A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Regional Planning Agency Behavior

Charlie B. Tyer
A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Regional Planning Agency Behavior

CHARLIE B. TYER
The University of South Carolina

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the early 1960s dramatic and novel changes appeared in American federalism. The federal government during this period identified what it conceived to be regional problems at the substate level and assumed the responsibility of encouraging regional approaches to these problems. Between 1961 and 1972, 24 federal programs were enacted which utilized an areawide approach to local government problems.1 These programs required a regional approach by their requirements and incentives for “multicounty comprehensive or functional planning, grant-in-aid review and administrative districting.”2 Federal legislation also led to the creation nationwide of over 1,800 areawide planning districts at the substate level for such activities as law enforcement, health, manpower, air quality control, economic development, and various other functions.

The focus of this article is to discuss one aspect of substate regionalism: substate planning and development districts. The framework used for this discussion, however, is not restricted to this one variant of regional planning behavior. Rather, the framework is suggested for use in the study of other regional agencies also. The effort of my research here is to seek to discover determinants of regional planning agency behavior and to offer a suggestion for explaining that behavior in terms of a theoretical framework. The use of substate planning and development districts as a focal point in this article is due to my belief that they deserve particular attention by scholars.

Substate planning and development districts, state mandated substate districts, or state designated districts are official multicounty districts established by state legislation, gubernatorial executive order, or both. As of early 1976, 45 states had delineated such districts. These districts need to be distinguished from other substate regional organizations, however. The ACIR, in its multivolume work on substate regionalism in the United States, identified four varieties of substate regions. These were special districts, federally encouraged single-purpose areawide units, regional councils, and state mandated district systems. Special districts are the oldest and most numerous of substate regional units. As special purpose forms of government, they have been resorted to as a relatively easy means of dealing with areawide services and problems without drastically altering the existing local government landscape. Federally encouraged single-purpose areawide units have resulted from federal assistance programs which use an areawide approach to community problem solving. In 1972, 24 such programs existed. Problem areas covered by these programs ranged from rural development to solid waste disposal. Regional councils differ from the above two types of substate regions by their multi-functional character. Four categories of regional councils may be identified. These are: (1) councils of governments; (2) economic development districts; (3) regional planning commissions; and (4) hybrid and special planning districts, such as the Atlanta Regional Commission and the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council. State mandated district systems, or substate planning and development districts, compose the final variety of substate regional organization. These are multicounty groupings of local government jurisdictions delineated by state government. Upon examination, one will discover that the four varieties of substate regions identified by the ACIR are not always mutually exclusive. Thus, substate planning and development districts may have multiple designations and may assume the character of a regional council, as well as being used by various federal programs as single-purpose areawide units. Hence, a discussion of state mandated districts may include the examination of other substate regional units also since a district may carry several designations. In many states, for example, the state mandated districts are also designated as Economic Development Districts by the federal government.

The initiative for the creation of substate planning and development districts came from the federal government. President Johnson, in 1966, requested that federal agencies encourage utilization of common boundaries for planning and development regions or districts if any existed.
Circular A-80, issued in 1967, was the first formal attempt by the federal government to deal with the quandary of substate regionalism. (The rationale had evolved from earlier federal action, however, such as the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 which established review procedures for metropolitan area planning and coordination.) Circular A-95, issued pursuant to the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act of 1968, established review and comment procedures for federal grants and encouraged the creation of state, regional, and metropolitan clearinghouses. But, most important for our discussion, Part IV of Circular A-95 stated that the federal government should encourage the states to delineate and establish substate planning and development districts in order to provide a common geographic base for federal, state, and local development programs. Federal agencies, moreover, were directed to conform their boundaries for regional programs to these districts as far as possible. Thus was established the federal position of formally encouraging the creation of statewide networks of substate districts.

