueprint planning evolved independently in the four largest metro areas in the state; by 2004, each had adopted a blueprint.10 By orienting land use to promote regional as well as local transportation-related and environmental goals, blueprint planning helps reintegrate growth management at a regional scale. COG/MPOs are useful institutions for such integrated planning because they combine regional systems-level planning functions for transportation and air quality with the community-level land use authority of local governments (cities and counties). Generally operating on a one-government, one-vote basis, the COG decision process helps build consensus in a political environment in which “no-growth” forces are often pitted against “pro-growth” ones. But COG/MPOs have no actual land use authority; they can only influence local policy through identifying funding incentives from their own transportation resources, or through peer pressure or technical assistance. Without substantial state support for achieving blueprint goals, COG/MPOs must convince member local governments that adopting local policies with regional benefits is in their self-interest.

The basic implementation strategy followed by the COG/MPOs has been to target priority development areas for resources, including technical assistance and competitive grants, for development projects that support blueprint goals (funded in three regions with about $10 million annually). A more assertive approach by the Bay Area’s MPO is to condition allocation of discretionary funding for new transit expansion, amounting to $11.8 billion, on supportive local land use plans and policies. In a related move, the agency adopted measurable objectives for supportive land uses that apply to transportation corridors, encouraging cooperation among jurisdictions that share each corridor as a resource. This latter strategy, now being considered by other COG/MPOs, embodies the same recipe for success noted earlier—combining clear performance objectives with flexibility in implementation among local actors.

Blueprint Planning and Megaregional Concerns

Our research in 2005 and 2006 on progress to-date in blueprint planning in the state’s four largest metro areas provides lessons relevant for megaregional planning and governance (Barbour and Teitz, 2006). Perhaps our strongest observation was that COG/MPOs in larger regions face much greater difficulty compared to the smaller ones.21 In the larger regions, organizational challenges make it much harder to hold “one regional conversation” – an essential blueprint goal. In those regions, the COG/MPO provides an overarching framework for coordinating land use and transportation policy, but county-level transportation agencies also have considerable power and resources. Institutions generally are absent at the sub-regional (county) level capable of linking the COG and MPO functions – the systems focus of the MPO with the participatory function of the COG. Of course, other areas such as the Central Valley face an opposite sort of problem with multiple county-level COG/MPOs but no overarching framework.

A basic concern is how to nest planning effectively at different scales, which is becoming critical as metropolitan development spills over current COG/MPO boundaries. The problem became quite evident in the blueprint processes we studied. Even though some COG/MPOs may be “too big” to easily facilitate the blueprint visioning and dialogue processes, even the same COG/MPOs may be “too small” to provide place-specific incentives that are needed by the smaller cities. In more than one-quarter of cities in the smaller regions (over three-quarters) was targeted for land use changes in the blueprints, according to the survey respondents (it was closer to half in the larger regions). Also, over three-quarters of cities in the smaller regions, but less than a third in the larger regions, were engaged in blueprint implementation.

9 Other programs in recent years also strengthened the connection between environmental planning and land use. Regulation of “nonpoint source pollution,” such as from urban stormwater runoff, and water quality requirements affecting bodies of water, was stepped up. Watershed planning initiatives have proliferated in response. State goals established last year for reducing greenhouse gas emissions 25 percent by 2020 also have implications for land use, because 41 percent of these emissions have been traced to transportation sources, mainly on-road vehicles (California Environmental Protection Agency, 2006).

10 Starting in 2005, the state department of transportation systematized and extended the work through an annual appropriation of $5 million for competitive grants.

