Coping with Rapid Growth: a community perspective


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Many communities are being disrupted by rapid growth, and residents face drastic changes in their way of life.

Rapid community growth is generally the result of some type of new economic activity. Sources of impact include large-scale construction projects, such as nuclear and coal-fired energy plants, dams, oil ports, and naval bases. Other sources of community growth might be the development of new mining operations, irrigation systems, industrial plants, and destination-type recreation facilities. In addition, community growth occurs due to the in-migration of commuters working outside the community, retirees searching for a more pleasant environment, or persons seeking a different style of life.

The purposes of this publication are: (1) to introduce a method of identifying problems associated with rapid community growth; (2) to outline several growth management options—and some challenges to be faced when attempting to influence related policy choices; and (3) to examine how people being impacted might cope more effectively. This publication is organized in three parts. Part I, Growth Impacts Assessment, provides an overview of rapid growth impacts, and introduces an impact assessment and management model. Part II, Community Growth Management, identifies several alternatives for coping with rapid growth, and examines processes and prospects for influencing growth management decisions. Part III, Coping with Rapid Community Growth, outlines several opportunities for citizens living in impacted communities to obtain more effective leverage in the public decision-making process. This section also suggests an important role for public agency professionals and appointive officials in growth impacts assessment and in the analysis of growth management options.

1 These objectives address the first two steps of a five-step public policy education process outlined by Bruce Florea (1979). These steps are: (1) identify the problem, (2) develop alternative solutions, (3) analyze consequences of the alternatives, (4) choose an alternative, and (5) evaluate.

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Part I. Growth Impacts Assessment

Benefits and Costs of Rapid Community Growth

Community growth is generally accompanied by two types of impacts—benefits and costs. It is interesting to note that the benefits tend to be well-documented (in fact, promoted) to the benefits of the new development, while the costs are played down or not mentioned at all. Usually emphasized as benefits are the number of new homes, increased payroll, increased sales and commercial expansion, higher assessed valuation through new investment, and additional property tax revenues. On the other hand, recent studies indicate that the costs associated with growth may have been understated. These may include likely cost increases for additional local government services, possible increases in the local cost of living, and increased stress on citizens and their organizations.

A very important aspect of cost and benefit impacts is the local community. Many local government units, and among people, for example, an impacted community. An impacted community may include the citizens of the immediate area for school expansion and a lag in new property tax benefits from the increased valuation. This lag is due to the time it takes for new property to get on the tax rolls. Such increased tax revenues may accrue to the local school district where new construction is located, while other districts may bear an unequal burden of the costs of new students and other public services. Within a jurisdiction, the increased cost of services demanded by new residents may be borne, perhaps, by all the people—including those on fixed incomes who may not benefit from the new jobs and payrolls.

Economic and fiscal benefits and costs may be accompanied by social impacts, such as more stress on individuals, community facilities, or increased drug abuse and conflict within the community. Review of numerous technological statements indicates that social impacts and related costs are often not mentioned at all, or they are only implied in a brief and often general manner. Costs associated with growth must be made explicit if communities are to cope with rapid growth in an informed manner.

Citizens and local officials can indeed influence some aspects of community growth, and in some cases, manage many of its impacts. Those implementing community growth management, however, need information and techniques if they are to identify and cope with associated economic, fiscal, and social impacts. Information and growth management techniques are needed if local leaders are to weigh the costs of growth against its benefits—and to develop policies that affect the distribution of those costs and benefits among people and local jurisdictions.

A Growth Impact Assessment and Management Model

The useful way of looking at community growth, its potential impacts, and options for its management is provided by a growth impact assessment and management model (Figure 1). Derived from an earlier social impact assessment model proposed by Cortas and Jones (1970), this model delineates a critical distinction between expected and actual impacts. It also emphasizes growth management options available to the local community for influencing the kinds of economic, fiscal, and social impacts that actually occur. The focus of the local community is on the future and the way in which local leaders relate to the six components of growth impacts.

The components of the growth impact assessment and management model and their interrelationships are as follows:

- **Outside forces** refer to the policies, needs, and perspectives determined outside the community that condition growth. In which the source of impact will affect the local community, and (2) its growth management options.
- **Source of impact** refers to the new project or growth disturbance being introduced into the community, such as those outlined earlier in this publication. Numerous economic, demographic, technological, social, and cultural characteristics will be associated with the source of impact as it enters a local setting.
- **Local setting** refers to the economic, demographic, technological, social, and cultural characteristics of the impacted community. These characteristics interact with characteristics associated with the source of impact, such as a new development, to determine expected impacts in the local community.
- **Expected impacts** refer to the expected impacts that may likely occur in a local setting, which is being impacted by a specific project or development, under existing policies and procedures for managing growth. Several categories of growth impacts can be anticipated—including economic, demographic, housing, fiscal, and social. Economic impacts include new jobs and expanded payrolls and sales in the community due to the source of impact, plus the investment in new plant facilities and/or new housing, and perhaps changes in the local cost of living. Demographic impacts include the size, composition, and distribution of the new population, as well as subsequent changes in local birth and death rates. Of particular concern is the number of school-age children and their distribution among school districts. Housing impacts will occur when the capacity of existing housing cannot meet the demand of an increasing population. These economic, demographic, and housing impacts lead to fiscal and social impacts. Fiscal impacts are changes in local government finance, including increases in tax revenues and public service costs, as well as their distribution—over time, among jurisdictions, and among population groups. Social impacts include increased stresses on organizations and individuals and related problems. These kinds of benefits and costs—and their distribution—are some of the categories of expected growth impacts that can be assessed, predicted, and used as the basis for developing alternative growth management policies and procedures.
- **Growth management options** refer to alternative policies and procedures that people and their institutions can develop in response to the expected impacts of growth.
- **Actual impacts** refer to the actual economic, demographic, housing, fiscal, and social changes that ultimately occur due to the growth management option(s) implemented by the community as the source of impact interacts with the local setting.