The research currently available on state mandated districts is varied and proceeds from different emphases. In a 1973 publication, the ACIR listed three main purposes for substate planning and development districts:

1. To offer a common set of geographic boundaries for use in data collection and for carrying out various federal, state, and local programs.
2. To offer a basis for reorganization of state operations along regional lines, such as planning, budgeting, and service delivery.
3. To bring some understanding and coordination to confusing boundaries and competing organizations at the regional level.

From a national perspective, the ACIR saw the primary functions of these districts as planning, operating programs and services, conducting A-95 review and comment, and to coordinate federal programs at the regional level. To evaluate the behavior of these substate districts, the ACIR conducted case studies in 12 states and based its judgment upon four criteria:

1. Regional planning
2. Regional coordination
3. State use of districts
4. Federal use of districts

---

The overall evaluation of the ACIR was rather negative. The emphasis of the ACIR research, however, was on evaluation rather than upon explanation of the behavior of substate districts. No theoretical framework was utilized to organize the information gathered concerning the districts. The resulting study, although a valuable source of information, offers scant assistance if one is attempting to explain why substate districts, or regional agencies behave in a particular manner.

Other published material which reflects a state and local government perspective fails to offer a framework for understanding substate planning and development district behavior. For example, in 1972 seven state and local government organizations issued a report on substate planning and development districts. In the report the sponsors called for the clarification of federal policy toward substate regions and the strengthening of the state and local government role in substate planning and development. The emphasis was not upon understanding district behavior but upon policy clarification.

A departure from the above two publications is found in a study of state mandated districts in Tennessee, however. Glass hypothesized that the planning outputs of substate districts in Tennessee would be influenced by politics, which was defined as the attitudes towards regionalism and planning held by the districts' policy board, i.e., executive committee. (This board is composed of mostly local public officials, usually mayors and county chief executives.) The analytical framework used by Glass was an ideal conception of the planning process which was compared with the actual planning process with its resulting output in five Tennessee districts. Four determinants of district planning outputs were examined. These were (1) regional characteristics which included district size, homogeneity, geography, and nodality; (2) federal and state legislative mandates; (3) the influence of the executive director of the district which included his planning ethos (or philosophy of planning), his role, and the relationship between ethos and role; and (4) the attitudinal environment (or politics) of the district using the policy board as the unit of analysis. Glass concluded that the influence of the district executive director and the district's attitudinal environment were the most important determinants of district output or activity. Three propositions were advanced by Glass concerning regional planning in substate districts. These stated that (1) districts as new organizations

6 J. J. Glass, Regional Planning and Politics: Development Districts in Tennessee (Knoxville, Tenn.: The University of Tennessee, 1973).
would have to provide services to their member governments to survive; (2) the attitudinal environment of the district would influence the type of planning produced; and (3) only after strong support was established for the district would the influence of the executive director and his staff become a significant influence upon the district’s planning output.

The Glass study is particularly significant because of the emphasis it placed upon examining the planning behavior (conceptualized as planning output) of substate planning districts. Research accomplished prior to and even following the Glass study has not addressed directly the question of determinants of regional planning agency behavior. This is the question which this article will address. To do so a theoretical framework will be utilized in order to organize data and examine relationships between key variables in the framework. The framework used is drawn from the literature of planning theory and overcomes some conceptual problems of previous research. Specifically, these derive from the focus of the Glass study upon the internal environment of substate districts, i.e., the director and policy board, as well as the restriction of the concept of planning behavior to planning outputs. As will be seen, planning outputs are but one element of planning methods, which is a broader concept than reflected in previous research and constitutes only one manifestation of planning behavior.

