

# land-use planning: what's extension's role?

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To date, Georgia, like some other states, has enjoyed only a fragmented approach to the issue of land-use planning.<sup>1</sup> We all appreciate the need for and value of well-defined objectives to guide our planning process. Thus, the question arises as to where we're headed and where do we want to go.

## **Ag Versus Other Uses**

While there are many controversies and confrontations involved in land-use planning, much of the issue seems to evolve around the question of agricultural versus other uses for our land. A great deal of emotion is also involved. Many people extend to land attributes beyond the capacity of the land to generate economic returns. Also, a feeling exists among many people—urban dwellers and rural alike—that if we're to have an adequate food supply in this nation one or two generations hence, we must move now to set aside or reserve farmland and protect it from encroachment for other uses.

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This nation will need to maintain a large, highly productive agricultural land base as the world and our national population increases. At the same time, the United States also needs a high level of nonfarm industrial activity if we're to maintain a vigorous economy and an acceptable level of living for this society. This industrial activity must be located in a way that enhances the competitive and efficient production of goods and services in both the national and international economies. Sometimes it's not possible to locate such activity on land and in areas that aren't suited for crop

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Received for publication: August, 1976.

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production. We will, then, have to make choices between industrial activity and agricultural production.

As we look around Georgia at the rapid pace of urbanization, the consumption of prime agricultural land, the pollution of streams and rivers, and expensive and unreasonable construction in flood plains, the need for effective land-use planning is quite evident. Yet, we may also find it extremely difficult to bring together the needed technical, educational, political, legal, financial, and organizational capabilities necessary to effectively confront the task.

## **Policy Statement Considerations**

*Local  
Citizens  
Decide*

Let's consider a few thoughts about a policy statement on land use. First, any statement should provide for land-use decisions to be made by the local citizens affected by those decisions. There's no way agency personnel residing outside of a particular locality can fully understand the values, the feelings, and the significance placed on specific land-use activities affecting local citizens.

We know some folks support legislation that places substantial authority for land-use decisions above the local unit of government. It would seem reasonable that local people could be given the information necessary to do effective land-use planning. We hear planners and others speak of the lack of progress made by small communities. These small communities often may be better off than urban areas that have the benefit of "land-use planners." Even the professionals are working in an inexact science based on a given set of parameters valid for only that particular time.

*Form Local  
Committee*

Secondly, we feel that a land-use policy statement should encourage the formation of an active, viable citizens' committee or council in every county within the state to work specifically on land use. This group could be and probably should be a planning commission, but it also could be any other type of citizens' committee. This group should represent both the county and the municipalities within the county. We don't feel the land-use issue can be approached efficiently except on a countywide basis. This approach should provide the citizen involvement that's necessary for successful land-use planning.

*Develop  
Local Plan*

Third, we feel that the policy statement should advocate the development of a land-use plan for every county in the state. Good people with good leadership, sound advice, and professional technical help should be able to produce a meaningful and practical land-use plan for their county.

*Specify Responsibilities*

The fourth consideration in a policy statement should recognize specific responsibilities for various state and private agencies in providing necessary information or other needed input for instigating a land-use study process and developing resulting plans. Where staff time is limited, state agencies could take an active role of support.

*Develop Statewide Plan*

Next, the policy should call for the development of a statewide land-use plan. This plan could identify specific land-use concerns such as flood plains, critical aquifer recharge areas, and historical sites that would be of interest on a statewide basis. It shouldn't be necessary for the sponsoring agency to have authority for local implementation.

Rather, this plan could be used as a basis for reviewing and determining possibilities for improving and/or revising locally prepared plans if such revisions would prove to be in the best interests of the local citizens and the state at large. This plan would be useful to developers, local units of government, and others. People could see through demonstration what statewide planners could do.

*Encourage Awareness*

Sixth, a policy statement should encourage an ongoing educational effort to provide local citizens timely information and create widespread awareness of land-use issues confronting us. Local people should be exposed to new and innovative approaches: timed-sequential zoning, performance zoning, development rights, and green belts.

Extension can very logically take a leading and coordinating role with other appropriate organizations and agencies in developing an educational program to properly inform local people.<sup>2</sup> This program can be organized with the state Department of Natural Resources discussing solid waste management and water quality, the Soil Conservation Service and state Association of Conservation District Supervisors discussing soil and water conservation, the Regional Planning Associations or Commissions discussing technical aspects and local peculiarities, and Extension teaching what it's all about—why we have land-use planning and how it works. With a coordinated and positive approach, we might be surprised at the results.

*Endorse Standards*

Lastly, the policy statement should endorse development of minimum performance standards. These standards could regulate such things as runoff, affluent discharge, erosion, and water usage. The standards could be based on such concepts as the carrying capacity of the land.

## Summary

Too often people hear the word zoning and think it has some magic. However, zoning in itself doesn't help us locate industry or commercial development at more suitable sites. Land-use planning can. I think we should be careful to point out that zoning is only an enforcement process and that the establishment of zoning districts has little meaning unless their establishment is based on a sound land-use plan.

We can't solve all our problems through a land-use policy statement developed by Extension and other appropriate agencies, but we might point up some good directions to proceed in seeking solutions.

In Extension, we're concerned with land use from both an agricultural and community-interest standpoint. Our primary effort should continue to be in the area of educating the public on the issues concerned. A good educational program is a basic and essential part of developing an effective strategy for land-use planning in the state. Information programs must be directed to the public, local officials, and legislators since they all must be aware of the existence of problems, and accept the need for and feasibility of solutions to these problems before an effective program can be carried out.

We must deal with the real issues as local people perceive them. We need to play the game on their field and by their rules until we can demonstrate a better way.

## Footnotes

1. "Community" (Atlanta: Georgia State University, Georgia Planning Association, Inc., Urban Life, 1976).
2. Earl L. Butz, Secretary's Memorandum No. 1827, Statement on Land-Use Policy, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., October 26, 1973.