Taking a broader view in decisions on land use

In the future, society will have low carbon emissions and will operate under the principle of a circular economy. To reach this goal we need closer cooperation among the various planning levels and the different administrative sectors. Finland needs to create a good framework for cooperation now that the Land Use and Building Act is being amended.

Low-carbon circular economy as a goal

A sustainable future requires that solutions of transport and land use must not be made only from the point of view of an individual municipality or city; the entire urban region must be taken into consideration. Decisions will be made for the long term and will be consistent all the way from the regional level through solutions for specific locations.

Land use planning information will be in a uniform and digital from the earliest stages of planning. Information is of high quality, up-to-date, and openly available. Responsibilities for the production of information are straightforward.

Many types of values are taken into consideration in decisions on land use, such as values of nature and social sustainability.
A new direction is needed for land-use

A key item of legislation that guides land use planning, the Land Use and Building Act, is to be extensively amended. The changes are scheduled for completion by the end of 2021. The purpose of the legislative change is to create a framework for land use in the 2030s through the 2050s. The legislation needs to be amended to make it work as a more effective tool of sustainable development. For example, low carbon emissions and a circular economy require closer cooperative practices among the various levels of land use planning and the various administrative sectors.

Making peri-urban environments a basic unit

A large proportion of greenhouse gas emissions originate in urban regions. Consequently, it is important to aim at low carbon levels in decisions on land use and transport in those areas. An urban region refers to densely built area that can extend to the territory of many cities and municipalities.

Currently decisions on transport and land use are often made exclusively with the needs of individual cities in mind, although work and shopping by residents extend to the areas of more than one municipality. In the largest urban regions the development of the urban structure will need to involve walking, cycling, and public transport.

The Land Use and Building Act must include a requirement for planning at the urban region level. The law also needs to determine what entity coordinates the drafting of the plan.

Consistency in planning

Closer collaboration between municipalities and regions is a prerequisite for the achievement of low carbon goals. Low carbon emissions should be taken as a goal of strategic planning at both the regional and municipal levels. Region level operators could have a strategic responsibility in promoting measures aimed at keeping climate change under control. This would effectively channel low carbon emissions into decisions on municipal land use.

Consistent planning work from the regional level all the way to solutions at individual locations creates the preconditions for the possibilities such as the development of resource-efficient transport systems in growth zones extending from Helsinki to Tampere, Turku, and Lahti.

Linking transport and land use

Decisions on transport and land use must be interlinked better than is now the case. The aim is for residential areas, jobs, services, and green spaces to be connected by public transport or pedestrian and bicycle routes. This requires cooperation among the different administrative sectors. The density of community structures of city centres, subcentres, and areas near them should be increased, as sustainable movement is easier in those areas.

It is especially important to ensure that the goals of transport planning at the regional level are passed on to the municipal level. For example, areas with a high workplace density should be linked to transport planning. New kinds of places of work should be set up at transport hubs, where it would be possible to work on a temporary basis, and where the self-employed, for instance, or employees of different companies can work together.

Low carbon emissions and circular economy go hand-in-hand

Decisions concerning low carbon emissions and the circular economy should increasingly be examined as a whole. The circular economy means, for example, a sharing economy, recycling, and the utilisation of waste in excavation. The efficient distribution of regionally significant bioeconomy and circular economy areas requires decision-making that extends beyond municipal and regional boundaries.

In construction, the entire life cycle of building, from zoning solutions through the actual construction, the use of the buildings, and their eventual demolition need to be taken better into consideration.

Instead of building new areas, it is better to favour complementary construction and the utilisation of old buildings. For instance, municipalities in the Hinku project, which aim at carbon neutrality, are sharing good practices in energy efficiency, renewable energy, and electric transport.

From the circular economy point of view amending the Land Use and Building Act must promote cooperation and life cycle thinking that transcends municipal boundaries while recognising the changes that are needed in other legislation for expediting the circular economy.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT WILL GROW IN THE HELSINKI REGION

The 14 municipalities in the Helsinki region constitute a functional whole. In the future, a growing proportion of the region’s population and jobs will be located in areas with high-quality public transport and nearby services. To promote low carbon emissions in the central areas of an urban region, cross-town connections need to be established to link subcentres and public transport cities with each other. The forecast is based on land use reported by the municipalities. Sources: Tiitu et.al. and SYKE.