REGIONAL PLANNING AND PLANNING THEORY

The theoretical framework used here is suggested by Alden and Morgan when they observe that planning theory is concerned with four major variables: planning methods, societal environment, the planner, and the planning system. A fifth variable, planning behavior, is implied by the above authors and is added to the list. Thus, the argument is that planning theory has attempted to explain planning behavior in terms of four variables. This is illustrated in Figure 1. The influence attributed to these variables varies, however, with different writers. Friedman has written that planning behavior is significantly influenced by the societal environment of planning. Bolan has hypothesized that the societal environment of planning influences the methods of planning and as a result determines planning behavior. Faludi has made a similar argument by asserting that the environment of planning influences the method of

planning thereby determining planning behavior. Burby argues that the societal environment influences both planning structures (which Alden and Morgan refer to as the planning system) and approaches to planning (or planning methods). Glass, on the other hand, argues that the influence of the planner (i.e., executive director) and the attitudinal environment of the planning agency are the most important factors in explaining the relative influence of the four variables upon planning behavior. Attempts to explore the relationships of the key variables are complicated by the fact that none of the above writers have examined all four key variables at the same time. In addition, the concepts involved are not used consistently in every case so that one finds ambiguity concerning the meaning of such concepts as societal environmental, planning methods, and the planning system. Faludi, for example, views the societal environment in terms of level and pace of development, norms and values, politics and administrative structure, the institutional structure of planning, and cleavages in society. Bolan, on the other hand, views the institutional structure of planning as part of the planning system which also incorporates planning methods which Alden and Morgan view as a separate variable. The lack of consistency in terms results

12 Faludi, op. cit.
13 Boland, op. cit.; Alden and Morgan, op. cit.
in confusion. For purposes of clarity and analysis the key variables discussed above are modified in order to offer a theoretical framework for the analysis of regional planning behavior. Rather than five variables, this writer suggests the use of six key variables, i.e., societal environment, the planner, policy board character, planning methods, strategies, and program character. (See Figure 2.) The latter three variables are viewed as manifestations of planning behavior, both individually and collectively.

**SOCIETAL ENVIRONMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>↓ Planning</th>
<th>↓ Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Board Character</td>
<td>Planning Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Planner</td>
<td>District Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program Character</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 2**

*Key Variables in Regional Planning Agency Behavior*

The first key variable, societal environment, refers to the external environment of a planning agency. This environment may be viewed in terms of three components: the federal decision field, the state decision field, and the local decision field.\(^{14}\) (See Figure 3.) The local decision field is the unit or units of government which must adopt and implement the plans of a planning agency. In the case of multicounty substate districts this would be the cities and counties which comprise the district and which have the authority to adopt and implement district plans. This concept can be operationalized by examining the socio-physical character of the local decision field and its attitudinal environment (or as Glass refers to it, the political environment). The socio-physical character of the local decision field includes such factors as the popula-

\(^{14}\) The term decision field is adapted from Bolan, *op. cit.*
The Societal Environment

tion size of local governments, the urban-rural character of the districts and their member governments, racial and ethnic characteristics of local governments, and income data. Glass used the notion of regional characteristics to refer to these indicators. Other factors can be used to refer to the socio-physical character of the districts/regional agencies, of course, but these are singled out by this writer based upon his familiarity with substate districts and research experience. (Other researchers may add others.)

The attitudinal environment of the local decision field refers to the attitudes of local government officials toward the concepts of regionalism and planning (concepts used by Glass also). The assumption is that the socio-physical character and attitudinal environment of the local decision field, as a part of the societal environment of a planning agency, may
influence the other key variables and the planning behavior of an agency.\textsuperscript{15}

The remaining components of the societal environment refer to organizations and institutions which interact with the planning agency apart from the agency's local decision field. Specifically, these refer to the federal and state governments. The federal decision field refers to federal programs and policy concerning substate districts, and the state decision field to state programs and policy affecting the districts. Both federal and state programs and policy refer to such factors as the level of funding provided to the districts, the number of programs sponsored by such funding, and program requirements. The assumption is that the individual components of the decision field, which form the societal environment, may influence the other key variables and planning behavior perhaps through constraints and inducements, for example, which encourage or discourage certain forms of planning behavior.

In addition, as Figure 3 indicates, the components of the societal environment are interrelated. The federal decision field, for example, impacts upon the districts unilaterally as well as through the states. In a similar fashion, the state decision field affects the districts directly as well as through the local decision field. Thus, the components of the societal environment can present complex patterns of interaction which are difficult to identify regarding sources of influence. Nevertheless, we can attempt to delineate the separate spheres of influence with the recognition that some caution is required in the elaboration of the interface of the components of the variable societal environment.

