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Calif. Aims to Concentrate Growth to Cut Use of Cars

High-Density Development May Get Dibs on Funds

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LOS ANGELES -- California is poised to pass the first law in the nation linking greenhouse gas emissions to urban planning, a departure from the growth approach that spawned the state's car culture and urban sprawl.

The measure, known as SB375, aims to give existing and new high-density centers where people live, work and shop top priority in receiving local, state and federal transportation funds. The idea is that such developments check sprawl and ease commutes, in turn cutting the car pollution wafting through the Golden State.

Authored by Sen. Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento), the bill reflects California's push to slash its greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by 2020. Sponsors say the measure is part of a much-needed growth policy for a state whose population is expected to swell to 50 million from the current 38 million in two decades.

"Many places across the country have realized that if you just build spread-out developments, with the expectation that everyone will have to drive for everything, it should be no surprise when the result is excessive burning of gasoline," said David Goldberg, spokesman for Smart Growth America, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit group that helps cities and towns plan more workable, environmentally friendly growth.

"SB375 breaks new ground, because it specifically links that pattern of development to excess driving and what we need to do to address climate change," he said.

Two years of intense negotiations have satisfied several critics of the bill and galvanized support from an unusual alliance of environmentalists, home builders, local governments and affordable-housing advocates.

But other home builders and several business groups are among the bill's opponents. They say it adds a new layer to an already complicated approval process, opens projects up to delays and frivolous litigation, and could threaten the state's economy.

"It will hamper or completely stop infrastructure throughout the state. It will jeopardize buildings, the transfer of goods and services," said Tom Holsman, chief executive of the Associated General Contractors of California, which is joined by the California Chamber of Commerce, the California Grocers Association and the California Retailers Association in opposing the bill.

"Basically, you're looking at all of California's economy, not just the housing industry," Holsman said. He added that despite the association's opposition to the bill, it supports Steinberg's environmental goals.

The state's legislature recently green-lighted the measure, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R), who aims to make California a trendsetter in fighting global warming, is expected to sign it into law once the state balances its long-overdue budget.

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If he does, the state's Air Resources Board will set emission-reduction targets for 17 major metropolitan planning organizations responsible for housing and transportation projects. A separate bill, also expected to be signed by the governor, would designate financial resources to these organizations.

Steinberg said that those who veer from the targets won't be penalized, but that by 2012 transportation subsidies will almost entirely go to projects that comply -- an incentive he called a "hard carrot."

California is the 12th-largest emitter of carbon in the world, with cars and trucks emitting about one-third of the state's greenhouse gases. In 2006, it became the first state to impose a cap on all greenhouse gas emissions.

Some other states similarly striving to combat global warming have been eyeing California's latest legislation.

"We've been watching it closely," said Peter Kasabach, executive director for New Jersey Future, a statewide research and policy organization advocating smart growth. "It combines three different elements of housing, transportation and land use into one package, which is something that a lot of different groups around the country are trying to do."

Kasabach called the measure's broad support among usually contentious groups a coup but added that he is not sure whether the revised bill would have much effect. "Usually, the tradeoff of getting everyone to agree is watered-down legislation. The question that remains to be seen is what impacts come out of this legislation," he said.

Tom Adams, president of the California League of Conservation Voters, one of the bill's co-sponsors, said the legislation would significantly affect a state where affordable housing comes with a two-hour commute and the number of vehicle miles traveled is growing much faster than the population.

"This will be a watershed moment for car culture in California," Adams said. Without reducing the number of miles people drive every day, he added, the state cannot hope to live up to its environmental policies.

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