Thinking About Growth—for the Bay Area and POS
Discussion of a report recently published by SPUR

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Introduction

In December of 1981 SPUR published a seven-page report entitled "Thinking About Growth." Although focussed primarily on San Francisco, the final conclusions of the report stress the importance of taking a new look at possible futures for the nine-county Bay Area.

The need for a new strategy to guide regional development has been made evident by the spectacular growth of downtown office buildings in the City and the shift of an increasing proportion of this development from San Francisco to less central places throughout the Bay Area. These changes could destroy the integrity of the greenbelt by generating a new wave of suburban sprawl if they are not concentrated around sub-regional centers. Although not stated in specific terms, SPUR suggests that some of the most important policies developed by the Bay Area's three postwar comprehensive regional planning efforts—the BART plan completed in 1956, the '2020 Plan' of 1959, and the ABAG plan adopted in 1970—must now be reconsidered and probably replaced with a new regional strategy prepared by joint public-private cooperation and support.

The SPUR proposal for a new regional growth management strategy deserves serious consideration. Because of POS's earlier participation in the work that led to the ABAG 1970-1990 plan, our activities in farmland conservation, and our current work to develop housing policies that will provide for Bay Area housing needs without jeopardizing the regional greenbelt, POS will especially be expected to respond. It seems to us that POS, as the Bay Area's only citizen group advocating both a regional greenbelt and conservation-oriented regional planning, has a uniquely important role to play, once again, if a new regional planning effort is to be undertaken.

Note: While this article expresses the views of its authors, POS supports its general intent and recommendations. We wish to encourage public awareness of the concerns raised here, and we invite responses by POS members and others to the ideas presented by Prof. Kent and Mr. Pivo.

"Thinking About Growth" SPUR Report No. 180, San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, December 1981. SPUR is a non-profit civic organization established in 1910, concerned with improving the living and working environment for all of the City of San Francisco. For copies of the SPUR report send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the POS office.
The Re-Emerging Issue

As cities and metropolitan regions grow they periodically confront thresholds which, for a time, limit their normal growth patterns and become constraints that must be dealt with if new non-detrimental growth is to be possible. While in the past most projects intended to overcome such thresholds have proven to be manageable, some required very large amounts of public money and effort, and at times imposed heavy and disruptive social, economic, and environmental costs.

We have responded since 1900 to metropolitan growing pains in the Bay Area by building public projects such as the Hetch Hetchy water system, the S. F. Muni, the East Bay Regional Park system, the Golden Gate and Bay bridges, the postwar freeway system, and the Bay Area regional rapid transit system. Since Earth Day in 1970, we have also acted to overcome growth constraints imposed by unacceptable water and air pollution by building large scale sewage treatment facilities and by regulating sources of air pollution in ways that were unthinkable only ten years earlier. And, of course, the existence of the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, the result of a gloriously successful ten-year political battle and "threshold" debate, symbolizes the Bay Area’s determination to continue building a great world metropolis if it can be done without degrading beyond a certain point the natural features and elements of the physical environment within which the metropolis is situated and upon which it is absolutely dependent in ways that are both obvious and subtle.

When great projects, programs, or policies aimed at meeting threshold demands were decided upon in the past, public leadership and support for long range planning understandably subsided and became quiescent. The great merit of the SPUR report for those of us who are members of POS is that it raises serious questions about another approaching major challenge, one that will directly affect our greenbelt goal and our broader environmental program for the future. SPUR tells us that a new kind of surging metropolitan growth is upon us, that previous strategies to guide growth in the Bay Area must be reconsidered, and, by implication, that the time may be approaching when the limits to growth foreseen by SPUR for the City of San Francisco may have to be considered for the Bay Area as a whole.

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In "Thinking About Growth" SPUR sets the stage by describing the fantastic scale of the building boom in downtown San Francisco. "Since the beginning of 1980, the amount of office space built, in construction, and under review exceeds 20 million square feet. This is greater than the total amount built during the preceding ten years... San Francisco dominates the regional office market, with a majority of the Bay Area’s rentable office space, but it no longer leads the region in the amount of new office development. Between 1970 and 1979, San Francisco averaged 1.6 million square feet of new office space per year, while the rest of the Bay Area averaged 2.4 million square feet." This means that the boom is spilling across the Bay Region.

