

Islandwide land-use planning

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In January, the Planning Board will present to the public its first proposal for a regulatory plan covering land use across Puerto Rico's entire territory. In 1995, the board proposed a policy document toward islandwide use planning, but it came to naught. Although, since its creation in 1942 the board has been zoning land, it never has regulated land use across the island's entire geography. As a result, for many years, we have had zoned and unzoned areas in the municipalities of Puerto Rico.

The first effort to regulate the use of a municipality's territory was undertaken in Ponce by that municipality's government, under the Law for Autonomous Municipalities, approved by my administration in 1991, which authorized the municipalities to regulate land use in their territory; thereafter, 17 other municipalities have adopted such plans.

On Oct. 3, 2004, then-Gov. Sila Calderón signed Law 550 to establish a Plan for Land Use in all the Commonwealth. The law recognizes that the Commonwealth Constitution establishes as public policy the most efficient conservation of our natural resources, as well as their development and utilization for the general welfare. However, its statement of motives says that although many laws have been approved and government agencies created—the Planning Board, the Regulations & Permits Administration (ARPE), the Department of Natural & Environmental Resources, and the Environmental Quality Board—we haven't been able to control the deterioration of the environment in Puerto Rico.

This is most important due to our limited geography and large population. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, we, as of that date, had 3,808,610 residents in Puerto Rico. That is 1,112 people per square mile, which ranks us among the five-most-populated countries on earth per square mile.

Nevertheless, this isn't our only distinction in accumulation within our limited living space. We also have 2.4 million motor vehicles on the island, three for every five residents. We have built 16,438 road miles. We have 146 automobiles per road mile. In the metropolitan area—San Juan, Bayamón, Guaynabo, Trujillo Alto, and Carolina—there are 4,286 automobiles per square mile. These numbers rank us proportionately three times higher than the U.S. mainland and among the highest in the world.

In waste disposal, we also rank very high. Each Puerto Rico resident disposes 3.91 pounds of waste daily vs. 3.15 pounds daily for the residents of the U.S. mainland, the most-throwaway society on earth.

Recognizing these facts, Law 550's statement of motives expresses the lack of planning, speed of degradation, improper use, and destruction of land has accelerated during the past four decades.

Resources experiencing the most severe impact from this situation are the water, hydrographical basins, forests, agricultural land, and coastal plains.

Law 550 created the Land Use Plan Office in the Planning Board. It has been working on the plan all this year to meet its Dec. 31 deadline for the completion of the first draft of the plan. The draft will go to public hearings in January. At that time, a wide process of consultation and citizen participation will open up, extending to November 2006.

The plan is of critical importance to Puerto Rico. It aims to achieve a sustainable level of development that can be enjoyed for generations and generations of Puerto Ricans. To achieve the goal, the plan will attempt to strike a balance between economic development and resource conservation.

The plan will integrate these objectives on an island, regional, and municipal basis. It won't attempt, however, to undermine municipal autonomy for land-use planning. The board has been consulting with the municipalities about to develop the plan. The *planes de ordenación territorial* (land-use plans) of those municipalities that have them in place, were respected by the board. As for those municipalities that don't have plans, the board started a collaborative effort for them to establish their own *planes de ordenación territorial*.

The board's plan will propose a basic classification of all land in Puerto Rico. This classification will be between urban land or land that may become urban, and rural land, which is land to be permanently free of urbanizations, such as our forests or agricultural lands. The subdivisions between urban and rural, however, will be drawn up by the municipal *planes de ordenación territorial*. For example, for land classified as urban, the municipalities will determine which are the residential, industrial, commercial districts, etc.

Once the island's land-use plan is adopted, development must occur on land classified as urban. There will be no more development in rural areas. To put it another way, this will be the end of *consulta de ubicación*, a mechanism through which the board has liberalized land use under pressure from developers. This mechanism has been a principal promoter of land speculation in Puerto Rico and urban sprawl. It is a patchwork-planning process that has occupied most of the Planning Board's time for the past four decades. The municipalities' basic classification and districting hopefully will free up the Planning Board to look at the big picture regarding development, not merely economically, but socially and culturally. The aim is to focus on all variables that determine Puerto Rico's quality of life.

Such a vision must be both islandwide and regional. Once land is classified as the board intends, then infrastructure must be provided to guide development in accordance with those plans. The board has the authority to harness the development of infrastructure, now done at will by the individual agencies, into a coherent plan of action. This step must quickly follow the adoption of the plan next November.