In viewing growth impacts at the community level, one major concern is: Does the local setting have the capacity to absorb the source of impact? For example, if the local setting were able to provide most of the workers needed by a construction project or a new industry, then few new people would be drawn into the community. On the other hand, if very little of the needed labor force were available in the local setting, then a sizable portion of the new workers would either commute to work from outside the local area, or would migrate in as new residents. New residents require housing, if adequate housing is not available locally, a demand for new residential development is created.

By jointly analyzing the characteristics of the local community and the source of impact, it is possible to anticipate many of the impacts associated with rapid community growth. Four sets of information—defined and discussed in detail in the following sections of this publication—will identify that community decision makers will need to develop explicit or default growth management policies and procedures. Options with their implications.

Figure 1. A growth impact assessment and management model and its components.

Figure 2. Four sets of growth management options suggested by the growth impact assessment and management model (Fig. 1).

- **Expected impacts** refer to the changes that may likely occur in a local setting, which is being impacted by a specific project or development, under existing policies and procedures for managing growth. Several categories of growth impacts can be anticipated—including economic, demographic, housing, fiscal, and social. Economic impacts include new jobs and expanded payrolls and sales in the community due to the source of impact, plus the investment in new plant facilities and/or new housing, and perhaps changes in the local cost of living. Demographic impacts include the size, composition, and distribution of the new population, as well as subsequent changes in local birth and death rates. Of particular concern is the number of school-age children and their distribution among school districts. Housing impacts will occur when the capacity of existing housing cannot meet the demand of an increasing population. These economic, demographic, and housing impacts lead to fiscal and social impacts. Fiscal impacts are changes in local government finance, including increases in tax revenues and public service costs, as well as their distribution—over time, among jurisdictions, and among population groups. Social impacts include increased stresses on organizations and individuals and related problems. These kinds of benefits and costs—and their distribution—are some of the categories of expected growth impacts that can be assessed, predicted, and used as the basis for developing alternative growth management policies and procedures.
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Part II. Community Growth Management

Options

The growth impact assessment and management model identifies four sets of options for local leaders to consider, each aimed at a rapid growth situation. The different options, shown in Figure 2, can be used together or separately.

Option One refers to public action initiated by local leaders. Using this approach, community leaders attempt to modify outside forces through state or federal action. An example of such an action is a change in the state or federal law that restricts new development in a certain area.

Option Two is for local community leaders to negotiate front-end or preproject impact assistance, to be provided by the private developers or government agency that is the source of impact. In the case of energy development in the state of Washington, the State Publicly Owned Power Agency, Public Evaluation Council provides a framework for the local community to negotiate with the developers.

The intent is to provide financial and other kinds of assistance to a community to negotiate with the source of impact. In the case of an industrial plant needing public services, the outcome of such negotiation may range from one extreme—to the community to grants a variety of generous tax and service concessions as an incentive for the project. The other extreme is to require the project, in that case, to pay all costs and pay all costs for public services extended to that site.

Option Three is to change the local setting by developing the capacity to negotiate with the source of impact. In this case, an example of public service costs that a community might need to negotiate with the source of impact is to change the capacity of public service delivery to a community to receive the benefits of such a change in setting.

Option Four would be to take no action and passively accept the impacts as they come. Some consequences of the passive option will be discussed later in this chapter.

An active growth management strategy for citizens and local officials need not be any more complex. Because of the exchange forces outside the community, acquire impact information, understand the exchange forces, and be able to influence or modify these forces. In contrast, would accept impacts by taking no action to influence their extent and distribution.

Incentives for Influencing Community Growth Options

In sorting out growth management options, the growth impact assessment and management model identifies actions that can affect the decision-making process. These are:

1. Decisions concerning outside forces made within the state and federal policy development and administration arenas;
2. Decisions concerning impact assistance made during negotiations between the local community and the source of impact; and
3. Decisions made within the local community concerning growth management policies and procedures for implementation.

Such differential influence can be seen in decisions concerning community growth. When decisions are made concerning the spending of public funds on the extension of public facilities to a new development, a considerable amount of influence is involved. If decisions are made concerning the distribution of medical care, such as public aid, the influence is less. The point is that growth influence processes are more complex than they appear on the surface. The point is that growth influence processes are more complex than they appear on the surface.

