



**SOUTH JERSEY REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FORUM:
A DISCUSSION ON THE GROWTH FIT MODEL**

Including a Presentation by the Builders League of South Jersey

Thursday, November 3, 2005
Rutgers University
Camden, New Jersey

SUMMARY BRIEFING MEMO

IN ATTENDANCE

Participants:

Jay Appleton, Marketing Director- Taylor Wiseman & Taylor
Barbara Armand, Chairperson- Southern New Jersey Development Council
Susan Barrows-Barber, Deputy Executive Director- NJ Future
Patrick Bunn, President- Builders League of South Jersey
Jack Fisher- Gloucester County Administrator
Peter Furey, Executive Director- New Jersey Farm Bureau
Louis Greenwald- New Jersey State Assemblyman
David Hojsak, Principal Planner- Burlington County Department of Economic Development
Andrew Levecchia, Senior Planner- Camden County Improvement Authority
Carleton Montgomery, Executive Director- Pinelands Preservation Alliance
Paul M. Raetsch, Regional Director- Economic Development Administration
Chuck Romick, Director- Gloucester County Planning Division
Richard Van Osten, Executive Vice President- Builders League of South Jersey

Senator Walter Rand Institute Staff:

Richard Harris, Director
John Hart, Associate Director
Amanda Olejarski, Research Assistant
Atnre Alleyne, Research Assistant
Tatiana Poladko, Research Assistant
Tim Steinitz, Graduate Assistant

I. INTRODUCTION

On November 3, 2005, in its ongoing effort to foster regional discussions of critical issues facing future development in Southern New Jersey, the Senator Walter Rand Institute hosted the “South Jersey Regional Development Forum: A Discussion on the Growth Fit Model” at Rutgers University- Camden. The forum provided an arena to discuss a proposal by the Builders League of South Jersey (BLSJ) for a regional planning model known as *Growth Fit*.

The Senator Walter Rand Institute is dedicated to the study and analysis of issues facing South Jersey and to the dissemination of information regarding resources available to the region through Rutgers University- Camden. This forum series on regional development corresponds with the mission of the Senator Walter Rand Institute by providing a venue for active and open participation of policymakers and stakeholders in discussing the future of development in South Jersey.

II. WHAT IS THE GROWTH FIT MODEL?

The word *sprawl* has been part and parcel of the state-wide debate over land-use development and policy. Although a clear definition of sprawl remains elusive, the Senator Walter Rand Institute defines sprawl in New Jersey as being synonymous with “rapid regional growth at the expense of the state’s most precious natural resources, farmland, and open space.”¹ It is for this reason that the public debate over the issue is more prominent than ever. Concerns related to sprawl have sparked state-wide requests to reverse the trends of *downzoning*, or large lot zoning, and to focus development and redevelopment on mixed zoned communities and regional planning. The current growth in population, combined with the increasing scarcity of developable land, has heightened the desire to identify solutions to this problem. As the fastest growing region in the state, South Jersey is acutely aware of the challenges posed by rapid development in a context of home rule and the “ratables chase.” Southern New Jersey in particular faces the uncertainty of competing demands for open space and livable communities on the one hand and new homes to accommodate a burgeoning population. The growth of South Jersey’s population, compared with state-wide population growth, can be observed in Table 1. This chart shows that in the period from 1980 to 2000, the population growth of the seven southern counties increased by 244,564 (16.2%). This growth is higher than the state-wide growth in population percentage of 14.2 percent and higher than the rate of growth for the remaining counties (13.7%) since 1980.

Table 1

Total Population Trends, State of New Jersey 1980-2000									
	Total Population			Population Change			Percent Change		
	1980	1990	2000	1980-1990	1990-2000	1980-2000	1980-1990	1990-2000	1980-2000
Camden, Burlington, Gloucester Counties	1,034,109	1,127,972	1,186,999	93,863	59,027	152,890	9.1%	5.2%	14.8%
Remaining Counties	6,330,714	6,602,216	7,227,351	271,502	625,135	896,637	4.3%	9.5%	14.2%
State Total	7,364,823	7,730,188	8,414,350	365,177	684,162	1,049,339	5.0%	8.9%	14.2%

U.S. Census Bureau

¹ Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs “Smart Growth Forecast for Three Counties of Southern New Jersey,” May 2005, Rutgers University- Camden, p. 3.

In response to the current situation of uncertainty, the BLSJ has proposed the Growth Fit model of development for both new and old communities in Southern New Jersey. While the current New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan addresses issues of conservation, redevelopment, and economic growth, it does not provide an effective design for implementation and enforcement mechanisms. The Growth Fit model focuses attention on county coordination of growth to promote the rational development of uplands, while taking into account population growth and the legitimate desire to preserve open space. According to the model, regional planning for development must replace strict home-rule based development with county zoning and planning.

