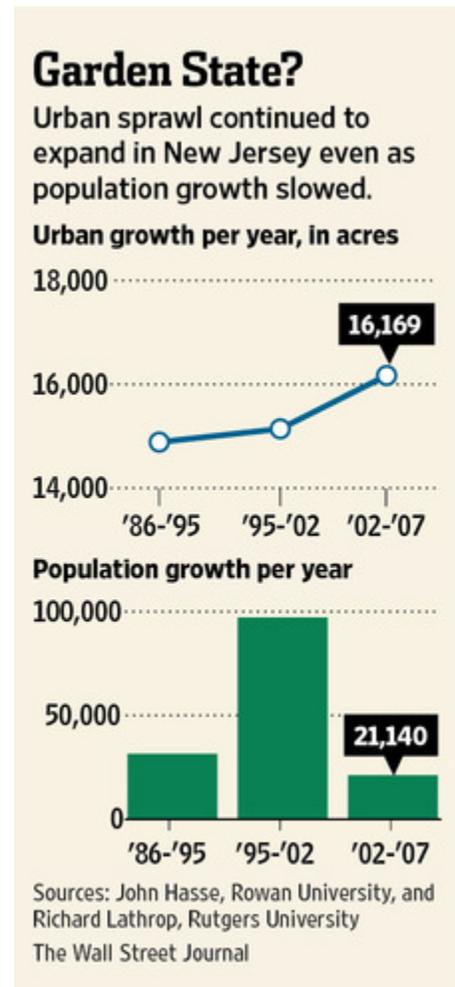


New Jersey Attempting to Get a Handle on Development

After more than two decades of sprawling suburban growth and state agency feuds that led to chaotic regional-planning efforts, the Christie administration is pushing a new vision for future development in New Jersey.

Gov. Chris Christie is proposing a statewide plan to promote economic growth, funnel residential development toward mass transit and existing infrastructure and get state agencies cooperating more efficiently.



State officials say New Jersey's shrinking budget has forced the state to prioritize how it allocates funds for regional planning efforts. New Jersey's new proposed strategic plan—the third such plan since 1992—will provide a clear blueprint for growth, they say.

"States across the country have limited funds," said Gerard Scharfenberger, director of the Office of Planning Advocacy. "Any sort of capital expenditures that the state makes you want to be sound."

The plan has been in development since September 2010. In February, the State Planning Commission will hold public hearings on the proposal. State officials hope to begin implementing the plan early next year.

Local municipalities, planning groups and homebuilders say they've been frustrated by years of ineffective planning efforts and are ready for a simplified approach. But some question whether the Christie administration will succeed at getting state agencies in line and whether the plan will encouraging development in appropriate locations.

Previous state plans were largely ignored by past administrations, said Peter Kasabach, director of planning group New Jersey Future. "Now you have a governor that says he wants the plan implemented. It's a big enough issue

because people don't know how it's going to impact them," he said.

For counties like Burlington, the fresh approach to planning is a welcome change. "It's a good start," said Mark Remsa, the county's director of economic development and regional planning. "Hopefully we get the kind of leadership that gets them all marching in the same direction."

Development planning in New Jersey has long been a complicated affair. There are more than 500 municipalities with their own zoning rules and the state agencies that oversee different aspects of development often have conflicting regulations.

State officials said they wanted to rewrite the state plan to reduce conflict and promote economic growth. Another goal was to simplify the plan.

The main problem with previous state plans was a lack of implementation that led to feuding between state agencies, said Mike Cerra, a legislative analyst with the New Jersey State League of Municipalities.

"There has been huge discrepancies between the planning priorities of state agencies," Mr. Cerra said. "Municipalities were caught in the cross fire."

The lack of implementation led New Jersey down the path to becoming a "sprawl state," especially in the last decade, said Michele Byers, director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation. She said she's skeptical that this new plan will succeed where past attempts have failed.

Now state officials are focusing on defining which areas to prioritize for commercial and residential growth as well as deciding where to focus conservation efforts. To make that happen, state officials say they will offer funding and expedited regulatory review for projects that meet the plan's guidelines.

But those guidelines remain vague, said Ms. Byers. "It looks like the smart growth areas can be anywhere the way this plan is written," she said.

For counties, those definitions of growth and conservation areas will determine the plan's on-the-ground impact. "How this plan will affect Morris County we really don't know," said Christine Marion of Morris County's Department of Planning and Development.

Mr. Scharfenberger of the Office of Planning Advocacy said more precise definitions of growth and conservation areas will be released prior to the public hearings held next month.

Ultimately, local municipalities and counties have the final say on what gets built and what doesn't get built in their regions. "A lot of those decisions will take place at the local level," he said. "You have to respect that."

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