

A Balm for Growing Pains

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During last year's recall campaign, Arnold Schwarzenegger talked nostalgically of California as a "place of dreams" when he arrived in the late 1960s. He implied that, if elected governor, he would try to revive that state of opportunity.

Nothing can bring back a California that had the nation's best freeways, water system, universities and colleges, parks and what many considered the best public school system. California then had barely 20 million residents. Today, it's 36 million and headed for 50 million within the next generation, with a much more restrictive tax system.

What the governor *can* do, along with legislators and local governments, is to finally institute a statewide planning framework that will accommodate new growth with some common sense, preserve valuable open spaces and farmland and resuscitate a transportation system that is vital to the business future of California. This can't be achieved quickly, considering the present fiscal plight of the state. But state and local officials can lay the groundwork at little cost.

Oregon and several other states have successfully put a state overlay on local planning authority. Alas, developers and local governments abhor the idea.

Some modest steps proposed by the state chapter of the American Planning Assn. have survived in AB 857, a once-ambitious bill sponsored by Assemblywoman Patricia Wiggins (D-Santa Rosa) in 2002. What survived in the final version merely adds some shape and guidance to the present state planning law, which was passed under Gov. Ronald Reagan. That law requires the governor to prepare an environmental goals and policy report every four years to serve as "a basis for judgments" on major programs, capital construction and budget allocation. But it's been ignored since 1978. With no coherent investment priorities, decisions are made ad hoc by those with the most political clout. New developments have been approved in areas without adequate water, and housing tracts get built in areas once zoned as open space when well-heeled developers and builders pressure city councils and county supervisors to change their general plans.

The Wiggins bill sets general priorities, including support of infill construction in urban areas, protection of farm land and open space, and development that closely abuts populated areas where infill is not possible.

Unfortunately, the measure has not been fully implemented, and without Gov. Schwarzenegger's support, it could meet the same fate as the neglected Reagan-era measure it amends.

Local governments jealously guard their role as principal planning bodies. They often adopt commendable plans but subvert them when developers propose tax-yielding "big box" stores and auto malls. That is fundamentally a fault of the state's tax policy since Proposition 13, but the result is that purely local planning leads to a hodgepodge of bad development.

The state should not interfere directly with local zoning or the details of local plans, but it should offer broad directives, goals and incentives, such as additional transportation funds, to accommodate the new growth that everyone knows is coming.