

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

Planning Knowledge and the Regulatory Hydra

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6gp6h7bk>

Journal

Journal of the American Planning Association, 86(2)

ISSN

0194-4363

Authors

Monkkonen, Paavo
Manville, Michael

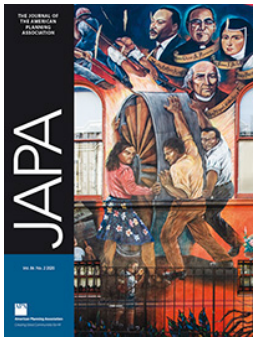
Publication Date

2020-04-02

DOI

10.1080/01944363.2020.1725255

Peer reviewed



Planning Knowledge and the Regulatory Hydra

Paavo Monkkonen & Michael Manville

To cite this article: Paavo Monkkonen & Michael Manville (2020) Planning Knowledge and the Regulatory Hydra, Journal of the American Planning Association, 86:2, 268-269, DOI: [10.1080/01944363.2020.1725255](https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1725255)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1725255>



Published online: 31 Mar 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 128



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Commentaries

Planning Knowledge and the Regulatory Hydra

Paavo Monkkonen  Michael Manville 

Land use regulation is important, but measuring it is hard. How can researchers know whether a city is friendly or hostile to development? Surveys are one time-honored way, but Lewis and Marantz (2019), in their important and long-overdue contribution, throw some cold water on this approach. They compare multiple surveys of the same city and find significant inconsistencies in responses to seemingly objective questions. In one instance, they show cities that reported having an urban growth boundary in one survey reported not having one in another—in the same year.

This finding is, perhaps unfortunately, not unique. O'Neill, Gualco-Nelson, and Biber (2019) compare survey responses from eight cities about the entitlement process to actual project data from those cities. They find the survey responses mostly understate the average time to entitle a project. In Los Angeles (CA), for example, actual entitlements took twice as long as surveys suggested. Murray and Schuetz (2019), meanwhile, analyze regulation in multifamily housing production, relying in part on survey estimates of a city's share of land zoned for multifamily development. They find many respondents estimating that much more (or less) of their land is zoned for multifamily than their actual zoning maps suggest.

What is unique, however, is Lewis and Marantz's (2019) second finding: Although planners are often unable to give accurate information about specific regulations in their city, they do know its regulatory atmosphere. Planners' subjective assessments of regulatory constraints are fairly accurate. In short, planners can predict whether developers are going to have a rough time, even if they cannot say why or how.

How should we think about these findings? Consider the hydra, a mythical multiheaded beast that regrows two heads every time an adversary cuts one off. The hydra is an apt metaphor for land use regulations. Foes who concentrate on counting the hydra's heads are likely to err (it is always changing) and also miss the point. What matters is the underlying force that keeps generating the heads—the beast itself—not the precise number or shape of heads at any given time. Cities, similarly, have many and varied options for making development difficult: height limits, parking

requirements, impact fees, or one discretionary approval. A city deprived of its height limits could increase its parking requirements and get the same outcomes. Regulations, in short, are just the legal manifestation of an underlying political opposition to development. It is this latent political sentiment—the beast itself—that matters. We should not be surprised that planners understand the beast better than they can count its heads. They know they work in an anti-growth city, even if they are not sure exactly how that sentiment manifests in law.

For this reason, in our own work (Monkkonen, Manville, & Lens, 2020) we move beyond survey data in measuring a locality's underlying political sentiment toward development. We exploit a California law requiring cities to estimate their total zoned capacity for new housing. This subjective estimate, of how much room a city has left for new housing, provides a window into how the city views housing overall. We find that it correlates very strongly with housing production, more than correlations with particular regulations, because—again—two cities with the same animosity toward development can use different tools.

One can accept this logic and reasonably wonder what do about it. We agree with Lewis and Marantz (2019) about standardizing local zoning designations and that states or the federal government should collect systematic data on land use regulation. Promising reforms in California are moving in that direction (Elmendorf, Biber, Monkkonen, & O'Neill, 2019). A skeptic could argue, however, that better head counting will not get very far. Changing a regulation is easier than changing a sentiment. If the sentiment persists, new heads will sprout up.

The key here is that some regulations are more damaging than others and sentiment and regulation might feed each other. Cities have many ways to exercise antihousing sentiment, but there is a big difference between, for example, slow-walking permits and setting aside 70% of land area for nothing but low-density detached single-family homes (Manville, Monkkonen, & Lens, 2020). Furthermore, a city effectively organized around the idea that new development is threatening will have residents who believe it is threatening, in part because they never see that idea falsified by new development.

The hydra myth ends with its death at the hands of Hercules and his nephew. They cauterize each neck with a torch after removing its head, until they arrive at the one immortal head, which they chop off and hide

under a rock. Planners, fortunately, need not do anything quite that dramatic. Planners need only identify and remove the regulations that most impede density and social mixing. Removing these heads can change the beast, because much of what people fear about new housing is not fearsome at all. New neighbors are often more frightening in the abstract than in the flesh.

ORCID

Paavo Monkkonen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3513-0230>

Michael Manville  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4218-6427>

REFERENCES

- Elmendorf, C., Biber, E., Monkkonen, P., & O'Neill, M. (2019, December). *Making it work: Legal foundations for administrative reform of California's housing framework*. Working paper. Davis, CA: California Environmental Law & Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://law.ucdavis.edu/centers/environmental/files/Elmendorf-et-al.-ISSUE-BRIEF-Administering-Californias-Housing-Framework-1.pdf>.
- Lewis, P. G., & Marantz, N. J. (2019). What planners know: Using surveys about local land use regulation to understand housing development. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85(4), 445–462. doi:10.1080/01944363.2019.1643253
- Manville, M., Monkkonen, P., & Lens, M. (2020). It's time to end single-family zoning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 86(1), 106–112. doi:10.1080/01944363.2019.1651216
- Monkkonen, P., Manville, M., & Lens, M. (2020). *Built out cities: How California cities restrict housing production through prohibition and process*. Turner Center for Housing Innovation Working Paper, UC Berkeley.
- Murray, C., & Schuetz, J. (2019, July). *Is California's apartment market broken? The relationship between zoning, rents, and multifamily development*. Turner Center for Housing Innovation Working Paper, UC Berkeley. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20190711_metro_Is-California-Apartment-Market-Broken-Schuetz-Murray.pdf.
- O'Neill, M., Gualco-Nelson, G., & Biber, E. (2019). *Comparing perceptions and practice: Why better land use data is critical to ground truth legal reform*. Turner Center for Housing Innovation Working Paper, UC Berkeley. Retrieved from http://californialanduse.org/download/O'Neill_Comparing_Perceptions.pdf.

PAAVO MONKKONEN (paavo.monkkonen@ucla.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Urban Planning and Department of Public Policy at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Luskin School of Public Affairs. **MICHAEL MANVILLE** (mmanvill@ucla.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Urban Planning at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.