

Attitudes Towards Growth Management in Florida: Comparing Citizen Support in 1985 and 2001

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Researchers have long been interested in citizen attitudes towards growth management initiatives. This research is important as an identification of those factors that predict support for growth management can help planners to galvanize support for these initiatives. While analyses of citizen attitudes towards growth management are prevalent, to date no study has investigated whether or not citizen attitudes have changed over time and, if so, in what ways. This research fills this gap by investigating attitudes towards growth management at two key points in time: 1) in 1985 as Florida's groundbreaking legislation was being passed by the legislature and 2) in 2001 when major revisions to the state's approach have been proposed.

Background

In 1985 the state of Florida passed one of the most innovative growth management (GM) programs the country has seen. The 1985 Growth Management Act called for state oversight of local planning efforts, a requirement for consistency between formerly disconnected local plans, and a concurrency requirement, a state mandate that specified urban services must be in place prior to the issuance of development orders. The program also outlined a very detailed process for citizen input into local planning decisions.

Although in many ways a landmark piece of legislation, Florida's GM approach has not been without its problems. Initially heralded around the country as one of the most comprehensive and potentially most effective attempts at managing growth, in reality Florida has experienced mixed success at guiding growth. These problems have prompted reforms to the system, including the relaxation of concurrency standards and greater consideration of affordable housing and rural economic development issues. More recently there have been efforts to reshape the system, with specific attention paid to modeling the fiscal impact of new development and to making the system more accessible to public input.

Research Approach

The data employed in this study came from the Florida Annual Policy Survey. This survey monitors the policy interests and attitudes of Floridians on issues of importance to state and local governments. Questions concerning growth issues were asked of a random sample of Florida's citizens in the two study years. Survey results were generated from a representative sample of 983 and 1,085 residents in 1985 and 2001, respectively. Using this data, we investigated the following questions;

Did citizen support for growth management change between 1985 and 2001? For what reasons did any attitudinal changes occur?

Did Floridians Attitudes Change Between 1985 and 2001?

Yes. Results from a question on the perceived need for growth controls revealed that the broad-based support for growth controls that existed in the 1980s no longer existed in 2001. While the need for growth controls had traction amongst all subgroups in 1985, by 2001 perceived need for growth controls varied markedly across the population. In 2001 minorities and lower socioeconomic status respondents perceived less of a need for growth controls whereas high income households and whites perceived a steady or increasing need for these controls.

A second question asked those respondents that perceived a need for growth controls whether or not they believed government, at any level, should play a role in managing growth. Overall support for a government role in managing growth fell precipitously between 1985 and 2001 from 75.5% to 63.7%. This decline was remarkably robust as support for a government role in managing growth declined across almost every subset of the population, inclusive of demographic, socioeconomic, and contextual variables.

Explaining Changes in Citizen Attitudes

We attribute this decline in citizen support for growth management to four factors: 1) historical context, 2) general unfamiliarity with the state's GM system, 3) perceived ineffectiveness of the system, and 4) a perceived organizational mismatch. Each of these explanations is briefly summarized below.

Historical Context

At the time of the first survey in 1985, the state's GM legislation had yet to be finalized and the long, difficult comprehensive planning process and the contentious state review of these local planning documents still lay in the future. To survey respondents in 1985 growth management remained unblemished, a vision of "good planning" that had yet to be spoiled by the realities of day-to-day implementation. As a consequence, survey results from 1985 reflect heightened expectations as to the effectiveness of this approach to managing growth.

By 2001, the system of growth management had been in play for over a decade and the state still continued to grow at a rate well above that of the nation.

During the intervening period, development was directed to areas where infrastructure was available (sometimes promoting sprawl rather than containing it), loopholes in concurrency were identified and regulations were drafted to close these, and shortages in funding for new and existing infrastructure needs were experienced throughout the state. In short, the system created in the mid-1980s had been put into practice, in the process exposing the many shortcomings of the approach. The 2001 survey results, then, provide insights into attitudes towards GM after years of struggling to implement a very complex approach to managing growth.

Citizen Unfamiliarity with the State's GM System

Citizen familiarity with the state's system of growth management has long been an issue in Florida. Many believe that the comprehensive plan amendment process and the many governmental layers (and players) involved in the process have created barriers to citizen input into and understanding of the system. Survey results support this contention as familiarity with the system is remarkably low given the high profile of this issue over the past twenty years. Less than one-third of respondents stated that they were very or somewhat familiar with the state's system for managing growth.

Perceived Ineffectiveness of the State's GM System

To acquire some sense as to the perceived impacts of the system, we asked respondents familiar with the state's GM system about their perceptions of the impacts of growth management on traffic, local water supply, the environment, and disaster preparedness. We found that citizens perceive the system to be ineffective at addressing growth-related problems in the state, especially traffic.

Perceived Organizational Mismatch

In both 1985 and 2001 respondents that were supportive of a governmental role in managing growth were also asked what level of government should take primary responsibility for controlling growth. Results

indicate that between 1985 and 2001 there has been a shift in citizen preference from state-level growth management to county-level growth management. In 1985, the greatest number of respondents assigned the state primary responsibility for managing growth. By 2001, however, the county level emerged as the modal response, reflecting an emerging belief that growth management is best undertaken at the local level.

Explaining Shifting Attitudes in Florida

When taken together, the survey data provide insights as to why support for GM fell between 1985 and 2001. Any public policy that is poorly understood by citizens, deemed ineffective at addressing key problems, and perceived as an incorrect organizational response to these problems is almost certain to lose citizen support over time. However, it is clear that growth management is here to stay in Florida. Despite a loss of support, we found that in 2001 over two-thirds of Florida's citizens still perceive growth to be a problem in their community.

Implications

These results offer some insights to other states that have chosen a growth management course. First, survey results show that citizen attitudes towards growth management change over time. Second, we found that support for growth management may differ across subgroups of the population and that these differences may increase over time. Taken together, these findings indicate that citizen attitudes should be monitored so that policy makers can track and respond properly to these shifts. Lastly, despite significant problems with growth management as implemented in Florida, our results indicate that there is still substantial support for the general idea of growth management. While debate continues over the form and content of growth management policy in Florida, these survey results make it clear that growth is an issue still of great importance to the state's citizenry.

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