



Barriers to sustainable economic development: The Dallas–Fort Worth experience

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the scope of existing economic development activity and the motivations and perceptions of practitioners to shed light on the barriers to sustainable practice. In contrast to related fields like urban planning, the economic development literature has minimally examined how practitioners think about sustainable development and the extent to which sustainable development principles are adopted in practice. This omission is significant because economic development policies can have a notable impact on the sustainable development goals of environmental protection and social equity alongside economic growth. To capture the extent to which economic developers engage in sustainable development and the barriers that practitioners face, we study fifteen cities in the Dallas–Fort Worth region. We find that six key barriers – a conventional economic development mindset, incentive-based practice, a lack of resources, ad hoc planning, inter-regional competition, and a lack of coordinated regional planning – impede sustainable economic development in the region.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, state and local governments have taken significant steps to address land use, transportation, and environmental issues with an eye on more sustainable planning and development (Birch & Wachter, 2008; Portney, 2003). In comparison, economic development has largely been overlooked as a component of sustainable planning efforts in the US. Sustainable economic development focuses not simply on increasing jobs and tax revenues, but on the creation and implementation of programs and strategies that attempt to balance concerns for social equity and environmental preservation alongside economic growth (Blakely & Green Leigh, 2010; Campbell, 1996; Newby, 1999).

The failure to incorporate economic development in sustainable planning efforts is a problem for at least three reasons. First, economic development in the US is rarely conducted at the regional level although employment and business activity extend across municipal boundaries and, therefore, impact regional development patterns and the location of future growth. As a result, economic development activity is often uncoordinated and can intensify uneven investment in neighborhoods, encourage the creation of major job centers far from affordable housing, and contribute to traffic congestion, loss of open space, and other environmental problems. Second, economic development practice in many US cities is localized, competitive, and reactive. In other words, municipalities compete for investment both within and between regions by

advertising a good business climate and offering tax incentives on a firm-by-firm basis (Bartik, 2005; Bartik, Erickcek, & Eisinger, 2003; Markusen & Nesse, 2007). This condition tends to favor short-term goals over comprehensive planning, loose private sector regulation, and inattention to distributional issues. Further, evidence suggests that tax incentives often fail to produce the intended benefits (Peters & Fisher, 2004). Finally, economic developers in the US often fail to develop human capital, which a significant body of literature emphasizes is a central factor for regional economic growth and well-being (e.g. Clarke & Gaile, 1998; Markusen, 2004; Mathur, 1999). As capital and labor have become more mobile, a significant, albeit controversial, body of research finds that firms and people often seek out places that provide and protect environmental assets and possess high levels of amenities rather than seeking the lowest cost region (Clark, 2004; Florida, 2002; Glaeser & Saiz, 2003). As such, the ability to develop human capital may be enhanced through sustainable development efforts. Moreover, human capital strategies can directly tackle socioeconomic inequality through occupational training, entrepreneurship, and other employment programs for marginalized populations.

Despite these conditions, sustainable development has not been a focus of attention in economic development literature as it has in fields such as urban planning. While the planning literature contains a body of case study and survey research that examines the meaning of sustainable development to practitioners and the extent to which sustainable planning principles are adopted in practice (Berke & Conroy, 2000; Campbell, 1996; Conroy, 2006; Conroy & Beatley, 2007; Jepson, 2003; Jepson, 2004; Jepson, 2007; Lubell, Feiock, & Handy, 2009; Saha & Paterson, 2008), the study of

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economic development in this regard has been minimal. Given this gap, this article addresses the following question: What are the barriers to more sustainable economic development practice?

To address this question, we examine the scope of economic development activity and the motivations and perceptions of economic development officials in fifteen cities in the Dallas–Fort Worth region (DFW). A better understanding of the motivations and perceptions of economic development officials can enhance our ability to identify and deal with barriers to adopting strategies that balance growth, equity, and environmental concerns. We analyze Dallas–Fort Worth because, as Graff (2008, p. xxii) emphasizes, “what is most striking about Dallas is not its difference from other US megalopolises, but rather its exaggeration of features that many contemporary cities share.” Like many US regions, urban development in DFW since World War II has been built on a foundation of low-density suburban expansion on cheap and abundant land, low housing prices, and the growth of new economy sectors particularly aerospace and electronics manufacturing, telecommunications, and financial services (Graff, 2008; Hanson, 2003; Hazel, 1997; Walz & Wilson, 2007). While urban growth has historically been governed by business elites with little concern for the environment and social equity and the region continues to promote its “business climate” as its “strongest asset in global competition,” there is increasing discussion of the negative consequences of this legacy and a consideration of alternative development scenarios (Dallas Regional Chamber, 2009, p. 3; Elkin, 1987; Graff, 2008; Vision North Texas, 2006). While we recognize that each region presents a unique social, economic, and political context, because DFW is emblematic of many other US regions, this case study may serve to draw out important factors that account for (a lack of) sustainable economic development activity in other similar places.