The report focuses initially on the impacts of the continuing office boom on the city of San Francisco. It presents the benefits in terms of jobs and tax income; it describes the difficulties caused in terms of (1) the unmet housing demand for middle income employees, especially in San Francisco, (2) limited peak hour commute capacities for workers from central Bay Area communities, and (3) environmental damage caused by disruptive developments that threaten established neighborhoods, degrade cultural and historical areas, greatly increase automobile congestion, pollute the air, generate mountains of garbage, and generally cause adverse impacts on all elements of the man-made and the natural environment.

The facts and figures presented are impressive. Indeed, SPUR tells us that it seems inevitable that both private and public factors will, in the foreseeable future, compel a slowdown and then a halt to further office building construction in the City. SPUR concludes, "to the extent that transportation, housing, and environmental quality become serious problems, in either San Francisco or elsewhere in the region, office growth should slow down. But will it do so before the impacts become too severe?"

With this slowdown in the City, continued office growth will move elsewhere, either in the Bay Area or to other cities in the West. It is this judgment that leads SPUR to direct our attention, once again, to the future of the Bay Area as a whole. Aware of the potential significance of the city’s Environmental Impact Report that is now being prepared on the long term control of downtown office growth, and of the new project which "San Francisco’s business community is now planning to fund" aimed at producing goals, objectives, and a strategy for addressing San Francisco’s major problems over the next two decades, SPUR calls for a similar kind of public-private cooperative strategic planning effort to be undertaken as soon as possible for the nine-county Bay Area.

A Parable

We are familiar with the story about the blind men who each touched and were aware of different parts of an elephant—the same elephant—and believed they were each concerned with a different kind of creature. Our concern with the greenbelt cannot be disassociated from the future of the entire Bay Area. Each major interest group concerned
with the region, representing both public and private sectors, should prepare to work cooperatively in developing a new regional planning, development (and conservation, we would add) strategy for the Bay Area. Unless we act once again to see the whole regional picture, we will condemn the future of the Bay Area to the blind forces of hit-or-miss metropolitan urbanization.

In a still-growing region, the necessary complement of open space is "growth space". If growth in the central cities and established sub-centers begins to locate elsewhere in response primarily to speculative forces, it will establish precedents that will compromise open space goals. New offices in less well developed areas which are often associated with new shopping centers will bring investments in roads, sewers, and other facilities and encourage more offices, housing and, typically, sprawl. Disorganized growth can do great damage to the greenbelt. Open space can serve as an organizer of this growth, shaping and helping to limit the size of the metropolis, as well as serving as the provider of essential environmental resources to the region.

Unless we minimize disorganized growth, pressures will mount against open space. Encouraging compact, city-centered growth will protect the health of the inner city's economy, protect the billions of dollars of investments already made in the region, discourage flight from what could become an ailing metropolitan core, and reduce pressures for disruptive growth on the urban fringe. A sensible pattern would also reduce the expense of development and keep financial resources available to pay for essential environmental and infrastructure needs in an era of fiscal austerity. There may also be a possibility that decisions on the difficult issue of an eventual limit to the region's population can be postponed with well organized growth, and that currently exceeded environmental limits can be adjusted as a result of more sensible life styles and development.

Although POS is widely known and accepted as the only citizen group that has a primary and continuing goal of establishing a permanent regional greenbelt, we have always sought to keep in mind policies that would promote the well-being of the cities of the Bay Area as well as of its countryside. The message of the SPUR report is that all groups with regional concerns must now make an effort, without losing sight of their own particular objectives, to see the complete regional picture. For POS the result of such an effort should give us even stronger reasons and broader support for protecting the greenbelt in the immediate future.