The second key variable is the planner. Examination of the planner can focus upon the director and/or staff of the planning agency. When reference is made to the planning staff, of course, an appropriate distinction can be made in order to avoid confusion. Several attributes of the planner can be considered as potentially influencing the behavior of a substate district/regional planning agency. Emphasis could be placed upon ascertaining the planner's planning ethos, for example. Planning ethos, as a concept, refers to the philosophical orientation of the planner toward planning. The dimensions of planning discussed under planning methods below can be used to portray the position of the planner regarding what planning \textit{should be}. The assumption is that the ethos of the

\textsuperscript{15} Some evidence exists to suggest that the physical character and attitudinal environment of a regional agency may influence its behavior. See R. Warren, "Federal-Local Development Planning: Scale Effects in Representation and Policy Making," \textit{Public Administration Review}, 30 (November/December, 1970), 584-595; and Glass, \textit{op. cit}. \textsuperscript{16}
planner may be associated with behavior variables, such as planning methods, strategies, or program character in a distinctive manner. Other attributes of the planner can also be examined to observe their association with his ethos and the other variables. These include the age and education of the planner, ideological stance, previous work experience, professional orientation, and role. It is assumed that many of these attributes will interact with the planner's ethos. Professional orientation, for example, refers to the education and level of professional activity on the part of the planner, such as membership in professional societies and attendance at professional meetings. Presumably a higher level of professional orientation would be associated with a distinctive ethos. The association of role with planning behavior has received some attention which suggests that a particular role is found in certain types of societal environment. These attributes should, therefore, provide a means of discussing the planner and his relationship with the behavior variables.

The third key variable is policy board character. This variable is derived from the Glass study and reflects, with the planner, the internal environment of the planning agency. Conceptually it could have been included in the variable planning system cited earlier. The variable planning system, however, is so multidimensional that it lacks a clear usage in relevant literature. Hence, it is discarded by this writer and other variables are used instead, one of them being policy board character.

Policy board character refers to the attitudes of the district/regional agency policy board toward regionalism and planning, and their planning ethos. Glass found that the policy board's attitudes toward regionalism and planning were important influences on planning behavior. What he did not examine was the relationship of the attitudinal environment of the policy board to the local decision field. As a result, to assert that the policy board's attitudes affect district behavior may overlook the possibility that the local decision field, as an aspect of the societal environment of a district, significantly influences the policy board thereby influencing the district.

The concept of planning ethos was also used by Glass but not for the policy board, nor was it elaborated fully. The framework proposed here examines the planning ethos of the policy board on the assumption that it could be significant in influencing other variables in the regional

planning agency. Again, ethos refers to the planning philosophy of a respondent as to what planning should be rather than what it is. The dimensions of planning used to discuss planning methods can be used to assess ethos as well as planning method. The distinction to be noted is that ethos refers to a notion of should be and refers to a philosophical position. If Glass is correct, the ethos of the policy board should be reflected in district behavior variables, assuming that the policy board has some influence upon district behavior.

The fourth key variable is planning methods. Glass implied the use of this variable in his usage of planning outputs. For our purposes, planning methods are viewed as a manifestation of planning behavior and is operationalized by examining the methods of planning actually used by a district/regional agency conceptualized along three dimensions of planning. The concept of planning dimensions is used by Faludi to discuss planning methods (which he refers to as modes). For purposes of this analysis the dimensions have been adapted and expanded to provide a more thorough examination of planning methods. The dimensions used are certainty, scope and value formation. Each of these is viewed in terms of different methods of planning which can be used and which are cited in planning literature. It is assumed that collectively these dimensions provide a means of describing the methods of planning used by a planning agency.

