Today is a big day for SB 375, California's much-heralded land use and transportation law. The Air Resources Board is setting greenhouse gas emissions targets for each metropolitan region covered by the law. The regions then have to develop a plan to meet these targets through comprehensive land use and transportation planning. That means reorganizing transportation and land use planning to make sure people don't have to drive so much and can live near transit, services, and jobs.

While the Building Industry Association (BIA) and many cities in Southern California appear to be freaking out about high targets (expressed as a per capita percentage reduction in GHG emissions), the reality is that these targets are somewhat close to meaningless.

Why? First, the plan that a region must develop to meet the target doesn't actually have to meet the target. If it doesn't, the Air Resources Board simply requires the region to develop an alternative fantasy plan that would meet the target. That fantasy plan has no practical effect, except for making some real estate projects that are consistent with the plan eligible for limited exemptions to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). But even those exemptions are extremely narrow, and they are filled with wiggle room for local governments to avoid granting them if the projects are too controversial.

Second, even if the regional plan does meet the targets, the big impact the plan might have is that it becomes part of the region's application for state and federal transportation funding. So state and federal funds theoretically have to go first to the transportation projects consistent with the regional plan under SB 375. But the problem, as land use expert Bill Fulton points out, is that the board members of the regional bodies are the ones ultimately making the decision about where transportation dollars go. And these board members are local government elected officials who are unlikely to ensure that transportation money goes to smart growth projects. So it's likely to be business-as-usual on transportation funding.

Finally, as I mentioned above, SB 375 contains a number of CEQA exemptions for projects consistent with the regional plans. However, California already has exemptions for transit-oriented and infill projects, and even though they are more flexible than the SB 375 exemptions, they are hardly used.

Having said all that, SB 375 does have some bright spots. First, cultural: SB 375 has already sparked debate among regions about their future growth, and it has forced disparate local governments to reconceptualize planning as a regional activity. And the planning process initiated by SB 375 has the potential to stimulate political support for more infill-oriented growth. Second, the law does synchronize the transportation and affordable housing allocation processes, which will likely ensure that regions begin to cluster affordable housing near transit. Finally, SB 375 could create a sort of feedback process that over the decades could alter what kind of growth is considered feasible, in the same way that President Obama talks about bending the cost curve with his initiatives.

But make no mistake: SB 375 at best is about bending the curve, not changing directions altogether.