When at the local level, or in state and federal arenas, public officials make decisions on the basis of whatever information they have at the time a decision is made. Unless decisions are influenced by some outside force, they are not likely to change.

Thus, in making decisions concerning community growth options, it is necessary to understand the exchange forces outside the community and to consider the source of impact. In addition, the growth management strategy is concerned with the following:

1. How decisions are made concerning community growth;
2. How decisions are made concerning impact assistance;
3. How decisions are made concerning growth management policies and procedures for implementation.

Part III. Coping with Rapid Community Growth

Opportunities for More Effective Involvement

This section identifies several opportunities for those adversely impacted by rapid community growth to obtain more effective leverage in decision-making processes.

1. The environmental impact statement review process. One of the most visible manifestations of new environmental concern is the shifting of decision-making power from the state and federal government to the local government. This change in decision-making power is a result of the environmental movement and the resulting state and federal environmental policy acts. The environmental impact statement (EIS) is one of the most visible manifestations of this new power.

An EIS is intended to identify potential environmental effects of a proposed action, and to open for public review the decision-making process a proposed project. Additionally, the EIS procedure requires that the proposal, and evaluate the adverse effects that cannot be avoided. The EIS procedure requires that the

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of a draft EIS and its circulation for comment 90 days before the proposed action. This is to assure adequate time for review by private citizens, community groups, and local government. (State Environmental Policy Act, 1977.)

The EIS review process can provide an opportunity for citizens to learn more about expected impacts, and to develop alternatives which modify adverse impacts to acceptable levels. Often the incentive structure previously outlined, however, is there for the tendency for the review process to be perceived as a forum to emphasize project benefits and to undertake or ignore project specifics. The process does provide a forum in which those expected to adverse impacts may raise questions about the issues involved or inquiring citizens who in turn, would have the opportunity to analyze the issues. This analysis should be supported by the final EIS and take into account the discussion. It usually less costly to react to an impact document such as an EIS than to initiate an independent study.

2. Identification of community goals and growth management policies. Another strategic opportunity for involvement is the determination of community goals and growth management policies. It is paramount that persons who are vulnerable to adverse growth impacts have their interests reflected in such goals and policies. The crucial opportunity for impact are to be found in the local comprehensive planning process, including the development of ordinances and other tools for implementing the comprehensive plan. Furthermore, by having different perspectives on an issue presented during the planning process, broader community interests can be brought to bear in the evaluation of specific growth-related proposals. Such proposals may range from plans for new subdivisions and the expansion and siting of capital facilities, to smaller projects requiring variances to existing ordinances. If such practices are carried out, diverse interests may be more likely to be reflected in both the development and the implementation of community goals and growth management policies.

3. Negotiation of preproject impact assistance. Another method of limiting the extent and distribution of growth impacts is to negotiate front-end agreements. Without this, some localities make a substantial part of the fiscal burden of rapid growth from the community. This method requires that the community identify and negotiate the impact assistance.4

Several means have been identified whereby local government officials can opportunistically address growth issues at an early stage—in other words, before the project is thoroughly developed. While these processes do serve to facilitate the involvement of persons who are adversely affected by rapid growth, it should be noted that these officials are likely to benefit from growth if strong incentives for involvement. These processes, however, do not necessarily guarantee decisions in their favor.

Mobilization of Public Agency Resources. This overview of growth impacts in communities undergoing rapid change, changes for impact management, and contrasting incentives for different individuals and groups to influence public decision making, suggests a need for mobilizing local public agency resources through coordinated efforts. These efforts should be supported through educational assistance to institutions such as the Cooperative Extension Service.

If communities are to cope effectively with rapid growth, local officials and citizens need to understand the economic, fiscal, and social changes accompanying growth—and the distribution of those changes. Formidable constraints have been identified, however, which will make it difficult, if not impossible, for local officials and citizens to address these issues. This is particularly true for studying these issues by local elective officials and by the citizens adversely affected by the expected changes. In most communities, some public agencies are also affected by rapid growth, including new businesses and new structures that attract labor, reduce job turnover and foster worker productivity, a great deal of work will have to be done to address administrative delays in project development or to address informal leverage in project development. The source of impact, on the other hand, is a matter of broader concern, especially when the community is eager to have the development. In such cases, community officials generally promise new jobs and an improved economy to community—and threaten to locate the proposed development elsewhere if it is presented with too many obstacles. A community's negotiating strategy should include a systematic assessment of its need for impact assistance, and a clear understanding of its negotiating leverage and how it may be used to the best advantage.

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4For a framework that can be helpful in setting up a process for analyzing the structure of the source of impact and the local community, see U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration (1973).

References


Growth Impact Issues series produced by the Office of Planning, Analysis, and Evaluation, September, 1977. Other titles in the series include:

- Evaluating Fiscal Impact Studies: Community Guidelines
- Impact Studies of Residential Growth
- Citizen Involvement Strategies in Community Growth Issues
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