In its October 2005 report, “An Introduction to Growth Fit Management: Smart Planning through Growth Fit,” the BLSJ proposed two changes that need to be made in order to implement the Growth Fit model. These changes are as follows:²

- Mandated minimum densities in zoning laws with an **average density of 2.5 units per acre**. Such minimum density requirements, the BLSJ contends, would reduce the sprawl-like waste of land resources by coordinating developable uplands and preserved lands.
- Development of comprehensive regional open space plans. This would include the incorporation of county-wide zoning that would allow for the development of adjacent and continuous zoning characteristics. In order to implement county-wide planning, it would be desirable to restructure the property tax system to support regional development.

The BLSJ’s Growth Fit model proposes an amendment to the New Jersey constitution under Article IV, Section VI, which would provide a legal basis where counties, not municipalities, would adopt Growth Fit density ordinances. Such zoning regulations would provide for a balance of open space, farmland preservation, and the protection of environmentally sensitive areas. The Growth Fit model is only one proposed solution to South Jersey’s future regional developmental needs. The Senator Walter Rand Institute facilitated this discussion to encourage an open and constructive dialogue among key stakeholders concerning regional development.

III. BIG MAP V. OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION: LEARNING TO SEPARATE POLICY ANALYSIS FROM POLITICAL FEASIBILITY

Discussion:

After a formal presentation of the Growth Fit Model by the BLSJ, Dr. Richard Harris, Director of the Senator Walter Rand Institute, led a discussion of the policy and political challenges of pursuing the model. To stimulate discussion, he asked participants why Governor Whitman’s anti-sprawl policy of Open Space Preservation was perceived as being more successful than Governor McGreevey’s so-called BIG Map. The general consensus of the participants was that while both Governor McGreevey’s BIG Map and Governor Whitman’s Open Space Preservation were designed to achieve a similar outcome, the designation of land for preservation and development, Open Space Preservation was a more politically acceptable approach to regional development for the following reasons:

² Builders League of South Jersey, “An Introduction to Growth Fit Management: Smart Planning Through Growth Fit,” October 2005, Assisted by Taylor Wiseman & Taylor, p. 1.

- Participants determined that the essential difference between the BIG Map and Open Space Preservation was the message conveyed to the public by the state government in the latter was clear and comprehensible.
- Open Space Preservation identified areas to preserve, whereas the BIG Map identified areas to develop. Participants believed that Open Space Preservation, often viewed as the “apple pie” model of regional development, was more well-received by the public than the BIG Map, which the public viewed as “big brother.” Open Space Preservation was more well-received by the public because of the tangible benefits of land preservation; therefore, the participants determined that it is easier to designate land for preservation than for development because the latter requires state-imposed choices about which municipalities gets to develop and which do not.
- Furthermore, participants concluded that the BIG Map, in addition to the lacking public awareness and understanding of the model, contained inaccuracies that were evident when compared to GIS maps.
- Participants speculated that these oversights may be the result of political and process issues, such as the state DEP acting too quickly and without the support of professional planners and stakeholders.
- However, participants acknowledged that Open Space Preservation only picked the “low-hanging fruit,” or the easy part of regional development, in that it only determined how areas should be designated, rather than allocating funds between suburban and urban, agricultural and non-agricultural lands and assigning development to areas through regulation, therefore minimizing home rule.

IV. MAKING THE COUNTY THE FOCAL POINT OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Discussion:

Participants of the forum agreed with the BLSJ that in order for any regional development model to be successful, the counties should assert more leadership over municipalities with regard to minimum densities and land-use determinations. New legal backing for the county planning and zoning authority would be highly desirable. The Growth Fit model therefore called for an amendment to New Jersey’s Constitution under Article IV, Section VI to allow counties to mandate minimum densities and to induce municipalities to use smart planning densities to develop new zoning requirements. However, participants acknowledge that an amendment to the state’s constitution lacks political feasibility. Therefore, the discussion focused on the ways in which a mutually beneficial partnership between counties and municipalities might be developed. Suggestions included ways in which municipalities can agree on creating county zoning plans and educating municipalities on the benefits of transferring their development rights to the county (i.e. counties building roads and sewer systems in new municipal development) to lessen the burden on municipalities.

A Model of Growth Fit Implementation:

Advocates for the Growth Fit model pointed to Gloucester County as the model for regional development and land-use allocation, particularly the Woolwich/Swedeboro and Harrison/Glassboro areas. They argued further that these municipalities are seeking the help of the county in developing sewage and road capacities along the Route 322 corridor because they realize that by transferring their development rights to the county, the land will be developed more efficiently, rationally, and at a lower cost to them and, in turn, their residents.

