

National Urban Planning Policy in Chile: Principles and Lesson from the US Experience

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Chile, like all Latin American countries, faces increased urbanization pressures in the coming years. How Chile responds to these challenges will have a large impact on its economic, social and physical well-being. Chile will have to decide its own path and system to ensure the success of planning as a key tool toward successful, healthy communities. In the United States, we faced similar pressures and the challenge of balancing public and private interests, levels of government and development impacts over the last 100 years since our population became predominantly urban. Through that experience, we have learned a good deal about these relationships and how good planning is essential to good governance. This article will share some of our lessons—good and bad. The collective pursuit and discussion of a meaningful policy is in and of itself, a part of Chile’s solution.

Purpose of Planning

As the National Urban Development Policy is discussed, I want to clarify my perspective is from the view of planning as comprehensive: addressing the intersection of economic, social and physical issues and done with the help of trained professionals with the specific analytical, interpretive and integrative skills of this complex discipline. While arrangement of buildings and public spaces are an important element of planning, it is essential that planning be seen as a systematic profession that reviews data, identifies options and shares those options with a wide variety of stakeholders. Any system should be crafted to promote collaboration among different agencies, public and private interests, institutions and individual citizens. Planning at its most basic level aims to improve the quality of life for the largest number of citizens. It is important to engage citizens regularly to determine what they consider essential to their quality of life rather than imagine or impose either a political or personal view of what that means. Planning must also take historic and cultural heritage into account. Valparaiso, for example, offers a unique resource to demonstrate how 21st century urbanization can learn from the past and create a vibrant place for the future.

Recently, President Obama created within the federal government a specific sustainability partnership among the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency to develop joint programs, including grants to local governments, to support the holistic aspects of community planning. Addressing the need for planning to cross departments and levels of government should be an important element of the Policy. (see <http://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/>)

Structure of Planning

In the US experience, we have a wide variety of models for how planning is structured. The federal government generally provides resources that local governments can access either through formulaic cash distribution, as in Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) or

through competitive grants. In addition, the federal government guides important elements of planning by setting standards as in air quality and water quality, transportation infrastructure and hazard mitigation. Local governments are free to meet these standards in their own way. This demonstrates one of the key philosophical aspects of our federal system: to balance general guidelines and requirements with local flexibility and priorities. Our federal agencies do not as a rule get involved in the specific planning activities nor do they regulate local plans or planning processes beyond general guidelines or through funding requirements. Similarly, each state has its own statutes on planning, some more up-to-date and detailed than others. Like the federal government, states do not usually have a specific role in local planning beyond providing resources and laying out the basic enabling legislation for planning.

While the President's sustainability partnership demonstrates some progress in federal collaboration, most of the coordination and interpretation of federal and state resources and statutes is done by local planners who work at the municipal level. Local planning in the US is by far the most robust indication of variety of planning tools, techniques and outcomes. The planning function in the US has a wide range of examples but one common institution in the US is the Planning Commission. In the early 20th century in the United States, the "Good Governance" movement emerged from a period of corruption in municipal government. The American Planning Association traces its founding in 1909 to this effort to create good governance models. Planning serves this goal by creating an open means for setting priorities, and measuring outcomes. One important institutional success in the US is the creation of the local Planning Commission.

The Planning Commission provides an independent body of appointed citizens to supervise a staff of professional planners in three major tasks: drafting a new comprehensive plan, proposing any significant amendments to the plan, and reviewing development proposals. The selection and make-up of the Commission varies but usually have 9-15 members with appointments from the mayor, city council, neighborhoods and significant local institutions like the school board and business association. They meet once a month primarily to review development proposals, with the staff serving to review and make recommendations to the commission.