The certainty dimension refers to the level of preciseness which planning can attain. Three methods are examined: blueprint planning, policy planning, and process planning. Blueprint planning stresses the production of "a plan" and assumes that few uncertainties exist about the plan's leading to the desired outcome. This method of planning was emphasized in the early periods of American planning. Recent years have been characterized by criticisms of the method, however, due to its ignorance of the politics of planning and the dynamics of the decision process. Policy planning has been advocated as a more realistic method of planning. Rather than emphasize the production of a physical planning document, or plan, policy planning emphasizes the necessity of rational development of government policies which are coordinated

18 Ibid., pp. 131-149.
in order to achieve desired results. Hence, an agency might emphasize the analysis of existing government policies and the development of new policies for achieving objectives rather than concentrate upon a document per se. Policy planning implies less certainty about the outcome of planning in the absence of attention to the dynamics of the decision process. Planning as a process is also a reaction to blueprint planning and has gained favor in planning literature as a more realistic method of planning also.21 This approach emphasizes the continuous nature of planning and the necessity of modifying plans and policies as new information is developed and becomes available and as the planning situation changes. Thus, objectives may be reformulated and priorities altered as time passes. Plans are not fixed blueprints but are flexible, fluid tools for guiding change and analyzing policies. A document called a plan may not even exist. Hence, the process is emphasized out of a recognition that many uncertainties exist which must be dealt with as they arise. Emphasis is placed upon the flow of information on the assumption that increased rationality will result from the interjection of information and systematic analysis into the decision process. These three methods of planning clarify the dimension of certainty in planning and provide a continuum which ranges from extreme certainty regarding end attainment, to less certainty which emphasizes policies over plans, to great uncertainty which emphasizes the process of planning.

The second dimension of planning, scope, refers to the degree of comprehensiveness sought by planning. Four methods are examined, again presented along a continuum. These are comprehensive planning, program planning, incremental planning, and ad hoc opportunistic planning. Comprehensive planning has traditionally received much emphasis in planning literature. Its usage refers to the identification of planning goals, the specification of problems, the examination of a thorough range of alternatives to achieve goals and each alternative’s consequences, and the selection of the best alternative.22 In addition, the usage of the term comprehensive planning implies that all functions of government are covered by planning, including physical, economic, and social planning. Criticisms of the comprehensive ideal are extensive. As a result, the term may be used at times to refer to comprehensive program coverage rather than to the identification and evaluation of all alternatives and consequences.

Program planning is a method of planning which does not seek to be comprehensive in terms of program coverage but rather emphasizes one or a few programs of government, such as economic development planning, human services planning, and so forth. The examination of alternatives and consequences within these areas may or may not be comprehensive. The crucial distinction is the emphasis upon specific programs. This method is referred to by Glass as functional planning but since that term is used to refer to another dimension of planning below, another concept is needed to assure clarity in terms.

Incremental planning refers to a method of planning which rejects the ideal of comprehensiveness and works instead with segmental and incremental problems as they arise. It refers to the description of existing problems and how they might be remedied without attempting to articulate general goals which are desirable. Objectives are sought which are appropriate to existing means rather than means sought for desirable objectives.

The ad hoc opportunistic method of planning refers to a variation of incremental planning in which problems are dealt with on a selective basis as they arise. The incremental character of planning is retained but no attempt is made to plan in areas which show little promise of reward or which would pose perceived threats to the planning agency. Thus, the selective opportunistic approach to planning varies from an incremental approach which attempts to plan for problems as they arise. Once again the methods of planning in the scope dimension lay along a continuum. These range from a very broad scope to a very narrow scope of planning and from an idealized rational approach to an incremental approach to planning and problem solving.