Outcomes for Further Discussion:

In addition, some participants believed that local officials, and, in turn, residents, would favor regional development for fiscal reasons, but it is unrealistic, under current conditions, to expect them to weaken home rule on their own; Growth Fit offers the necessary incentive in the form of property tax relief. As a result of the rapid increase in development and, in turn, a more dense population in municipalities, property taxes would be dispersed, so as to decrease the burden on individuals. In addition, with county zoning plans, municipalities would not be competing irrationally for the same types of development at the expense of open space or rational planning. With the implementation of the Growth fit model, counties would be responsible for redistributing taxes within municipalities in order to sustain all communities with the county plan. According to BLSJ, Growth Fit is an alternative to downzoning, or sprawl zoning. However, Growth Fit supporters acknowledged that downsizing should not be condemned, as it may be necessary in the future to preserve land. Moreover, downzoning is not the only cause of sprawl, as explained in Section II; public policy choices on transportation expenditures, sewer and infrastructure construction, as well as the market desirability of new communities, even with homes on lots under an acre, all contribute to sprawl.

V. SENSE OF URGENCY

Discussion:

Participants of the forum felt that professional planners and environmentalists often realize the sense of urgency associated with regional development long before the public, but it is necessary to convey its importance to the broader community. Participants also stated that while elected officials often understand this sense of urgency, they are constrained by the electoral reality and the public's fondness of home rule. Therefore, the discussion led to the outline of a Push/Pull model that calls on a strong coalition of elected officials to push the issues surrounding regional development into the media and the minds of the public, and an alliance among interest groups and environmentalists to pull the issues into the media and public, validating the position of the legislators and the need for a regional development plan. Participants noted that in order for any regional development plan to engage the media, the elected officials must be confident that they will have the backing and support of the public, professionals, interest groups, and environmentalists.

How Does the Growth Fit Model Address the Sense of Urgency in Regional Development?

Supporters of the Growth Fit model stated that it takes the sense of urgency into account in that it hopes to gain the support of the environmentalists, as well as interest groups, and that

forums such as this one are critical to building support and strategizing about how to educate the public.

Potential Strategy for Further Discussion:

Many participants expressed agreement that regional planning is a necessity to guide development. Participants believed that it is necessary to secure cooperation from the environmentalists by emphasizing the potential effects of regional development on natural resources, such as water supply and open space. Participants also noted that the Growth Fit Model, as presented, focused almost exclusively on housing development, and that a robust effort at county level planning and zoning must also incorporate commercial and public sector development.

Environmentalists and interest groups must understand that it does not make sense to preserve land that does not need to be preserved, or to develop land that does not need to be developed, and land is as easily misused in urban areas as it is in suburban areas. Participants believed that with the implementation of a regional development plan, misuses in land use would be reduced.

VI. GETTING MUNICIPALITIES TO AGREE

Discussion:

Participants in the forum determined that when the previously discussed barriers to implementing a regional development plan are overcome, lawmakers, professionals, and interest groups are still faced with another barrier- compelling municipalities to agree to and follow the plan. Participants clearly expressed the need for municipalities to:

- “bite the proverbial bullet” and give up some of their home rule power;
- remove themselves from the home rule bandwagon;
- develop in county-mandated areas.

Participants agreed that municipalities must agree with the regional development plan whether they agree or not in order to lower property taxes for their residents; supporters of this strategy argued that if municipalities do not acquiesce to regional development, property taxes will increase to such a heightened level that residents will no longer be able to afford to reside there.

How Can the Growth Fit Model Encourage Municipalities to Support Regional Development?

Another suggestion on which participants focused is to promote the flexibility that the Growth Fit model offers counties, which is then transferred to municipalities, in the 2.5 units per acre county average for development. Supporters of the model argued that although the Growth Fit model decreases home rule in municipalities, it, in turn, requires that municipalities determine what areas to develop and to preserve.

Conclusion to Build Upon for Further Discussion:

Participants concluded that perhaps the most critical aspect of implementing a regional development plan with municipality support is gaining the support of the media for fair coverage on the issues. Participants believed that because the press only prints news that it thinks will sell, while at the same time “dumbing down” the issues, the public education campaign, combined with the coalition of elected officials, environmentalists, interest groups, and professionals, is necessary to overcome the press. Furthermore, participants agreed that the campaign and the coalition must be held accountable to encourage the public, and thus, the municipalities, to support regional development, despite what the media may choose to disseminate to the public. Advocates of the model stated that the flexibility of the Growth Fit model facilitates overcoming the barriers created by the press.

VII. CONSISTENT THEMES

Several themes were identified consistently throughout the regional development forum discussion topics, and it is clear that a further examination of each is necessary at future forums for a successful implementation of a regional development plan.

- The media coverage of the regional development plan will undoubtedly prove to be a difficult barrier for supporters of the plan to overcome, so it is imperative that the coalition of elected officials, environmentalists, interest groups, and professionals have the same strategy and objectives.
- Therefore, the education campaign will serve to not only educate the public, but also the members of the coalition and the media, so that the same message is being permeated throughout the state.
- Further discussions should also focus on reaching a strategic consensus regarding what level of government should be included in the coalition and how strong of a role should environmentalists and planners play.
- A final key point that should be addressed is that the Builders League of South Jersey’s approach must be expanded to incorporate environmental and natural resource issues, as well as encompass more than housing in development or redevelopment discussions.