

Issues in the Southeast's Regional Councils Are Significant and Worth Studying Nationally

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Background

Since 1987, the Institute of Community and Area Development (ICAD), a public service unit of The University of Georgia in Athens, has provided staffing and secretarial support for the Southeast Regional Directors Institute (SERDI). SERDI is a voluntary professional development association for regional council executive directors, senior staff, and other public and private professionals who have an interest in regional councils and their affairs in the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. SERDI is governed by the Council of Peers, which contains two executive directors from each of the ten participating states and two at-large assistant directors. The Council of Peers develops a yearly work program with the assistance of ICAD staff.

Peer leadership and statewide and regional strategies to enhance regional council professionalism and credibility were identified by SERDI's membership as critical to the future viability of regional councils in the southeastern United States.

To address these concerns, the SERDI Council of Peers arranged day-long meetings in each participating state to analyze the status of each state's regional councils. An attempt was made to have a broad cross-section of participants in each state with the idea of getting a wide, honest perspective of

the councils. Invited participants included executive directors, regional council policy board members, state officials, federal officials, and other public and private sector leaders.

The day-long meetings followed a format that provided for individual and group participation. The same set of questions was asked in each state.

- What is good about the regional councils in your state?
- What is not so good about the regional councils in your state?
- What do you worry about regarding regional councils in your state?
- What is something that the regional councils in your state are doing that you wish they would stop doing?
- What is something that the regional councils are not doing that you wish they did?
- Design the "ideal" regional council.
- Identify the role that the council should play with the private sector, local governments, state government, federal government, other regional entities, and other organizations.
- What should the responsibility of the executive director be to ensure that the roles are accomplished?
- What should the responsibility of the board of directors be?
- What are the barriers that will keep the "ideal" from happening?

- What are specific action strategies that should be developed to overcome the barriers so that the ideal regional council can be realized in your state?
- How should your state association be structured or restructured to help realize the ideal structure?

The day-long meetings were facilitated by ICAD. Florida did not have a day-long meeting. Prior to the SERDI project, a very similar study was conducted on Florida's regional planning councils by the Environmental Land Management Systems (ELMS) Commission. At the request of the Florida SERDI membership, the findings of the ELMS Commission were conformed to the format of the other nine states' meetings.

The Significant Issues

While each state in the region has its own unique concerns and peculiarities regarding its regional councils, seven significant issues were identified in the day-long meetings across the region. Results of a national workshop in which these findings were presented along with responses of regional council officials from throughout the United States confirmed our assumption that these issues are not limited to regional councils in the Southeast. They are issues that, regardless of a state's regulations and logistics, must be addressed if regional councils are to be significant in the future development of the region and, for that matter, the United States.

The seven significant issues identified were

- relevance (an overriding issue),
- ownership,
- the role as convener of the region,
- relationships with local government,
- relationships with state officials,
- public relations and image, and
- lack of uniformity or capability.

An overview of each issue follows with quotes or elements that were given at one of the day-long meetings or the summary meeting held at SERDI's annual conference, where work on the project was completed.

Relevance

When board members returned from board meetings, did they relay or were they able to relay what had occurred at the meeting and what the COG was doing (and more importantly, did they care)?

Far too often local governments have no idea what the councils are doing and think that they are not performing any function really relevant to the needs of the local government.

Councils lack "refined missions." Many times there are only vague ideas of what the mission of the councils should be.

- "Members' participation is weak."
- "All board members are not active, and some counties are not represented properly."
- "Local governments do not necessarily get excited about COG activities."
- "Not able to assess the needs of our board members."
- "There might be wholesale withdrawals."
- "If the governor and legislature saw us as important, would this be happening?"

Relevance ties to the concern about ownership; councils need to return to a focus on the issues of regionalism:

- "A lack of uniform direction by all."
- "Councils are not always responsive to meet local government needs."

Ownership

Who owns regional councils? Enabling legislation or executive orders putting councils in business (for the most part) classify regional councils as entities of local government—that is, local governments are their owners. Ownership, however, in the minds

of local governments, board members and the public, AND regional council executive directors, is not always so clear.

The question of ownership brought about the most debate and concern by participants in the SERDI Annual Executive Development Conference.

Citing enabling legislation, many executive directors argued that only their local governments "own" the regional council.

Others countered that despite enabling legislation, they view their council is owned by many entities. They said that their effectiveness is based on customers that include more than local governments—state government, other local government and regional entities (chambers of commerce, development authorities, etc.), the private sector, and the citizenry at large. These directors claimed that much of their effectiveness and support would be jeopardized if they proclaimed that are "owned" by their local governments.

The Convener of the Region

Fostering leadership, being proactive, and making sure that the region's true leaders, both public and private, are involved in a council's mission and activities enable a regional council to be thought of as the convener of a region—as the forum, or gathering spot, where the blueprint for the region's future is addressed.

There is a need for more meaningful public and private sector input and involvement into issues facing regions.

- "Bring folks to the table that need to be there."
- "We need the participation of the movers and shakers (private sector or chief elected official)."
- "Local elected officials for the most part have a very difficult time looking past the next election and, in many cases, participate in the regional council out

of self (local government) interest and not for what is best for the entire region."

Many desire to get back to regional "planning" as a major emphasis of their councils—their constituents have a greater interest in regionalism.

- "The question is, 'Will councils play a significant role in the renewed interest in regionalism?'"
- "We need to bring an end to important people saying councils can't or won't take risks."

Becoming more proactive (rather than just being reactive), unlike the broad issue of funding, is something that can be handled within the council; no reliance on state legislation or an executive order is necessary.