The third dimension, value formation, refers to the relationship between ends and means in planning and the extent of involvement of the planner in the elaboration of planning goals. The normative method of planning refers to active involvement of the planner in goal formation so that he is not merely concerned with the means of achieving goals but also their selection and elaboration. This participation in value formation extends to a range of planning programs and is oriented toward some concept of the public interest. Advocacy planning refers to a modification of normative planning in which the planner seeks to aid in goal formation for a select group or community within the planning jurisdiction rather than for the community-at-large.23 Hence, no conception

of a broad public interest is used but rather the interests of a segment of the public. Both advocacy and normative planning, however, place the planner in a position of formulating goals for a specific population or region so that he plays an active role concerning value formation. Collaborative planning also involves the planner in value formation but his participation differs in that he formulates values with his clientele rather than for them. Thus, the resulting goals reflect not the planner’s conception of desirable values but his clientele group’s formulation. Functional planning refers to the acceptance of the ends of planning as given with the attention of the planner focused solely upon the means of accomplishing established goals. Again a continuum is presented which depicts the methods of planning concerning value formation ranging from active participation for the community-at-large, to participation for select groups, to participation with a clientele group, to acceptance of the clientele group’s values.

The three dimensions of planning discussed above provide a convenient method of conceptualizing planning methods. It is assumed that various methods of planning used by a planning district/regional agency would be associated with the other variables in distinctive ways. Thus, if Glass is correct, the methods of planning used by a district should reflect the director’s ethos and influence and possibly that of the policy board as well.

The fifth key variable and second behavior variable is district program character. This variable is much more inclusive than planning methods because it refers to the general mission and function of substate districts, of which planning is only one portion or work element. To examine this variable, two approaches can be taken. First, since the districts are planning agencies, the activity areas in which they have prepared plans can be examined, such as economic development, aging, and law enforcement. Second, their general program character can be discussed and their programs categorized by functions, such as planning, technical assistance, coordination and so forth. In addition, the emphasis these functions receive in terms of district priority can be assessed. The assumption is that the program character of the districts—when viewed using the framework provided here in relation to such variables as the societal environment, the planner, and policy board character—will reflect the relative influence of those variables and, if previous research is correct, indicate that the planner and policy board (i.e., internal environment) are key factors in determining the districts’ program character, thereby influencing their behavior.
Finally, the sixth key variable and third behavior variable is planning strategy. This variable can be operationalized in terms of general strategies which a district follows in order to carry out district programs. A typology of strategies could be developed as follows:

1. A service strategy. This strategy emphasizes the provision of services by the district/regional agency to its clientele. Regional objectives and plans are deemphasized while the clientele's conception of problems and objectives are followed.

2. An allocative strategy. This strategy assumes that regional objectives are given or ill defined and attempts to coordinate and allocate resources in the district in an optimal manner. Thus, the district is not primarily a service agency. Rather, it attempts to play an active role in the allocation of resources within the district through its programs and activities.

3. An innovative strategy. This strategy places the district in a position of formulating regional objectives and advocating those objectives through its programs. The ideal planning situation is approximated in this strategy with the district elaborating goals, surveying alternatives for attainment, and devising plans and/or policies.²⁴

The planning strategy variable, like the two preceding variables—methods and program character—is felt to be one of the more visible outward manifestations of planning agency behavior. Thus, the interaction of such variables as the societal environment, the planner, and the policy board can be examined to assess the relative influence of these variables. Again, previous research findings can be reexamined to observe whether the internal environment variables are the key influences upon regional planning agency behavior.

As noted previously, however, previous research has examined only the internal environment of substate districts' policy board attitudes and the attributes of the planner. Moreover, the conceptualization of planning behavior as planning output (or the scope dimension of planning methods) dealt with only one aspect of planning behavior. This framework, therefore, builds upon previous research by using a broader theoretical framework in which to search for determinations of planning behavior. In so doing we have (1) increased the number of variables which reflect planning behavior, and (2) expanded the concept of environment to more adequately treat both internal and external en-

environmental influences upon behavior. With these modifications the findings of previous research and scholars can be reexamined and the determinants of planning behavior in substate districts/regional planning agencies more adequately assessed.

The framework outlined here is offered as a suggestion for use in studying regional planning agency behavior. Key variables are identified and previous research findings noted. With the increasing use of regional planning agencies by federal and state government, and especially the use of state mandated substate districts, it behoves us as scholars to examine these organizations and develop explanations for their behavior for use by students as well as public policy makers.