NGA Center for BEST PRACTICES

Issue Brief

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Fixing It First:
Targeting Infrastructure Investments to Improve State Economies and Invigorate Existing Communities

Summary

In an era of strained budgets, many states are finding it too expensive to build as they have for the last fifty years. For much of that period, state development spending has been driven by costly growth patterns. Seeing an opportunity to control expenditures and enhance the quality of life in their states, a number of governors are choosing a new path. By prioritizing investments in roads, schools, utilities, housing, and other infrastructure in a way that leverages and enhances existing assets before building new, states are enjoying substantial benefits. These include the cost savings of greater efficiency and restoration of the economic competitiveness of existing communities.

This approach, often known as "Fix-it-first," is not one-size-fits-all but rather utilizes a variety of strategies to meet individual state needs. This issue brief reviews the differing strategies of seven states and reveals that they pursue fix-it-first to achieve three primary goals.

First, states seek to spend funds more efficiency. Strategies to meet this goal include:
- Targeting state investment to areas with existing infrastructure and facilitating development in areas most suitable for growth.
- Coordinating state agency planning around common development goals.

Second, states seek to increase economic competitiveness. Strategies to meet this goal include:
- Improving existing community infrastructure to create places that are appealing for business and residential investment.
- Creating incentives to revitalize and restore the economies of targeted areas.

Finally, states seek to enhance quality of life. Strategies to meet this goal include:
- Creating incentives for communities to pursue coordinated development goals.
- Removal of barriers to the construction and rehabilitation of schools in established areas.

Background

States faced more than $100 billon in budget shortfalls during 2002 and 2003 and continue to seek ways to reduce public outlays[1]. Many states have begun to recognize they can save money by more efficiently utilizing the assets (including roads, housing, schools, and utilities) already

What is Fix-it-First?

Fix-it-first is a term used to describe a wide range of state investment strategies that utilize planning, development incentives, and other tools to better leverage limited state funds. The explicit goal of these strategies is to build upon and maintain previous asset investments before building new. These approaches focus on three main themes: 1) efficiency; 2) economic and community development potential; and 3) quality of life (including preserving the existing housing stock in the core and inner-ring suburbs).

in place in many cities and suburbs rather than spending money to build new infrastructure and facilities in undeveloped areas. Targeting their limited expenditures for roads, schools, utilities, and community facilities in a way that leverages these existing assets results in a number of benefits including: 1) greater efficiency; 2) more effective economic and community development; and 3) an improved quality of life.

Although many benefits can result from pursuing such a fix-it-first approach, governors often have a specific goal in mind. The primary goal for some is to help relieve strained budgets. **California** Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is calling for greater efficiency in state spending by directing funds to transportation projects in communities that effectively manage land development. Governor Edward Rendell of **Pennsylvania** is achieving greater efficiency by coordinating agencies and comprehensively mapping state investments to ensure the greatest impact of limited spending.

Other governors seek to increase the economic competitiveness of their states. To address a concern that **Massachusetts** may be losing business due to high cost of living, Governor Mitt Romney is promoting more affordable housing and transit-oriented development through a new cross-agency development office. **Michigan's** Governor Jennifer Granholm is working closely with the legislature to develop a comprehensive land use and development agenda that will redirect infrastructure resources to the state's ailing core communities.

States are using fix-it-first strategies to enhance quality of life and maintain the unique character of their communities. In an effort to maintain the vitality of **South Carolina's** local communities, Governor Mark Sanford is directing state school construction funding to existing schools as well as investing new school construction dollars in established communities. Governor Ruth Ann Minner's "Livable **Delaware"** initiative links state development funding with preserving the quality of the life in the state's communities.

This issue brief outlines some of the goals pursued and benefits realized by states whose governors are pursuing a fix-it-first approach in some form, including California, Delaware, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina.

More Efficient Spending

State governments can expect to face budget challenges in years to come, despite recent improvements in economic conditions.[2] Infrastructure and other capital investments will face increased competition in the future with health care, education and other spending priorities. To deal with these conditions, Governors are focusing on promising and emerging alternative frameworks for development—shifting attention to achieving and leveraging efficiencies.

