

California's Smog Czar Touts Golden State's Efforts to Create Sustainable Communities

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Mary Nichols, chairman of the California Air Resources Board, delivered Vermont Law School's 2010 Norman Williams Lecture.

Mary Nichols acknowledged it took some chutzpah for California's smog czar to lecture Vermonters about sprawl, pollution and land-use planning given the differences in how the two states have handled those issues.

"I'm not even a planner," said Nichols, who delivered the sixth annual Norman Williams Distinguished Lecture in Land Use Planning and the Law at Vermont Law School on Feb. 4. "I'm an air pollution regulator who's struggled with local communities" to get their cooperation in tackling the Golden State's air, water and sprawl problems.

But Nichols, chairman of the California Air Resources Board (ARB), is at the vanguard of California's pioneering efforts to align greenhouse gas emission reduction targets with transportation, housing and land-use planning processes.

The goal is to reshape the Golden State's car culture, turning the most polluted state into a model for federal climate change policy.

In addition to cutting emissions, California's strategic planning approach is intended to create communities with improved public health, accessibility and sustainability.

Nichols, one of the nation's leading environmental lawyers, was appointed ARB chairman in 2007, a position she also held from 1978 to 1983.

"We're trying to wring carbon out of our society and our economy," she said. "And it all comes back to planning and land use."

Speaking to a crowd of about 200 people in the Chase Community Center, Nichols discussed California's efforts to curb sprawl and cut greenhouse gas emissions through better cooperation between state and local governments.

In 2008, California passed Senate bill 375, the nation's first law to control greenhouse gas emissions by curbing sprawl. The law includes emissions-reductions goals for which regions can plan, coordinates disjointed planning activities and provides incentives rather than penalties for local governments and developers to follow new planned growth patterns.

Nichols said SB 375 is intended to reshape California's communities into cleaner, more sustainable and walkable communities with alternative transportation options and increased quality of life.

"We're doing integrated environmental problem solving," she said, "a holistic approach instead of looking at each issues separately."

Nichols said that for California to reach its greenhouse gas reduction goals, it must address how the state's communities grow. SB 375 requires the ARB to develop regional greenhouse gas emission reduction targets to be achieved from the automobile and light truck sectors for 2020 and 2035.

The ARB works with California's 18 metropolitan planning organizations to align their transportation, housing and regional land-use plans with greenhouse gas reductions. The MPOs will prepare a "sustainable communities strategy" to reduce the amount of vehicle miles traveled in their respective regions and demonstrate the ability for the region to attain the ARB's targets.

SB 375 is part of California's climate action plan, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, which is a "major advance in land-use planning," Nichols said. California's smog is notorious, but the state's landmark climate action plan shows that Californians also care about public health, she said.

The Golden State's population continues to rise, putting more cars on the road for longer periods, and its geography of ocean winds, mountains and valleys helps to trap smog that damages human health and crops.

"California still has the worst air quality in the nation," but laws passed in recent decades have improved conditions remarkably, she said.

Nichols said she's been accused of being a "job killer" who sends "air cops with guns and badges" to ticket people whose tires are underinflated. But she said she supports a "new clean energy economy" that rewards investment and innovation, creates jobs and serves as the engine for sustainable economic growth.

Nichols' priorities include promoting the state's landmark climate change program, reducing diesel pollution at ports and passing regulations to provide cleaner air for Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley.

"Don't expect immediate results," she said, "but we can't wait to start these corrective measures. I don't think fear of global warming is enough to motivate people, but I think this new law (SB 375) will provide the incentive for people" to take action.