

The Daily Transcript

OPINION & COMMENT

Local planning decisions can impact efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions

**Guest
Commentary**

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San Diego, along with the state of California, is taking seriously its role to help reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and address climate change challenges. Last month, the state sued the federal Environmental Protection Agency in an effort to set tougher emission standards for cars and trucks sold in the state.

And for the first time, the city of San Diego is adding an entire section that addresses climate change to its General Plan, which is a blueprint for guiding future growth and development in the city.

The state's lawsuit and San Diego's planning efforts are just two examples of the steps being taken to reach a statewide goal to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2020. The goal was established under landmark legislation, the Global Warming Solutions Act (Assembly Bill 32), adopted in late 2006.

Community and land-planning policy decisions may not be obvious steps to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions; however, they represent an important component of the type of integrated effort needed from state and local governments in order for California to achieve the goals of AB 32. As the agencies responsible for creating local community land-planning policy and ensuring that plans for proposed development projects meet government requirements, cities and county governments are uniquely positioned to help California achieve these goals by developing planning-related policies that address climate-change issues and lead to sustainable communities.

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The American Planning Association's California Chapter has also published its perspective on policy principles to help guide local government agencies to make planning-related decisions that respond to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.

In San Diego, the updated General Plan reflects a whole new way

of thinking. Last updated in 1979, except for the housing element, the revised General Plan is expected to go to the City Council for approval in early 2008, following the recent endorsement by the Planning Commission.

The updated plan includes 60 policies related to climate change, ranging from energy efficiencies and transportation, to urban development and sustainable communities.

The General Plan policies couple with existing incentives and guidelines for builders and public agencies, including a process to streamline permits and a street design manual to create more walkable streets.

One of the goals cited in the General Plan is to become a city that is an international model of sustainable development and conservation.

Sustainable communities are ones that conserve energy and water, maximize open space, put less reliance on the auto, encourage walking and biking and have an integrated system of parks, greenbelts and hiking trails. They are places where people can live, work, shop and re-create, because the farther away that people are from the places they want to be, then we only promote more driving.

San Diego already has several examples of the type of communities that are the result of smart planning decisions and ones that can serve as models for future developments.

Recently, one of San Diego's early villages, Hillcrest, was honored as one of 10 great neighborhoods through the American Planning Association's Great Places in America program. Hillcrest is the site of one of the nation's first pedestrian-oriented and mixed-use redevelopments, the Uptown District. It served as an early model for "smart growth," where obsolete sites are re-developed for higher density commercial, retail, residential and community uses. Projects such as these can help reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

And now San Diego's downtown has housing opportunities, so that people can live where they work and play. La Jolla's village also has the characteristics of a sustainable community.

From a transportation perspective, the new South Bay Expressway represents a planning decision expected to reduce traffic congestion on San Diego County's freeway and road system. By shortening drive times, cars and trucks will emit less exhaust.

Cities and counties must also consider how to protect their communities from the potentially increased environmental hazards and impacts related to the rise in sea levels, coastal storms and erosion, increased stress on levees, wildfire risks and growing demands for water supply as the Sierra snow pack shrinks. In fact, scientists estimate we could lose as much as 90 percent of the Sierra snow pack, the state's largest source of water, if global warming emissions are not reduced significantly.

When viewed from a global perspective, San Diego's planning efforts may seem like one small step, but if the city achieves its goal of becoming an international model in reducing greenhouse emissions, it will be an important step.

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