Strategies to improve budgetary efficiency include:

- **Targeting state investment to areas with existing infrastructure** and facilitating development in areas most suitable for growth.
- **Coordinating state agency planning** around common development goals.

Targeting State Infrastructure Spending

Infrastructure investments are a significant portion of state spending. In fiscal year 1999-2000, states spent $340 billion to build and maintain infrastructure and on related public services. In addition, state governments wield considerable discretion over how much they spend on these capital projects. Given the various tools and resources at their disposal (e.g., bond authority, allocation of Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, tax increment financing, and grants such as HOME and Community Development Block Grants), states may reap many synergistic benefits by coordinating and focusing expenditures on existing infrastructure investments. One estimate indicates "compact" growth would generate $22 billion to $24 billion in costs savings per year for state and local governments through 2025.[3]

Pennsylvania is utilizing new tools to more efficiently redevelop older towns and cities while preserving rural assets. Governor Rendell is prioritizing state infrastructure resources by directing agencies to cooperate in comprehensively mapping and distributing all of the state's development grants and loans. The state is developing comprehensive criteria to guide investment for maximum impact. The state is also analyzing the streams of economic and community development funding from various agencies to better understand how agency activities can be coordinated and how guidance and performance measures can encourage agencies to work together to develop common strategies. One estimate indicates that Pennsylvania state and local governments could save $120 million a year through more compact capital development.[4]

Infrastructure is a Significant Portion of State Spending

"Over the years 1999-2000, states and localities spent:

- Nearly $140 billion on capital outlays (greatly dictated by development patterns) for such infrastructure as elementary schools and secondary schools, highways, sewer lines, solid waste management, and utility systems.
- More than $200 billion on recurring expenditures to provide such services as highway maintenance, police and fire protection; trash collection; and utility service."

Source: Muro and Puentes. "Investing in a Better Future: A Review of the Fiscal and Competitive Advantages of Smarter Growth Development Pattern" Brookings Institution, 2004.

Massachusetts' most recent capital budget was developed with fix-it-first as an explicit guiding principle, making it an "Administration priority to repair the State's productive asset base and limit expansion to only core needs."[5] This philosophy has carried over to the recently proposed Transportation Bond Bill, which is seeks to modernize the state's existing transportation system. The Bond Bill also includes a specific set-aside for a transit-oriented development fund that will be used to encourage economic and residential development around existing transit stations.[6] Further, the Governor has made it a Commonwealth policy to give specific priority to the repair of existing transportation infrastructure and the use of "community-friendly solutions" that have multiple goals including preventing sprawl, avoiding unnecessary infrastructure costs, and providing "enhanced mobility for sustainable transportation modes."[7]

Facilitating Suitable Development

States are encouraging development around existing infrastructure -- rather than in undeveloped areas -- in order to make better use of these often underutilized resources. A mile of new sewer often costs states between $250,000 and $350,000 -- a mile of improved road between $250,000 and $500,000."[8]

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is calling for greater efficiency in state spending by targeting for funding transportation projects that contribute to a jobs and housing balance. Such a balance would reduce the strain on public services and need for expensive new infrastructure investment. The Governor recently signed a law to encourage development around rail stations to better complement the state's investment in public transit. The new law builds upon the foundation of California's Transit Village Development Planning Act of 1994 which authorizes cities and counties to create transit village plans within a quarter-mile of rail stations. Such transit villages—clusters of homes and businesses around public transit hubs—are eligible for transportation funding and other financial incentives and can utilize an expedited permit process to spur development. The new law will further encourage the creation of transit villages by expanding the definition of a transit village to include developments around a ferry terminal, bus hub, or bus transfer station.

Furthermore, a 2002 law (Assembly Bill 857) sets out three priorities for the state's annual infrastructure plan: 1) promoting infill development and improvement of existing infrastructure; 2) protecting valuable farm and open space; and 3) ensuring that new development is efficient and contiguous to existing development. The law also requires new development to be served by adequate transportation, public utilities and services to maximize taxpayer dollars.

