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A Technical (Yet Influential) Step Toward Building More While Driving Less: S.B. 375's Regional Targets Advisory Committee Issues Findings

October 2009

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This week the reach of A.B. 32, California's pioneering greenhouse gas emissions reduction bill, inched one step further toward the heavily guarded terrain of California's development and driving patterns. On Tuesday, a technical committee issued its final report containing recommendations for how to determine the amount by which each of 18 regions across the state must reduce vehicle emissions in order to comply with A.B. 32 and its transportation and land use companion, S.B. 375. While the committee barely escaped obscurity by the technical nature of its mandate, the methodology it has recommended will nonetheless have a powerful impact on regional transportation funding, land use policy and planning, brick-and-mortar project developers, and ultimately, California's driving public.

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S.B. 375's Mandate to Regions Across California

The appointed Regional Targets Advisory Committee ("RTAC") was given the difficult task of recommending factors to be considered and methodologies to be used for setting greenhouse gas ("GHG") emissions reduction targets for each of California's 18 metropolitan planning organizations. The mandate came from S.B. 375, the 2008 bill that links regional transportation planning, housing allocation, and land use decisionmaking in an attempt to encourage development patterns that result in fewer vehicle miles traveled. (Click [here](#) to read our S.B. 375 briefing.)

The key figure that links A.B. 32's GHG reduction targets with S.B. 375's complex regional planning provisions is the private automobile. As planning experts have long pointed out, and as the California Air Resources Board ("ARB") has concluded, even if cars become more efficient and run on cleaner fuels, meeting A.B. 32's GHG emissions reduction targets requires Californians to drive less. (Click [here](#) to read our briefing on ARB's Climate Change Scoping Plan.) This is easily said, but adapting development patterns to a new reality entails changing local land use policies, an arena where deeply entrenched groups typically oppose change.

S.B. 375 set in motion a regional planning process that will ultimately require 18 of California's

metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to develop and adopt “Sustainable Community Strategies,” essentially regional land use blueprints that, if implemented, would result in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to target levels. Before the process of developing a Sustainable Community Strategy can begin, however, ARB must set targets for each region. The report just submitted by the RTAC sets out recommendations for how ARB should set those targets. While RTAC had a highly technical mandate, its report is likely to have a strong influence on how the S.B. 375 process unfolds in the years to come.

The RTAC’s Key Recommendations

A One-Size-Fits-All Metric for Emissions Reductions

The RTAC has recommended that ARB measure GHG reductions by a uniform, statewide percent reduction in per-capita greenhouse gas emissions from base year 2005. In September 2010, the ARB will inform regions and local jurisdictions of the per-capita percentage by which they must reduce their emissions compared to the 2005 baseline. (S.B. 375 also permits regions to recommend their own reduction target.) The metric will apply equally to fast- and slow-growth regions, and it accounts for early actions some regions have already taken. A complex consultation process will take place between ARB and the MPOs over the next year, with the objective of establishing a reduction target that the RTAC says must be “ambitious” enough to meet A.B. 32’s mandate, but “achievable” – i.e., within each region’s financial and political grasp.

Room for Regional Variation in Achieving the Reduction

While recommending a uniform metric, the RTAC also recognized that every region is likely to find a different means of achieving it. To that end, it left plenty of room for regional variation, particularly in how each MPO works with local governments to encourage the land use policy changes that will better use the transportation system.

Not a No-Growth Bill

The report takes pains to point out that S.B. 375’s intent was not to halt growth as a way of limiting GHG emissions. Instead, the RTAC emphasizes the fact that S.B. 375 significantly strengthened state regulations surrounding the affordable housing planning process, and that new growth, if appropriately designed and located, can in fact reduce GHG emissions.

A Call for Funding

According to the report, the S.B. 375 mandate has created a growing list of fiscal needs: Money is crucial for public workshops and communication tools, for infrastructure and amenities to support infill development projects, for operational transit funds, and for incentive programs. To that end, the attention of transportation and land use insiders has now turned to the fate of S.B. 406, an optional \$2 vehicle fee to support MPOs as they implement the demands of S.B. 375.

Public Acceptance

The RTAC report is candid about the challenge in convincing local residents not to quash infill development projects or to vote local officials who approve such projects out of office. RTAC members frequently called out the Sacramento [Blueprint](#) as a forerunner in using modeling technology to aid a leap forward in land use policy. While studying maps that modeled the results of their land use decisions – e.g., density, parking requirements, height limits – participants at public workshops voted down the business-as-usual scenario, preferring one that shrinks the growth of the five-county region’s urbanized footprint from 661 to 304 square miles by 2050. It seems safe to say that S.B. 375’s success depends on the statewide replication of similar projects.

Click [here](#) to read the full RTAC report.

What’s Next

The focus now turns to ARB, which must begin a consultation process with the MPOs to forecast baseline emissions with currently planned transportation and demographics, determine their technical capabilities, and experiment with sample scenarios to determine what an “ambitious yet achievable” target might be. The actual per-capita percentage reduction target must be identified and presented to ARB’s board of directors by September 30, 2010. Once the targets are set, the real planning exercise begins as MPOs around the state must develop Sustainable Community Strategies. Because the

Sustainable Community Strategy is driven by the target, the target-setting process that will unfold during the next year is one in which anyone with an interest in transportation, land use planning, or development should participate.