Washington state has embarked on a major outlay of dollars and human resources for growth management planning in the 1990s. The Growth Management Act of 1990 and 1991 committed the state to 13 goals, including the preservation of open space, critical areas, and forest and agricultural lands.

How well are Washington's cities and counties doing in adopting development regulations required by the Act? An early look, stemming from a monitoring project at the University of Washington, indicates that cities and counties are developing different regulations.

**Implementation Issues**

Issues vary from area to area, depending on the size and makeup of the jurisdiction, from designation of flood areas in Carnation to irrigated agricultural lands in Douglas County. Generally, designation of wetlands seems to be a consistently hot issue in the state, as citizens realize the need to protect these fragile ecosystems while recognizing the constraints these limits will impose.

The wetlands issue is just one of many that emerges from a preliminary review of the regulations of 42 cities and counties in the state being undertaken by the University of
Washington Growth Management Planning and Research Clearinghouse. This project is funded by a grant from the Bullitt Foundation. The Growth Management Act (GMA) requires cities and counties to adopt development regulations for resource lands (forest, agricultural and mineral resource areas) and critical areas (wetlands, fish and wildlife habitat, aquifer recharge areas, frequently flooded or geographically hazardous areas).

**Emerging Themes**

In trying to assess how well the cities and counties are doing, the Clearinghouse’s monitoring project notes some themes and issues that appear to be emerging:

- There are delays in implementing the GMA. Over one-third of the cities in the study had not completed their regulations by the state deadline (March ‘92). The proportion of cities that are late is probably even higher statewide because we chose cities to study that had estimated they would be finished on time.

- There is inconsistency and disagreement about the definitions of the regulations. While two-thirds of the cities define wetlands the same way, only 20 percent share the same definition of geographically hazardous areas. Nearly every city has a unique set of permit application requirements, and there is a wide variety of development standards.

- Ten percent of the cities are not designating and protecting forest and agricultural lands under the GMA even though they exist within their boundaries. This is because they do not have a program in place to transfer or purchase development rights which GMA requires.

- More than two-thirds of the cities allow some activities in wetlands and other critical areas without a permit, including agricultural practices and bridge repairs. Most are following the advice of the Department of Ecology on this, but it is notable that several jurisdictions do not allow activities of any kind without a permit.

- Several cities have not adopted regulations for some types of critical areas, claiming they do not exist in their jurisdiction. Half the cities in western Washington covered in this study are not adopting aquifer recharge area regulations.

- Two of the cities are using the SEPA process to regulate critical areas. This puts off decisions about development standards and mitigation requirements until the time developments are approved.

- Most cities do not specify which federal manual will be used to delineate wetlands in the field. However, nearly all of those that do are using the tougher 1989 federal manual, which was recommended by the state Department of Community Development.

**Possible Policy Questions**

While it is far too soon to draw any definitive conclusions from these preliminary findings, several policy questions come to mind. These will bear watching as the monitoring continues and we continue to observe the impact of GMA implementation on state resources and critical areas. Are resources and critical areas being harmed by delays in implementation? Might it be necessary to speed things up by adopting more interim growth controls? Does the wide variety of definitions and requirements create confusion and unneeded costs for permit applications?
Do these differences create loopholes that allow resources and critical areas to be damaged?

The question of local autonomy and flexibility is crucial. These preliminary monitoring findings support the theory that the GMA encourages local control. Can there be such a thing as too much local control? At what point might variety undermine statewide goals?

As the state works on procedural criteria to assist counties and cities with their comprehensive plans and development regulations, the whole question of local autonomy becomes even more critical. This study shows that many cities do follow state models, but just as many choose to go their own way. If the goal is a minimum standard for everyone, then procedural criteria may require mandatory targets and standards, enforced by the state.

As we continue to analyze and interpret the data, we will be sharing further results and conclusions. For more information on the monitoring project and the Growth Management Planning and Research Clearinghouse, call 543-5168.

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Some Comments From the Field...

We asked planning directors across the state to comment on the process of planning for critical area and resource land protection, including any issues that came up in the drafting of the ordinances; possible tension between city and county; problems and barriers; public participation; and any general overall impressions. Answers were revealing:

"How do you delineate the actual edge of a wetland? ... Another issue is what is a steep slope. We looked at steep slopes and we were more restrictive than a lot of other cities ... we went for protecting 25% slope grades, compared to 40% in a lot of other places ..." Michael Shuttleworth, Planning Official, City of Bonney Lake.

"Our Board of County Commissioners ... saw the handwriting on the wall and the importance of regional policy plans. They formed an informal regional group and started working with the cities in July 1990, and by the time we were required to do the policy plans, our mechanism was well under way." Jerry Litt, Planning Director, Douglas County.

"I was quite pleased with what came out of the process finally. The GMA kind of forces counties and local jurisdictions to work together and that opened up a lot of communication lines that weren't there before." Barbara Grace, Associate Planner, City of Bothell.

"It's been a good thing in our community, if for no other reason than our old comprehensive plan desperately needed to be updated and this has provided the impetus to do so ... you have to be more future oriented." John Sieve, City Administrator, City of Carnation.

"We have a $600,000 revenue shortfall this year, and then we're hit with a mandate to do more with no ability to do it." Robert Nacht, Building and Planning Director, City of Chehalis.