

What Others Are Saying

Why Planning Fails

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*The Best Laid Plans: How Government Planning Harms Your Quality of Life,
Your Pocketbook and Your Future.*

Because they can grow a tree, planners think they can plan a million acre forest. Because they can build a house, planners think they can design an entire urban area. But there is a qualitative difference between these activities that is more than just a matter of scale. Ecosystems and cities are complex systems that are inherently unpredictable, even chaotic. Since even the near-term future of chaotic systems cannot be accurately foreseen, any attempt to plan the distant future will fail.

Any who can say they can write a comprehensive, long range plan for a city or a region necessarily presumes that:

- They can collect data they need about the values and costs of the land, improvements, and proposed and alternative projects in the planning area;
- They can accurately predict how those values and costs will change in the future;
- They can properly understand all the relationships between various parts of their region and activities in those areas;
- They can do all this quickly enough that the plan is still meaningful when they are done; and
- They will be immune to political pressures and can objectively overcome their own personal preferences.

Consider an urban area with a million people and a million parcels of property, each of which could be used for dozens of different purposes. Each of those people places a different value on each potential use of each parcel of land, resulting in trillions of different pieces of data to collect. Add transportation and other infrastructure (each item of which will be separately valued by each of the million people), changes in tastes and trends over time, and the way different uses on different properties influence the value of other nearby properties, and the data requirements reach into the quadrillions. No one can ever collect or understand this much data.

What do scientific, rational planners do when confronted with problems of this magnitude? They simplify.

- Instead of comprehensively planning for all resources, they focus on one or two resources.
- Instead of measuring the actual relationship between resources, they rely on preconceived notions and the latest planning fads.
- Instead of predicting the future, they envision what they want and try to impose that vision on the future.
- Instead of finding out what the people in the region really want, they succumb to pressures from powerful interest groups.

In "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," Jane Jacobs called planning a "pseudoscience." That remains true today not because of any flaws in the planners but because the promises planners make are simply impossible to keep. As a result, plans end up doing far more harm than good to the cities and regions for which they are written.

"Growth-management tools such as urban-growth boundaries, adequate public-facilities ordinances, and growth limits will help offset the cost of housing by restricting the amount of land available or the number of permits granted for home construction. On average, homebuyers in 2006 had to pay \$130,000 more for every home sold in states with mandatory growth-management planning... Some states with growth-management laws should repeal them, and other states should avoid passing them."

—Randal O'Toole,
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*The Planning Tax: The Case Against Regional
Growth-Management Planning*,
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