Earlier Regional Planning Efforts

The new "strategic planning study" recommended by SPUR, if successfully organized and carried out during the next few years, will be only the fourth such enterprise ever undertaken here. Prior to 1945, the metropolis in the Bay Area had been developed in much the same way the blind men were attempting to develop their understanding of the big beast of the parable. No one really knew—and very few thought they could know or that it was wise or useful to know—what the impact would be of a major development in one section or for one element of the region on the rest of the Bay Area. However, shortly after the end of World War II when the limited financial resources of the region were sought after by the proponents of two huge, conflicting public projects (the proposed but-never-built second central Bay Bridge for autos that became known as the "Parallel Bridge", and the proposed new regional rapid transit system that eventually became BART), it became obvious that this first postwar "threshold" probably could not be crossed without some kind of a thoughtful regional development strategy of the sort that SPUR is now advocating. In the intervening years since 1945, we have seen three major efforts "to understand the elephant" in recurrent attempts to keep our great metropolis alive and well.

1. The BART Plan. During the middle 1950s the Bay Area Rapid Transit Study Commission (predecessor of BART) prepared a city-centered, compact growth plan for the 1950-1970 period to show the kind of metropolitan development that would be encouraged if a regional rapid transit system were built. The BART system based on this plan was the investment chosen by us in 1962 to cross the growth threshold presented by rapid postwar urbanization.

2. The 2020 Plan. During the late 1950s the U. S. Department of Commerce carried out a study of long range development trends in the Bay Area to assist federal agencies and others responsible for making decisions on large scale projects. Although the final report became known as "The 2020 Plan", it was not a plan in the usual sense of the term: the authors made no pretense of advocating anything other than accommodation to what were taken to be normal, necessary, and presumably beneficial trends. The report presented estimates of future employment, projections of probable land use patterns for each decade from 1960 through 202, and a study of land reclamation (i.e., Bay fill) possibilities. The report's maps showed projections which assumed that the proposed BART system if built would not have a major impact on the shape of the metropolis, that extensive Bay fill would continue to be feasible, and that a regional greenbelt, as initially outlined by the BART comprehensive plan, was not a realistic possibility. The report suggested, in effect, a "spread" city of endless growth and urbanization, with a forecast population for the year 2020 of 14.4 million, as compared with the 1950 figure of 2.7 million.

3. The ABAG 1970-1990 Plan. Between 1963 and 1970 the Association of Bay Area Governments prepared what might be described as basically a more fully developed version of the BART city-centered compact growth plan, modified by what had happened in the intervening 15 years. The ABAG plan also called for a large scale regional
open space system surrounding the central metropolitan areas and the outlying cities and towns in the nine-county area. In 1972 ABAG reaffirmed the regional greenbelt proposal and called for permanent open space status for 3,400,000 acres of the region’s total acreage of 4,500,000. During the past ten years ABAG has continued to support and advocate the plan’s city-centered, compact growth policies, but has not played an active role in attempting to establish the proposed regional greenbelt—the single element of the plan most likely to stop sprawl and implement the plan’s urban development policies (after earlier decisions had been made to enlarge the metropolitan central district, build a regional rapid transit system, and halt construction of major central elements of the postwar freeway system).

Issues and Ideas for a New Regional Strategy

The SPUR report focuses attention on the following four key city planning issues that will have to be addressed in preparing a new development strategy for the Bay Area. POS will want to formulate its own position on each of the issues, and will undoubtedly want to take the lead in advocating for consideration by others an expansion of the group of ideas concerned with the natural environment so that it will include recognition of the need for a permanent regional greenbelt, without which, we believe, there can be no possibility in the future for a “sustainable” metropolis.

1. Employment Centers. The Bay Area has developed into two quite distinct metropolitan areas: the central Bay Area, with San Francisco and Oakland as the main centers; and the San Jose metropolitan area, which is closely linked to southern Alameda and San Mateo Counties. The big questions to be considered next will involve our ability to strengthen these two working metropolises, instead of weakening both by inadvertently encouraging the formation of a third major concentration which the environmental resources of the region probably cannot sustain.

