

Urban Land Institute backs sprawl-limiting law

Robert Selna, San Francisco Chronicle, 6-4-10

A developer-backed research group with 30,000 members worldwide has endorsed a landmark California law that aims to reduce vehicle miles traveled and emissions by pushing dense urban development and limiting sprawl.

The Urban Land Institute, which has an office in San Francisco and elsewhere in the state, says that SB375 could improve the ecology and boost the economies of the state's urban regions.

The group's support of the legislation contributes to the bill's legitimacy as preliminary regional targets to cut carbon dioxide from cars and trucks are due at the end of the month, but also as some are calling for the delay of a broader state climate change bill until the economy improves.

"ULI members are the professionals who build communities and who this bill matters most to," said Kate White, executive director of the institute's San Francisco District Council. "It's ironic that the real estate business community has been fairly absent from the discussions about this bill, because it's a land use and transportation bill that will have a big impact on how the region grows."

SB375 was signed into law in 2008 and has the support of environmental groups, builders and some business groups. It is opposed by other business associations and some Republican lawmakers who say it would limit consumer choice for housing.

The legislation directs metropolitan planning organizations to meet targets set by state air regulators for reducing carbon emissions related to vehicle miles driven, as opposed to fuel types or other automobile technologies. The idea is to discourage driving by concentrating development in urban areas near transit, jobs and retail, and by planning suburbs more efficiently.

The law does not prohibit new single-family housing, but it encourages cities, counties and developers to build projects that conform to so-called smart-growth goals. The incentives include help with securing funding, direct payments to developers or planners, and an easier environmental approval process for new construction.

SB375 is the land use and planning component of AB32, the 2006 state law that calls for a 25 percent reduction in the state's carbon emissions by 2020 and is the model for national legislation now working its way through Congress.

Republican gubernatorial front-runner Meg Whitman has said she will immediately suspend AB32 for at least a year if elected. It is unclear how a suspension of AB32 would affect SB375.