Map sources: SYKE, National Land Survey of Finland and Eau Finland.
Toward open digital information
Compatible data systems are needed for easing cooperation in statutory land-use planning among regions, urban regions, and municipalities. Information connected with statutory land use planning data and other types of planning of land use should be in a uniform digital form from the very start of planning.

The information must be of high quality, up-to-date, and openly available through interface services. Combining information and the overall evaluation of various planning alternatives requires tools that are easy to use.

The requirement that information should be digital and open must be included in the Land Use and Building Act. The legislation will also have to define the responsibilities of the production and distribution of data.

Giving the people a voice
Openness of data and decision-making makes it possible for citizens to influence decision-making concerning the environment in which they live. For the sake of fairness, it is important to indicate how information gathered from different entities has affected decision-making. The influence of the views of the citizens must be increased by ensuring participation already at the early stages of the planning process. Planners need support in arranging high-quality participation.

The Land Use and Building Act must make it possible to consider values that are especially important in promoting sustainable development, such as values of nature and social sustainability in decision-making.

Not at the expense of nature
Although achieving low carbon emissions often means complementary construction in cities, it must not take place at the expense of nature. Access of residents to nature and the water’s edge needs to be secured. This helps maintain physical and mental health. For example, day care centres and schools should be located near green spaces.

In increasingly dense cities, green spaces also help in adapting to climate change by reducing the impact of extreme weather events, such as heat waves and floods.

Networks of green spaces and water areas must be systematically included in zoning solutions. The system for planning the use of areas should prevent the splintering of green spaces, secure the preservation of areas that are central to values of nature and the benefits brought on by nature, and identify places where a natural state could potentially be restored.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE LAND USE DECISIONS BY A CITY LOCATED ALONG THE MAIN RAIL LINE
Low carbon emissions require consistent and persevering decisions of the planning of land use and transport. The goal of the city is to have a new station on the main rail line in 15 to 25 years. Building the station requires that the national government would implement extra tracks and the city would need to allow dense construction in the station area.

GOALS OF THE CITY: Managed growth of the city • A new railway station in use • Linking the new station area as part of the existing city structure • Reducing the need for car transport • Promoting sustainable transport

Deciding on the direction of a new station as an expansion area of the city
Deciding on the land use options for the expansion area if the station is not built
Deciding on feeder transport of the station area
Planning a dense use of land for the station area
The station will be built

Expected population development in 2015–2040 in Finland’s urban regions.

- $5,000$ Relative change
- $10,000$ $16...27$
- $50,000$ $6...15$
- $100,000$ $4...5$
- $-5,000$ $-15...-5$


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Raising the bar
To restrain climate change, emissions of greenhouse gases need to be reduced faster than has been estimated so far. This requires changes to the planning of land use and the practices of decision-making.

Decisions involving transport, land use, and construction should be planned so that as emissions are reduced, a society can be established that is more sustainable in other ways as well. The consequence is a living environment that is of better quality, healthier, and socially more sustainable, as well as nature that is more diverse.

Key legislation which guides the use of the areas, the Land Use and Building Act, is currently being thoroughly amended.

The purpose of the legislative change is to create a framework for land use in the 2030s through the 2050s. It will establish living and operating environments for future generations. The bar needs to be kept high.

THE COMMUNITY STRUCTURE SHOULD PROMOTE LOW-CARBON EMISSIONS

Car ownership by household-dwelling units in relation to population and job density in the Helsinki region (14 municipalities) in 2015. The greater the density of construction, the fewer households in the area have cars. In the future a goal of community structure should be to enable a car-free lifestyle, or one in which only one car is needed. Source: Helminen et.al.7

The law is being amended
The planning of the use of the areas refers to planning of land use, or the master plans and zoning, which is the responsibility of the municipalities, and the regional planning and maritime spatial planning, which is the responsibility of the regional councils. The planning of land use is also guided by national land use goals and Finland’s international commitments.

Key legislation which guides the use of the areas is currently being amended. The new legislation is to be completed at the end of 2021. The Land Use and Building Act defines the goals of land use, the planning system, and the responsibilities of different players, jurisdiction, and practices for shared use.