With the dispersing office boom, decisions should be made during the next few years on the number and location of subregional concentrations of office activities outside the existing major metropolitan central districts of San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. After Proposition 13, local governments alone cannot possibly pay for the roads, sewers, fire and police service, water mains and other public goods for more than a limited number of secondary concentrations. Efforts to develop new centers cannot succeed without such services and infrastructure. In addition to being a more efficient use of public funds, employment centers are also economically more viable because of their superior accessibility to more workers and shoppers.

The new regional planning strategy will also have to deal with rising energy costs, new technology, and changing life styles in considering where to encourage new and enlarged districts for light and heavy industrial activities. What the future holds for the outlying regional shopping centers built during the sixties and seventies must also receive attention, while new and less extravagant ways of meeting shopping needs, such as renewal of neighborhood shopping districts and the establishment of multi-use zoning areas, will be explored (as is already being done by enterprisers and public officials in the built-up areas of the region).
2. Housing. One of the Bay Area’s great city planning legacies from the 1906 earthquake is the system of cities and commuter towns that was established in the central Bay Area as a result of that environmental disaster. These communities have retained their vitality and individuality, and have been augmented during the postwar decades not only by sprawling suburban tracts, but by several additional outlying commuter cities that within less than thirty years have developed their own traditions of city planning, self reliance, and self government. Together with San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose, these smaller communities have a wide variety of strong residential neighborhoods within which additional homes for a major portion of the anticipated increase in population can be developed if worked out in architecturally and politically acceptable ways.

In addition to urban infill and modifications in existing neighborhoods, needed housing for new residents can be provided elsewhere in the region by continuing to add to the edges of a number of existing communities. The questions here will be concerned with the need for more compact types of suburban development, and the ability of the environment of the region as a whole to absorb the heavy impacts that such policies inevitably will, in cumulative terms, cause. Here again, POS members in particular will be expected to raise some of the key questions. What should be the relationship of the location of new housing to the existing and proposed major employment centers of the two metropolitan areas we now have and will be trying to improve? Can we anticipate and avoid the dangers involved in permitting the establishment of a new concentration that might lead to a third, and even possibly a fourth, metropolis in a region that may be already environmentally overloaded? What are “desirable” housing densities for different kinds of families? What can be done now, in practical terms, to make it possible for all families of moderate and low incomes to be able to live in decent dwellings and good neighborhoods in the relatively near future?

3. Transportation. The SPUR report does an excellent job of highlighting the significant increases in commuter transit capacity in the central Bay Area since 1945 that have made San Francisco so accessible. These expansions have taken us beyond previous commuter thresholds and have made possible the expansion of downtown office activities at a rapid rate, especially since BART began operating in 1972. However, the report also points out that there are limits to increasing the capacity of the public transit and freeway systems because of cost and other factors. These include the unwillingness of auto commuters to change their habits beyond a certain point and, we would add, the family and financial costs that will become unacceptable if office workers and others must submit year after year to daily commutes that take more than one hour each way.

The central Bay Area has a well established commuter tradition and system today, which provides great and tangible economic and social advantages to the three million people who are part of the central metropolis. The problem will be to keep from over-extending our system and ourselves—both of which are dangerous and familiar American traits of the Twentieth Century.

The San Jose metropolitan area has a different kind of transportation problem because it was not planned and developed during the postwar decades in a manner conducive to public transit. Recent studies call for the creation of the first basic elements of what can eventually become a metropolitan transit system that will enable the needed development of central San Jose as a major employment district.

As the expense of getting to work across and around the region by auto continues to rise (as contrasted with radial transit movements focused on regional employment centers), and as public funds are shifted from the maintenance of the low priority highways necessary for such trips to the high priority transit projects in the central metropolitan areas, there will be new pressures to increase the accessibility of a number of outlying centers by public transit. For obvious reasons, decisions will have to be made to limit the number of major subregional centers in order to provide workable commuter peak hour transit service where there is no such service now. Thus, especially during the next twenty years, it can be anticipated that the financial constraints of city-building will begin to dictate the physical organization and limit the size of the Bay Area’s two metropolitan areas and their outlying cities and towns.