Coordinating State Agency Planning

Coordinating the work of state agencies can help reduce the costs of unnecessary bureaucracy, duplication, and unintended consequences. In most states, transportation, land use, affordable housing, and economic development fall under the purview of more than one agency. While each of these issues is certainly complex enough to merit an entire agency's attention, the issues are intertwined enough to require coordinated decision making.

For instance, transportation projects that emphasize driver safety without considering the needs of local businesses might lead a transportation agency to spend money to achieve one outcome and an economic development agency spending money to offset the unintended consequences of that outcome. If a road project creates wide lanes with large shoulders down the middle of a town's main street to allow for smooth, swift vehicle flow, it also is likely that it will reduce the foot traffic vital to the businesses lining the road. Consequently, the economic development agency would wind up spending money to help revitalize the blighted business district. A framework that considers state agencies' decisions and impacts in totality can aid in eliminating the conflicts in agency goals and thus reduce spending inefficiencies.

Massachusetts Creates Office Coordinating Development

Governor Mitt Romney created the Office for Commonwealth Development (OCD) as one of two new development agency structures in his Cabinet. The mission of OCD is to care for the built and natural environment by promoting sustainable development through the integration of energy, environment, housing, and transportation agencies' policies, programs and regulations.

The Office for Commonwealth Development encourages the coordination and cooperation of all agencies, investing the state's public funds in a smart and equitable manner, giving priority to investments that will deliver living wage jobs, transit access, housing, open space and community-serving enterprises OCD is guided by a set of principles to redevelop first, concentrate development, be fair, restore and enhance the environment, conserve natural resources, expand housing opportunities, provide transportation choice, increase job opportunities, foster sustainable businesses, and plan regionally.

Source: <http://www.mass.gov/ocd.htm>.

Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney is doing just this. The Governor reorganized his Cabinet to create the Office of Commonwealth Development (OCD). This "super agency" oversees the Division of Energy Resources; the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs; the Department of Housing and Community Development; and the Executive Office of Transportation and Construction. OCD occupies a central position as coordinator of the state's development policies.[9] With support of the Governor, the new office manages cumulative annual state and federal spending of approximately $2 billion dollars.[10]

Under the Governor's direction and OCD's coordination, state agencies allocate resources to encourage development in areas that are supported by existing infrastructure. The state also supports a number of urban reuse projects that are transforming vacant or abandoned buildings into lower cost housing. Already converted are a naval air station, a hospital, a glue factory, and a number of vacant schools that were slated for demolition.[11]

In **Delaware**, the state reviews individual project development plans to ensure they are in conformance with state land use strategies and goals as part of the Livable Delaware initiative. To ensure that these requirements do not create new barriers to development they are contained within a "one-stop" shop for project approval called "PLUS." The PLUS process brings together relevant state agencies with municipalities and developers early in the planning stage to coordinate efforts and impact projects before the developer is too invested in one particular design path.

Increased Economic Competitiveness

States confront myriad challenges to achievement of their community and economic development objectives. These challenges are exacerbated by shifting federal support for state and local initiatives. Effectively leveraging a state's existing resources—especially public transportation, highways, roads, sewer systems, schools, and historic buildings—to encourage reinvestment in core communities is not only fiscally sound and cost effective, but also can result in larger economic and community development benefits.[12]

State economic competitiveness strategies include:

- **Improving existing community infrastructure** to create places that are appealing for business and residential investment.
- **Creating incentive**s to revitalize and restore the economies of targeted areas.

Making Communities Attractive for Business and Residential Development

Fix-it-first has broad potential as an economic development and workforce recruitment and retention strategy. As the United States' economy becomes more knowledge based and human-capital intensive, states and cities are attempting to create physical environments that attract "knowledge workers".[13] The features that attract these knowledge workers to different states and cities include: "24-7" urban spaces (e.g., entertainment, arts, retail), public transportation, population diversity, and appropriate types of housing for various income levels. Since fix-it-first strategies concentrate development where existing physical, economic, and social infrastructure investments are in place, they can help to create the vibrant spaces knowledge workers demand.

