

Aiming for Compact, Low-Carbon Urban Planning

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1. Introduction

On February 28 of this year, the Cabinet approved the submission of the “Bill on Promotion of Low-Carbon Cities” to the Diet. The Bill asks relevant ministers to jointly establish basic guidelines for the preparation of low-carbon urban plans to be formulated by cities, towns, and villages, and provides special measures based on the plans and measures to disseminate and to promote low-carbon buildings.

Low-carbon urban planning comprehensively promotes measures such as the intensification of urban functions, promotion of public transport utilization, and area management and efficient utilization of greenery and energy in specified areas such as urbanization promotion areas to encourage cities to shift towards low-carbon production. The bill clearly stipulates “intensification of urban functions”, and therefore, various measures will be developed concerning intensive low-carbon urban planning.

2. On Intensive Urban Structures

It is recognized that to address the population decline, aging of society, and the necessity to streamline urban management costs, we should aim for a compact city with “intensive urban structure” in which a certain number of people live densely in an certain area where a good living environment and space for interaction are efficiently provided by concentrating the urban functions and public services they require. This report presents related trends.

(1) The “Compact City” Concept

The term “compact city” reminds us of initiatives taken by Aomori City and Toyama City, which were taken while the national and local governments were debating various issues in preparation for enacting new laws to invigorate city centers. The beneficial effects of encouraging compactness on the cost of maintaining public facilities and on the conservation of energy were advocated, and people’s focus was on concentrating urban functions in city centers and preventing additional expansion.

(2) Act on the Improvement and Vitalization in City Center

This act, enacted in 1998, focused on

concentrating urban functions in city centers, improving streets and parking facilities, and providing public transportation networks to city centers, to improve built environments together with the invigoration of commercial activities, while striving to minimize the contribution of the central government

However, city centers did not cease to decline as a result of unachieved designation of land use regulation and the continued competition to locate large stores in suburbs or on former factory land.

(3) The Three Revised Acts on Urban Planning

An advisory given in response to the question “How should urban planning be done in the new age?”, submitted in June 2005 by the Sectional Committee on Urban Planning and Historic Landscape of the Panel on Infrastructure Development, noted in its first report in February 2006 the need for “urban restructuring” to replace existing urban structures with concentrated urban structures, in which the locations of commercial, administrative, medical, cultural, and other functions which provide services over wide areas are concentrated to ensure accessibility without reliance on automobiles, thus creating cities in which many people can enjoy convenient daily life. This resulted in the necessity for policies based on an awareness of urban shrinkage.

The three revised acts on urban planning enacted in 2006 (Revised City Planning Act, Act on the Measures by Large-scale Retail Stores for Preservation of Living Environments, and Act on Vitalization in City Center) strengthen the involvement of the national government in approving plans made by local governments, setting and evaluating numerical targets, etc. and require measures to restrict the location of large-scale facilities which attract many customers, particularly in the suburbs of regional cities.

Methods for land-use control in suburbs have increased, but the goals in this case were to help achieve goals established separately for city centers.

(4) Bill for Promotion of Low-Carbon Cities

The Sectional Committee on Urban Planning and Historic Landscape continued studies in response to the question of 2005, and concluded its deliberations on February 17 of last year, when it received progress

reports from the Safe and Secure Urban Planning Subcommittee and City Planning Statutory System Subcommittee.

The report from the City Planning Statutory System Subcommittee clearly states the basic guideline: “In place of past urban planning and related systems which focused on land and supply countermeasures, new systems will be repositioned to implement intensified city structures permitting sustainable urban life, sustainable urban activities, and sustainable environments.”

In this basic guideline of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, announced in November to promote sustainable and vigorous national land and regional development, “regional intensification (proximity of medical, employment, and residential functions)” and “formulation of low-carbon and recyclable systems” are presented as directions for new policy development to create a sustainable society. The bill conforms to such directions.

3. Expectations Following the New Bill

Urban planning and policies intended to create a sustainable society, which is the basic guideline, are expected to bring great results.

The reason is that the purposes of the guideline ought to require, in addition to intensifying functions in a specified area, enacting plans to deal with the shrinkage of low density urban districts and other aspects of cities in general, and the advancement of these policies together ought to deepen the “intensive urban structures”, and effectively achieve the goals of other urban policies, such as lowering the carbon emissions of entire cities, reducing the cost of maintaining cities, invigorating city centers, and improving urban landscape by increasing its greenery.

We want to note how local planning bodies will focus on organizing “regional intensification” and “formulation of low-carbon and recyclable systems” as their own policy challenges to skillfully apply “low-carbon urban planning.”

4. Initiatives by the Urban Planning Department

Urban planning powers are now increasingly transferred to local bodies, and the Urban Planning Department of NILIM is required to provide technical support to local planning bodies to implement this new system to create “intensive urban structures”. The Department plays important roles by providing various knowledge regarding technological guidance given by the City Bureau of the MLIT, or by showing planning methods and technologies to local planning bodies.

Accordingly, we have already conducted a number of research programs aware of population decline, established assessment methods for future city structures, challenging objective land-use suitability

appraisal, and challenging smooth urban shrinkage method development.

Also to offer public support to private-sector urban developers, we are researching block-level energy saving measures, heat island countermeasures, and measures to ensure greenery.

Further research is still needed on the directions of urban policies to create a sustainable society, with the help of members in other fields.

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