4. The Environment. The SPUR report makes the point that large scale additions of population and urban apparatus to the more than five million urbanites who already live and work in the Bay Area are certain to threaten the environment, both man-made and natural. But it seems to suggest that the remedy for such adverse impacts can only be found in what would seem to us to be relatively minor modifications of each proposed new development—in what is termed “mitigation.” The POS point of view will be needed to state in positive terms the environmental needs of both neighborhoods and the region as a whole while the new regional development strategies are being developed and considered. Cumulative impacts of growth which cannot always be avoided through incremental mitigation measures must be recognized in advance and such growth must be avoided.

For example, POS will want to emphasize in explicit terms the need for accessibility by everyone to large parks or natural open space features such as the Bay, the ocean, hills, or ridges. And in clarifying this need we will want to attempt to gain acceptance for some kind of guideline or standard, such as accessibility from one’s dwelling on foot within half a mile, or a ten minute walk. Needless to say, the acceptance of such a standard would make new developments superior to most of the existing urban fabric of the central Bay Area and should stimulate support for improvement programs being advocated by inner city residents.
Unfortunately, SPUR in this report does not clearly relate the prospect of large scale population growth to the need for a large scale regional system of open space to provide the watersheds, forest and farmlands, flood plains, regional parks, marshes and other natural areas, and unique habitat and ecological preserves that will be required to meet obvious and definable needs, as well as those needs that will always be difficult to quantify but may be of even greater importance to the health of the natural environment of the Bay Area in the long run. Here again, POS will have a major role to play, in this case, on familiar territory—territory that may seem initially to be familiar to us, but which this time will probably take us into new kinds of debates over the scale of metropolitan concentration that can be permitted without jeopardizing the future of the entire region in elemental ecological terms. It seems obvious to us that there are such limits, and that we probably have already entered the danger zone. One law of life is that the larger an organization gets the more expensive and vulnerable it gets, and that beyond a certain point it becomes disorganized and unworkable.

Thus, there are big, interesting, general, "public interest" questions ahead. Every member of POS is as fully qualified to consider and comment on these questions as any member of the several professional fields that will be drawn upon in preparing the proposed new alternative regional development strategies. Let us prepare for the discussion of these issues that will once again have to be debated and decided by the citizens of the region and their elected representatives.

POS and the Future

Since 1958 when Dorothy Erskine and a group of fellow conservationists organized POS, we have been actively engaged in educational, research and political activities to save the Bay Area's great natural greenbelt. This work has brought us into the arena of the regional growth debate. Today, the issue of how to manage the regional office building boom of the 1980's provides us with a new opportunity to take a positive role in shaping trends, rather than having to adapt to them.

1. Active Support for SPUR's New Regional Planning Proposal. It seems clear to us that POS should do whatever it can to help SPUR succeed in its initiative calling for a new look at the future of the Bay Area. But we must also recognize that there are risks in such a venture, especially for a conservation-oriented regional planning group such as POS. Unless we clarify just what kind of a metropolis we think can be safely fitted into the environment of the Bay Area, we could find ourselves being associated with the kind of endless growth strategy exemplified by the 2020 Plan. Now is the time to begin discussions of the new issues and ideas that can make the new regional strategy far better than any of the three earlier plans.

POS members will note in President Allan Jacobs' recent annual report that the executive committee and the Board of Directors have been working on a "Goals for the 80's" statement. Programs to implement the proposed broader set of goals are also being shaped. Just as the POS farmland and housing/greenbelt studies are directly related to elements of the ABAG 1970-1990 regional plan, POS Executive Director Larry Orman and his colleagues are suggesting additional POS projects for the next few years that would enable us to play a more constructive role by explaining in full just what we mean when we use the term "a compact, city-centered metropolis of limited size" and "an environmentally sustainable" metropolis, and why we consider these concepts to be of such crucial importance to the future of a livable as well as an economically strong Bay Area.