Further, various fix-it-fist strategies may concentrate people and development in established areas, which helps to retain their historic and unique character. Vibrant spaces spur and capture efficiencies—or "knowledge spillovers"—from a concentration of industries and their workforce that result from the sharing of information, ideas, technology, and opportunity.[14]

Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm is promoting "cool cities" as a strategy to encourage economic vitality and a high quality of life in the state's core communities. Under its Cool City Pilot Program, the state promotes the cooperation and integration of multiple state agencies and resources and has created a clearinghouse of existing state economic development and revitalization programs.[15] Projects will receive priority funding and access to state resources, including the Cool City Catalyst grants, in return for innovative local plans to revitalize established areas and utilize previously built infrastructure. Grants can be used for physical infrastructure, façade improvements, land acquisition, rehabilitation, new residential construction, preserving greenspace, farmer's markets, or outdoor facilities.[16]

As rising housing costs have hampered economic development in a number of states, **Massachusetts** is looking to attract and retain educated workers and businesses through expanding limited housing choices in ways that limit sprawl and are consistent with dense, vibrant community designs. A new Massachusetts program to encourage development of new housing gives priority funding to transit-oriented development (TOD) and reclamation of brownfields.[17] Massachusetts defines TOD as any development that creates a mixed-use community within walking distance of a transit stop and that mixes residential, retail, office, open space, and public uses in a way that makes it convenient to travel on foot or by public transportation instead of by car.

A Transportation Bond Bill, proposed by Governor Romney, includes a specific set-aside to support TOD.[18] This funding will be used to encourage economic and residential development around existing transit stations. The state also owns developable land at twenty Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) stations.[19] It is also working to complete "Greenbush" commuter rail line to serve a range of suburbs previously without transit access. Encouraging future development at these transit nodes will help the state satisfy its multiple objectives of building more efficiently, providing new housing options, and reducing pressure on limited open space.

Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich is building on the work of the state's previous administration to encourage job creation though local infrastructure improvement. The Governor created a five-year, $28 million "Linked Development" grant program, which is designed around the concept of linking, or leveraging, a community's existing resources and potential investments to a broader economic development strategy. "Examples of linked development could include bundling transportation funding to areas of job surplus in order to tie together areas of high unemployment and areas of worker shortage; linking affordable housing investments to areas that have low unemployment or worker shortages; leveraging funds to provide infrastructure upgrades for remediated brownfields."[20]

Spurring Reinvestment in Existing, Economically Challenged Areas

Neglected and blighted land negatively affects property values and deters revitalization and community development. Run-down and vacant buildings also have the potential to affect neighborhood safety, often playing host to drug trafficking and other illegal activities. Reinvestment strategies target these underutilized properties to spur investment and revitalize core areas that are rich in housing stock, transportation, and downtown amenities. Two notable efforts that states can use as models for reinvestment are the Main Street Program and a similar joint effort by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the National Main Street Center called the Center for Commercial Revitalization.

Main Street Program Revitalizes Downtowns

Over the eight-year life of the Main Street Program, nearly 94,000 buildings have been renovated through a loan program to refurbish blighted properties. (National Main Street Center 2004). On average, for every dollar spent to operate the program at the local level, more than $40 has been generated for reinvestment. Further, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has teamed with the National Main Street Center (NMSC) to develop a similar initiative Center for Commercial Revitalization, specifically targeting urban business districts without access to traditional commercial financing. In just four years, nearly 400 new businesses were opened creating nearly 1,500 new jobs (Carlson 2003).

Michigan faces dual pressures from the continuing loss of its historic manufacturing base and the loss of working farmlands to development. Governor Jennifer Granholm is working closely with the legislature to craft a comprehensive land use strategy to support economic and community revitalization. Enactment of House Bill 4284, the Joint Municipal Planning Act, has granted municipalities the authority to establish joint planning commissions with neighboring jurisdictions to better coordinate their planning activities.[21] A bipartisan Michigan Land Use Leadership Council, formed by Governor Granholm and legislators in early 2003, to recommend ways to improve land use and development throughout the state encouraged making better use of existing public infrastructure by encouraging investment in previously inhabited areas.