The planning function in municipal government is a policy component similar to budgeting that exercises objective, independent review over line agencies like housing, transport, public works, health, parks and recreation and so on, to integrate their activities into the comprehensive plan. Another important aspect of successful plans in the United States is to have the force of law behind them. Judicial precedent regarding the role and importance of city plans in the US treats the city plan as a legal document and the basis for regulations such as zoning, design guidelines and other. Long-term continuity is strengthened by ensuring that plans have legal status as the origin and guidance for the regulations that the government passes to shape the city. In the US, amending the plan and changing the regulations is relatively difficult to do by one person or agency. This system is designed to protect the plan and its regulatory support from being too closely tied to any individual agenda and represent a balance between short term political issues and the continuity of planning over time.

In addition, it is important that the planning commission and planning staff have under their role the management of the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). This Plan provides the municipality with a clear report and guide to where the public money will be spent on the improvements to the physical infrastructure: transit, roads, parks, public buildings, recreation centers and so on. This plan should have at least a five year time horizon with the specific allocation of funds so that there is built-in transparency to the public about where the public investments will be made. The CIP becomes an important tool both for meaningful public engagement, but more importantly, connecting the city plan to the reality of the budget. In the US cities, states and the federal government each have their own sources of funding, along with their roles and responsibilities. We recommend that the Policy consider the clear and important relationship between the plan, its status as a legal document, and funding.

Regional and Metropolitan Planning

The United States represents a similarly wide range of regional planning models and efforts. For a variety of reasons, planning beyond the municipal level does not have widespread norms or uniform success. While it seems an obvious need to consider economic development, environmental quality and transportation on a regional scale, often long-term regional planning runs contrary to short-term political aspirations and private investment cycles and returns. We do have some good examples to consider. During my recent visit to Chile, this relationship among Federal, Regional and Local planning was clearly one of most discussed issues. With Santiago containing 34 units of local government, discussion is clearly needed about ways for these units to effectively plan, budget and collaborate.

Transportation planning in the US represents a reasonably good success story tying local needs to regional and even national priorities and funding. Over 20 years ago, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan shepherded through the US Congress the landmark Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). This legislation set up a means to engage citizens in their transportation priorities, maintain a transparent system linking planning to budgeting, and underscoring the regional nature of transportation decision-making. Through a variety of administrations, these basic elements of ISTEA have been reinforced and as a result, even though only focused on transportation, the result has engendered conversation on the regional level on other issues such as economic development and the environment. (see <http://ntl.bts.gov/DOCS/ste.html>)

In addition to managing the ISTEA process, a number of regional and metropolitan entities also exist to do other things at the metropolitan level. One of the most common forms that these bodies have taken is the Council of Governments (COG) model. Under a COG, each municipality in a region sends representatives to regular monthly meetings, supported by a professional staff, to share and address issues that cross municipal boundaries. In some cases, these COGs have been successful in establishing region-wide regulations, guidelines and incentives through planning. In San Diego for example, the San Diego Association of Government (SANDAG) has had a wide range of successes, but one in particular on crafting Development Agreements

which offer private developers ways to build while agreeing to protect sensitive environmental areas. (See <http://www.sandag.org/>)

Another good example is in the area of metropolitan transportation management. Los Angeles Metro was created 20 years ago to address the issue of planning, budgeting and building transportation facilities for a region with 83 units of local government. LA Metro represents the model of a special public authority that has ability to plan, develop projects and raise money for implementation. To consider transportation as a key element in the policy, this may be a helpful example to consider in the discussion.

(see <http://www.metro.net/about/agency/mission/>)

Conclusion

Planning serves the public interest to create communities of lasting value. In considering Chile's future and crafting the structure and institutions to manage and promote good planning, the United States has many lessons—good and bad—to look at. Good planning provides ways for a variety of stakeholders and all citizens to engage their government in meaningful decisions about their future. Planning needs to be transparent, tied to budgeting, and comprehensive in its scope. The most effective planning system will find a balance among national, regional and local interests as well as between the public and private interests. In the short time I visited Chile, I saw many successes in a wide range of areas that can be examined for clues to the never-ending effort to improve the way we plan, govern, build and learn from each other. This article has only touched on topics that have been debated and written about for decades in the US. I hope that we can continue a robust and engaging discussion as colleagues and partners in the coming months.