11 We researched blueprint planning in the San Francisco Bay, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Diego areas, completing 60 key informant interviews and a survey of city planning directors, which received a 52% response rate. Planning directors from the two smaller regions were more familiar with blueprint processes; over two-thirds were very familiar with the blueprint process compared to about one-quarter in the larger regions. Respondents from smaller areas were also more likely to consider the blueprint processes effective and influential on local planning and development choices. However, the perceived influence of the blueprints was fairly low overall. A higher share of cities in the smaller regions (over three-quarters) was targeted for land use changes in the blueprints, according to the survey respondents (it was closer to half in the larger regions). Also, over three-quarters of cities in the smaller regions, but less than a third in the larger regions, were engaged in blueprint implementation.
small” in certain critical ways. In two regional processes we studied – those in the San Diego and San Francisco Bay Areas – a substantial share of new housing (about 25% and 40% respectively) needed to accommodate projected employment growth was allowed to spill over beyond the metro region’s boundaries. This strategy functioned as an escape valve to overcome conflicts that arose in the planning processes – such as how to reconcile environmentalists’ desire to protect open space with localities’ resistance to incorporating new housing. Resorting to using this escape valve lets a COG/MPO shirk its responsibility to plan for employment, land use, and infrastructure within a coordinated framework. The growth planning problems are simply pushed to outlying regions.

“Spillover” growth not addressed effectively through the blueprints is a red flag signaling problems associated with the lack of institutions at a megaregional scale that link infrastructure, environmental, and land use planning. In these cases, COG/MPO jurisdictional boundaries may need to be revised and/or requirements for joint planning by adjacent COG/MPOs strengthened, to reflect growth of regions and emerging megaregional inter-connections. Alternately, the spillover problems we encountered might be addressed in an entirely different fashion – for example if the state government provided more direct assistance for the sort of development advocated in blueprints.

What should be the state government’s role in supporting blueprint planning, and especially at a megaregional scale? Blueprint planners call on the state to directly support the processes, for example by making grants and loans for development activity contingent on consistency with the regional blueprint. No state program adopted so far has followed that path. However, new state programs using bond funds passed in 2006 will provide at least indirect support for blueprint objectives, for example, supporting transit-oriented infill development. Other programs address single-issue megaregional concerns, including goods movement and transportation corridor mobility. A greater focus on system performance within a regional context, rather than on the traditional approach for allocating transportation funds based on geographic criteria, may help further megaregional thinking.

Problems associated with the lack of megaregional integrated growth planning are starting to become apparent. However, the challenges associated with integrated planning at that scale are enormous. At this time in California, institutional changes to devolve integrated planning within the largest metro areas to a sub-regional scale (while still retaining an overarching metro-scale blueprint planning framework) appear to be at least as important as changes to enlarge the scale at which it occurs. Given that California is still groping to develop integrated planning at the metro scale, such institutions and arrangements at the megaregional scale may be far off. In the interim, the state could provide greater support for cooperative ventures among neighboring COG/MPOs to address integrated growth concerns (housing, transportation, and environmental issues, for example) along key connecting transportation corridors and in spillover growth areas.

Conclusion

What do megaregions mean for California? The concept reflects the perception that urbanization in the state, as elsewhere, has reached a new scale. Yet, to be socially meaningful, megaregions must reflect real underlying structures and new forms of functional integration that generate significant policy issues that can be resolved most effectively at this new scale. In California, such integration is manifest in debates such as those over global warming, air quality, and freight transportation. These issues will overlap those already being addressed at both higher and lower spatial scales.

The development of appropriate regional and megaregional planning institutions is a moving target, because it is hard to imagine any system that could respond to all challenges. In some cases, single-purpose planning entities may be most useful for dealing with urgent concerns (such as goods movement) in a concerted fashion. However, there are substantial trade-offs in designing single-function versus multi-function agencies. Single-function agencies have tended to become myopic, and there is great need for effective planning integration, including for megaregional concerns. As a step toward promoting megaregional integrated planning, the state could support cooperative ventures among neighboring COG/MPOs to address common concerns in spillover growth areas and along shared transportation corridors. Certain strategies appear promising for inducing planning integration; combining outcome-oriented performance objectives with flexible implementation can produce innovative strategies responsive to local as well as wider goals.

The web of decision making in California is dense and variegated, and the hold on power at existing levels is very strong. The state plays an especially important role, even as critical questions are left to local decision makers. Neither of these realities is likely to change soon, which constrains what might be done at the megaregional scale. Nonetheless, the problems will not go away, and how successfully the problems of 21st century California are resolved may well depend on the speed and effectiveness with which megaregional reality becomes part of the decision making process.
References