Other laws address the issue of planned unit developments, amending existing zoning ordinances to promote mixed use developments and preserve open space.[22] Also enacted with the support of the Governor were six bills granting a Land Bank Fast Track Authority to streamline the process of putting

Governor's Council Recommends Land Use Solutions

Governor Granholm created the bipartisan Michigan Land Use Leadership Council to identify the causes of inefficient land use patterns and recommend policies to minimize their impact. The Council's recommendations include:

- removing barriers to private investment in areas with existing infrastructure;
- identifying "commerce centers" where state spending can be used to support areas with established infrastructure
- preserving the natural environment;
- reusing abandoned and underutilized properties;
- encouraging mixed use development in core urban areas;
- providing tools so that local governments can make land use decisions that result in more compact, mixed-use development; and
- providing incentives for interagency cooperation.

Source: Michigan Land Use Leadership Council, "Michigan's Land, Michigan's Future: Final Report of the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council," 15 August 2003, Prepared for Governor Granholm and the Michigan Legislature. (www.michiganlanduse.org/MLULC_FINAL_REPORT_0803.pdf). Accessed May 13, 2004.

tax-delinquent properties back in active use, with the intent of encouraging investment in and revitalization of existing urban areas. Other statutes have authorized increased funding for brownfield redevelopment and the creation of a local administrative process to address zoning violations that affect "quality of life".

Pennsylvania Governor Rendell signed a major economic stimulus package in early 2004 to foster comprehensive community revitalization projects around deteriorating infrastructure. Assisting businesses and local governments with the preparation of sites for new development projects in struggling areas is a major state priority. By providing technical assistance, grants and loans, Pennsylvania's stimulus package will increase investments in the state's Main Street and Elm Street programs, supporting infrastructure maintenance and development in town centers and surrounding neighborhoods. The package will also redevelop and reuse blighted and vacant properties to promote neighborhood stability. The Homeownership Choice program will also be bolstered to provide financing of new single family housing in blighted areas.

In addition, passage of a proposed ballot initiative would provide funding to projects that advance the following state priorities: 1) protection and preservation of farmland and open space; 2) clean up of hazardous sites to get them "shovel ready" for development; and 3) urban revitalization. Under this initiative, urban redevelopment funds would go to park and riverfront restoration, housing and mixed use development, and incentives to promote "smart growth."[23]

Enhanced Quality of Life

Effectively managing development and efficiently targeting resources to established areas can also have a positive effect on regional quality of life. As population and jobs disperse, undeveloped land is disappearing. From 1982-1997, the United States population grew by 17 percent, while urbanized land grew by 47 percent.[24]. Growing distances between home and work result in increasing road congestion and longer commute times, exacting a toll on families and wallets. In 2001, the cost of congestion reached $69.5 billion and 3.5 billion hours of lost productivity.[25] In responding to these challenges, state quality of life strategies often have multiple objectives including shortening commute times, increasing homeownership, revitalization of specific neighborhoods, and promoting environmental quality.

Common fix-it-first strategies that states have employed to address quality-of-life issues are:

- Creating incentives for communities to pursue coordinated development goals.
- Removal of barriers to the construction and rehabilitation of schools in established areas.

Assisting Communities in Defining Development Goals

By providing assistance and incentives to encourage communities to create development plans, a state can ensure that community needs are met and unwanted land consumption does not occur. Community planning, especially that which links plans across local jurisdictions, helps to set forth a vision for the state's future, including its quality of life.