2. New Coalition to Protect the Greenbelt Now. Since 1976 POS has been working to precipitate a "Save the Greenbelt" campaign, similar to the "Save the Bay" campaign of the 1960's. While continuing our efforts to make clear the crucial role of farmlands in the greenbelt and to obtain needed legislative actions by state and local governments to protect our remaining farmlands, we must face the fact that such actions, when broadened to encompass all greenbelt lands, cannot be expected for some time. Thus, as suggested by POS executive committee member William Evers, the time has come to convene a caucus—or some appropriate kind of convention, perhaps lasting several days—of all of the Bay Area's environmental, conservation, and other related groups, to consider and act on what should be done next.

Despite the difficulties faced today by environmentalists and civic groups generally, there is ever growing support in each county of the Bay Area for actions now to firm up the inner edge of the greenbelt, and to hold the line against further needless sprawl. The Evers proposal would have each county group present an estimate of its situation, with a definite nine-county "inner green line" being drawn for all to see. When local threats that would affect the entire greenbelt developed, members of the "Bay Area Greenbelt Coalition" (or some such name) would find ways to help in those local situations where help was most needed. "All for one and one for all" would be the idea. As POS members know, local and subregional actions since the early 1960's have accomplished miracles. If we can create a workable regional coalition now, we just might be able to hold the line successfully until we are ready for the great push to protect the remaining greenbelt lands of the Bay Area permanently.
3. The Most Dangerous Metropolitan Alternative. Is the New York of today the Bay Area of tomorrow? The thought that this might come true haunts us. The New York metropolitan area in 1980 had a population of more than nineteen million. Despite the magnificent accomplishments of its people, and of its business leaders, architects and engineers as exemplified by the stupendous growth and vitality of Manhattan, the New York region today has city planning and environmental problems which adversely affect the daily lives of its citizens that can only be described as monumental. Since there seem to be so many people who think that what has happened to New York is bound to happen to the Bay Area—that massive metropolitan growth is "inevitable" here and probably has enough advantages to make the disadvantages acceptable—we believe that the time has come for the Bay Area to learn just what has happened to America’s largest, and once greatest, city.

What we are suggesting is a comparative study of the New York and San Francisco Bay Area metropolitan regions. The people of the Bay Area should be informed of what lies ahead if we continue to finance water, electric power, transportation, sewage disposal, and other projects that invite "endless growth." If the lesson of New York is what we think it is, ways must be found, with the Bay Area taking the lead, to shape a system of cities throughout the West that will enable us to avoid the mistakes that seem to be so evident in the great megalopolis of the Northeast. The project we are suggesting here is a modest one in terms of cost and time. A great deal of information is available, including the excellent reports and experience of the citizen group established in the 1920s known as the New York Regional Plan Association.

As the importance of the issue of metropolitan growth becomes more widely appreciated, additional comparative studies would be helpful in educating and alerting the people of the Bay Area to the dangers of "going along with the tide." In particular, we need to know more about Los Angeles. And we certainly ought to take a long and careful look at Mexico City. In 1940 the Bay Area and Mexico City had the same number of people—one and a half million. Today, Mexico City has more than thirteen million, with journeys to and from work for many of the city's lower income workers that take five hours every day. Forecasts for Mexico City indicate that by the year 2000 it will be the largest metropolis in the world, if trends are not modified, with a population of more than thirty-one million. What more appropriate note could be found to bring to a conclusion this discussion of "Thinking About Growth?"

Support Open Space Preservation in the Bay Area

People for Open Space is a non-profit, membership organization concerned with the regional planning and open space preservation needs of the San Francisco Bay Area. The goal of People for Open Space is to provide permanent protection for the region's remaining open space. POS needs and values citizen assistance. Your contribution will help save our vanishing open space and foster citizen education in regional planning and conservation. Our thanks for your support!

I would like to join POS.

I am currently a POS member and would like to make an additional contribution for Bay Area open space preservation efforts.

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