Below, we review the literature in planning and economic development on sustainable development practice. The following section describes the study area and methodology. The remainder of the article concentrates on the organizations, programs, resources, and perceptions that shape economic development activity in Dallas–Fort Worth and the barriers to sustainable economic development in the region.

Literature review

Few researchers have examined how cities define and implement sustainable economic development policy and the barriers toward encouraging more sustainable practice. However, we can take cues from the significant body of research in the field of urban planning that has focused on defining the meaning of sustainable development and its translation particularly in environmental and land use planning practice. One major area of attention is the identification of successful programs in places that lead in sustainable development policy (Krizek & Power, 1996; Portney, 2003). Similarly, others have reviewed and evaluated the extent to which award-winning land use plans actually exhibit sustainable development policies (Berke & Conroy, 2000). More recent work looks at how planning officials define the concept of sustainability and, in some cases, respond to it, through studies of places not typically thought of as leaders in sustainable development (Conroy, 2006; Conroy & Beatley, 2007; Lubell et al., 2009).

Additionally, a number of planning scholars have conducted surveys of planning officials in the US (Conroy & Beatley, 2007; Jepson, 2003; Jepson, 2004; Jepson, 2007; Lubell et al., 2009; Saha & Paterson, 2008). This work evaluates planners’ participation in sustainable development activities within a range of categories including environmental protection and resource conservation, zoning, transportation, land use, economic development and

redevelopment, institutional coordination and administration, and citizen participation. Overall, this literature underscores certain themes: an emphasis on the environmental dimension of sustainable development, varying involvement in and barriers to sustainability across and within regions, and an ad hoc rather than a comprehensive approach to sustainable planning. Jepson examines how planners promote sustainable development policy as well as the barriers to the adoption of such policies. He finds reasonably high levels of activity, particularly in “mainstream” policies like neotraditional development and open space zoning, and that low public interest and a low motivation among practitioners (over political or financial capacity) act as impediments to greater involvement in sustainable development (Jepson, 2004, p. 5). In later work, he tentatively argues that stronger mobilization of support organizations can lead to more sustainable development policies (Jepson, 2007). Conversely, in their examination of the fast-growing Central Valley of California, Lubell et al. (2009) find that traditional issues of urban growth including development and population pressures, fiscal capacity, and political alliances are significant barriers to sustainable development. Through a national survey, Saha and Paterson (2008) find regional variation in commitment to sustainable development, but overall cities tend to adopt an ad hoc approach to sustainable development activity, often within the confines of traditional planning policies (e.g. water-quality protection, affordable housing). Moreover, most cities emphasize the environmental dimensions of sustainability and generally fail to link sustainable planning initiatives to equitable development outcomes. Conroy and Beatley’s (2007) review of sustainable planning initiatives in Chicago, Cleveland, and Columbus, Ohio support this observation of piecemeal planning activities. In a somewhat different vein, Budd, Lovrich, Pierce, and Chamberlain (2008) argue that the implementation of urban sustainability programs is tied to the local political culture and high levels of social capital in a community.

While these findings are useful, a focus on sustainable economic development is important because, despite similarities to planning, economic developers often deal with objectives, institutions, and constituencies that are distinct from urban planning and its subfields such as land use, transportation, or environmental planning. In the first place, planners work through planning commissions, zoning boards and with government officials, community associations, and land developers. While economic developers may work with these groups as well, much of their work takes place with chambers of commerce, local business organizations, industry councils, and individual firms. Moreover, sustainable planning tends to concentrate on land use and transportation issues. For example, planners may promote multimodal transportation access to reduce traffic congestion and pollution or the development of compact, mixed-use projects and restrictions on the location of new development to conserve natural resources and open space. Sustainable economic development also pays attention to the environmental impacts of development, but prioritizes industry development and job creation through, for example, diversifying the regional economic base, supporting environmentally friendly industries, nurturing local businesses, and the creation of living wage jobs.

Unfortunately, however, work that focuses specifically on how economic developers think about sustainability and the impediments to sustainable development practice is limited. Although not specifically concentrating on economic development, Jepson (2003) surveyed members of the American Institute of Certified Planners including those that self-identified as economic developers. He found this sub-group to be the least likely to recognize and engage in sustainable development practice as well as low support overall for sustainable economic development policies. The only work to concentrate specifically on economic development

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