Delaware Governor Minner's Livable Delaware initiative links state development funding to goals of preserving the state's quality of life and community. Utilizing a fix-it-first strategy, the Governor has altered the development process to reduce bureaucracy and support development in locations where the state can efficiently serve growth.[26] New legislation requires each of Delaware's fifty-seven incorporated municipalities and three counties to create and maintain comprehensive development plans. New laws also authorize a transfer of development rights program, tax-increment financing, and a 'safe routes to school' initiative. In addition, the state has streamlined the development approval process, bringing in developers and relevant state agencies early in project planning processes to mitigate potential issues and consequences. Finally, Governor Minner has championed a "Smart Schools" policy initiative in order to promote school rehabilitation and construction in locations that are in accordance with state land use strategies.

Enabling Communities to Rehabilitate and Build High Quality Schools

South Carolina's strategy centers on fixing its existing schools first. The state is coping with a number of problems related to schools and communities' quality of life that is affected by school quality:

- the loss of older schools while new schools are being built at the suburban fringe;
- the health and well-being of kids and families, which are affected by the fact that children are car-dependent and cannot walk to school; and
- the weakening of social and civic capital within existing neighborhoods (National Trust 2002).

While one study suggests that renovation typically costs between $60 and $90 per square foot and new construction about $120 to $160 per square foot,[27] outdated state and local regulations make it difficult or even cost-prohibitive to bring older schools up to the standards of an ill-suited code. For instance, hundreds of North Carolina schools built with wood framing, which the state deems "unsafe" in new school construction, are often ineligible for building maintenance funds, which encourages districts to build new.

A recent report on South Carolina schools lends support to the focus on investing in improvements to the state's older, neighborhood schools. The report found that students are four times more likely to walk to schools built before 1983 than they are to schools built after 1983.[28] The study also found that school sites have grown in size over time: school sites built after 1971 are thirty-three percent larger per student and those built after 1983 are forty-one percent larger per student. In fact, South Carolina schools are often built to a size well in excess of the state minimum.

South Carolina's Governor Mark Sanford is reviewing the 62 recommendations of a Governor's Task Force formed to "enhance the quality of life for present and future generations of South Carolinians through the stewardship of our commonly held values of place."[29] In a bold action to preserve neighborhood-scale schools, Governor Sanford signed legislation (Act 87) in 2003 to eliminate acreage requirements for new school construction. The state will explicitly favor restoration and construction of "community-based" small schools over new construction of "remote mega schools." It is hoped that the spillover benefits from supporting smaller neighborhoods schools will also serve to bolster the stability of existing communities.

The Governor's Task Force Recommendations to improve quality of life in South Carolina also include:
1) Designate priority investment areas for state funding resources to localities;
2) Adapt major development projects for conformity with land use plans;
3) Maintain existing roads, before building new highways; and
4) Encourage new methods to support downtown revitalization, infill and brownfield redevelopment and private sector development of affordable housing.

Conclusion

While the seven states profiled in this issue brief have used different policy strategies to implement a fix-it-first approach in their state, they have all done so to achieve three goals:

- Spend funds more efficiently.
- Increase economic competitiveness.
- Enhance quality of life.

Strategies the states employed to meet these goals include:

- Prioritizing state investment around existing infrastructure and facilitating development in areas most suitable for growth.
- Coordinating planning in state agencies whose projects impact community development, including departments of transportation, economic development, environmental protection, housing, and more.
- Investing in existing assets and communities with a rich history and vibrant mix of residences, jobs, and retail. Such investments can spur job creation, attract new businesses and knowledge workers, and maintain a high quality of life.
- Involving communities in the planning process to define how area land use and development will occur.
- Considering school quality and siting. As these investments play a large factor in demand for growth and development, policies that define the placement and character of the school construction are becoming an important consideration in states' infrastructure investment decisions.

In a time when states are challenged with shrinking revenue bases and increases in mandatory spending, thoughtfully channeling development expenditures through careful planning, design, and coordination can benefit governments, businesses, and local communities while being fiscally responsible. State resources can be coordinated and targeted to address multiple policy objectives. A fix-it-first strategy allows states to plan for growth and development by leveraging their limited resources and maximizing past investments and previously built assets. Following a strategy that reflects state-specific needs, priorities and targets of opportunity, states are able to support job creation, workforce development, reinvestment in declining areas, environmental health, and quality of life while more efficiently utilizing state resources.

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