- "Councils must realize that they have to be a player in the region's activities, not the *only* player."
- "If councils were seen as they were intended to be—the convener, the regional forum—perhaps not as many regional efforts would be taking place without their participation."

Relationships with Local Government

Enabling legislation or executive orders putting councils in business (for the most part) classify regional councils as entities of local government. Councils should be seen as important tools for local governments and as vehicles to help solve local problems as well as address intergovernmental issues for their designated regions.

It is important for local elected officials to have a complete understanding of the relationship between their local government and the region's regional council.

- "Since local elected officials were not elected to serve the regional council like they were city or county government, they, for the most part, do not accept

ownership and, more importantly, accountability for the regional council.”

- “When they condemn their council, they don’t realize they are condemning themselves.”

Attendees in many states expressed the desire for full and complete local government support and membership. The key word is *complete*.

There are various phases of membership—from full mandated membership to voluntary membership. The degree of participation varies widely.

Obviously, a major portion of membership is funding. Even though regional councils are “locally owned,” a staggering percentage of councils’ funding does not come from local sources. Much of the funding comes from federal and, to varying degrees, state sources.

- “Local governments receive the greatest benefit from the council and fund them the least of all funding sources.”
- “Local governments need to decide what the council should be and if they are willing to make the financial commitment to make them work. There is no doubt; the answer should be absolutely yes.”
- “Decide what’s important instead of developing a work program based on funding to keep the doors open.”

Training of board members and their lack of interest and participation in the work of their regional council appear to be major factors in the ownership issue.

- “There is a need to have strong board members with a regional perspective.”
- “Regional councils should be using their boards more effectively as advocates for regional development interests—linked together statewide.”

Relationships with State Officials

The relationships with state officials vary from good to nonexistent across the ten-state

region. The one common point is that councils must improve their relationships with governors, legislatures, and state departments.

During many of the current legislative sessions in our region, funding for regional councils was cut, sometimes drastically. Councils must find multiple opportunities to show their relevance and dollar-saving ability to help the state address key issues. If not, what will the councils’ future be?

Councils should be a natural mechanism for assisting state departments with their missions to enhance the futures of their states.

Working together as a statewide network has always had varied success.

- “There have been times when our councils worked very effectively as a statewide network and were thought of by the state level as a statewide tool.”
- “There has never been cohesiveness.”
- “There is a recognition that for councils to survive in years to come, working together is going to be important.”

In working together on a statewide basis, both rural and metropolitan councils must understand each other’s needs and that they have more in common than they want to admit. This also is very true within some individual councils where the urban center of a region does not see the benefit of “serious” council participation and areas outside the urban center do not believe they need the urban participation. A viable region needs the teamwork of both. In the Southeast, there are more rural councils than metropolitan; however, the face of many rural councils is becoming more urban with the population shifts that are taking place in many of the region’s states.

The wide spectrum is no clearer than in North Carolina. The meeting in Raleigh revealed a strong role for one-on-one local technical assistance in the state’s rural councils. While the need for a very significant role as a regional forum to consider

broad issues affecting a region's local government was expressed, it was argued that reverse roles in each are needed also.

Public Relations and Image

The identity crisis that exists among most councils was, for the most part, self-inflicted. From the beginning, most executive directors and staffs felt that since councils were owned by a region's local governments, the local governments and their boards should get all the credit for anything positive that resulted from council staff's efforts. In fact, it is not until the importance or relevance of a council is questioned that its accomplishments are known.

Poor perception of what the councils do was contributed to the lack of participation by a region's movers and shakers.

The fact that the state government, local governments, the public, and the councils themselves perceive that councils are incapable, in some areas, was credited frequently as being one of the reasons that states have created additional regional entities for specific purposes (e.g., economic development) and bypassed the existing councils.

Image was cited as an impediment to councils' being major players in all areas of regional impact and to their ability to assure their roles as conveners of their regions.

- "Councils [need] to understand their own roles and express them to the governor, legislature, and local officials."
- "Councils need to do a better job of telling their story."

Educating everyone on the importance of regionalism often has been lost. The economics of providing traditional public services (e.g., water supply, solid waste management, emergency medical, etc.) to constituencies is becoming cost-prohibitive in many areas. This fact should prove to local officials that regional solutions will profit the council and its local governments.

Lack of Uniformity or Capability

In every state, the remark was made more than once that the lack of operations, size, and capabilities of individual councils was a serious barrier to the success of councils as statewide resources.

The levels of ability, capability, and dependability trouble our clients and potential clients.

- "The abilities of our states' councils vary greatly."
- "The trouble with the councils in our state is the lack of uniformity."
- "All councils are held responsible for the failures of one or two bad councils."
- "What do we do with weak sisters and brothers?"
- "Poor performance by some equate to bad for us all."

State officials advocated using their state's councils as mechanisms for their departments to carry out a statewide mission, but they said until there are "minimum standards" established for every council, they cannot use councils in statewide efforts.

What Does This Say about the Future?

One could dissect each of the seven significant issues forever. What applies to some councils, or states, does not apply to others. Regardless of how many or how few of these issues apply to a specific council, the findings can be used as a measuring stick or checkpoint for how an individual or statewide system of councils measures up in its relevancy, its role as bringing its region's leaders together, its ownership, its relationships with state and local government officials, its image, and its capabilities.

Regionalism has never been more in vogue. The economics of providing and planning for public service, infrastructure,

and development have never been more challenging. Very few individual governments, particularly local governments, can provide traditional public services alone. Very few communities can compete in the world economy by themselves anymore. They compete as an economic region.

The question that remains, through all of this, is what role will regional councils have in the future. Regional councils can begin to explore that future by asking themselves and their constituents the same questions that were asked in the SERDI analysis. ☉

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