

Regionalism: What It Is, Where We Are, and Where We May Be Headed

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What Is Regionalism?

The United States is a nation of regions. Some are big, like the major river basins, the cornbelt, the sunbelt, the frostbelt, and the northeastern megalopolis. Some are small, like the 300 or so metropolitan areas and the numerous rural commutersheds defined by the federal government. Some cross state lines, while others are in one state. Even among the "small" areas, there are about three dozen interstate metropolitan areas that cross state lines, greatly increasing their governmental complexity.

Each region has problems and opportunities that its citizens and governments strive to address. Yet most are not governed as single units; they span the jurisdictions of many governments.

The most common means of coping with these regions' issues has been to establish regional planning commissions or councils to study pressing problems and advise local, state, and federal agencies about potential remedies. In the American experience, these planning bodies almost always have been advisory only—without the power to govern by themselves. If they cannot convince the regularly constituted local, state, and federal authorities to act on their recommendations, those recommendations

simply sit on a shelf somewhere—until there is another study, another set of recommendations, and another opportunity to persuade the regular governments to act—often against their own individual self-interests.

Exceptions to this general pattern are so rare that they draw immediate, excited, and hopeful attention. Some of the most prominent examples of authoritative regional bodies are

- Tennessee Valley Authority;
- Susquehanna and Delaware River Basin Commissions;
- Metropolitan Service District in Portland, Oregon;
- Twin Cities Metropolitan Council in Minnesota; and
- Metropolitan Transportation Commission in San Francisco/Oakland, California.

But then they usually are dismissed as special cases, not appropriate for replication anywhere else. They were the product of a unique set of circumstances that required emergency action that is not justified in a normal situation.

In contrast, the advisory regions abound. It is just too local and politically attractive to have an organization that can geographically "get its arms around the problem."

Since many regional problems deserve this degree the recognition, many regional organizations have been created, and many of them lie on top of each other.

Where We Are and How We Got There

In the early part of this century, there was great excitement about regional solutions to governmental problems. Much of it was pushed along by planners, political scientists, public administrators, economists, water resources professionals, and the "good government" movement that brought so many other reforms to government during that period. And, from about 1920 until about 1960, there was a great deal of experimentation with regional planning commissions, statewide planning, and river basin commissions. By 1960, these organizations spotted the continent at wide intervals and whetted the public's appetite for more.

The 1960s and 1970s

The 1960s and 1970s saw the nation almost completely covered both by multi-state river basin and economic development commissions that had state and federal participation and by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan regional councils dominated by local government officials. Most of the metropolitan and nonmetropolitan regional councils were carefully designed to be "areawide" according to some criteria—such as commutersheds or areas of interdependent economic influences. By the end of the 1970s, 99 percent of all the nation's counties (or county areas in New England) were participating in regional councils.

This explosion of areawide regional councils and multistate river basin and economic development regions occurred because of

very intentional and systematic federal action that drew in states as well as local governments. In the cases of the areawide councils, the federal action established thirty-nine grant programs designed to require and fund regional planning, and it appealed directly to the governors of all fifty states to establish statewide systems of "substate districts" to systematize the administration of the federal programs that support regional councils. And many of the states did so.

By 1977, the areawide regions spurred by federal programs were so pervasive and so firmly established that the Census of Governments taken that year included a special report on them. The census found 675 general purpose (or multipurpose) regional councils and 1,257 special purpose regional organizations serving federal program purposes. On average across the nation, the general purpose regional councils were designated to carry out 3.73 federal programs, while the special purpose ones generally carried out a single federal program.

In the Southwest and Appalachia, the general purpose regions were designated to handle more than five of the federal government's regional programs together. The federal government strongly supported multiple designations, but the states had a lot to do with making some of these designations and they took differing approaches. Some states reinforced the federal policy of multiple designations, while others did not.

During the golden age of regional organizations in America, the federal government was committed to the idea that regional planning could help solve many of the nation's urban, rural, economic development, environmental, and water resources problems. Federal funds for regional planning flowed freely throughout the country, and the regional bodies prepared many planning studies, yielding comprehensive regional plans with an array of

specific functional elements and multi-year action programs.

The federal funds supplied the big bucks in the budgets of most regional planning organizations—often up to 75 percent. And the accompanying federal planning requirements defined the type of planning that was done.

The 1980s

The 1980s tell a very different story. The federal government abandoned most of its commitment to regionalism. Of the thirty-nine programs designed and enacted during the preceding two decades to promote regional organizations, only one—metropolitan transportation planning—remained relatively unscathed by this sudden reversal of federal policy. By 1984, the rest had been terminated, substantially defunded, or relieved of their region-promoting features. Most of this decline had occurred by 1982.

For the multistate programs, which had created most river basin and economic development regions by agreements between the governors and the president, President Reagan withdrew his approval, left them unfunded, and watched them die. The only ones that survived were those that had been created directly by federal law or interstate compact.

The metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areawide councils rapidly lost federal designations and funding. By 1984, their budgets and staffs had been reduced by about half. Their functions were beginning to migrate away from the federal government's areawide planning agenda to activities more in tune with services for which local governments, who were starting to pick up the funding responsibilities dropped by the feds, were willing to pay.

By the end of the 1980s, 80 percent of the areawide regional councils still existed, but they had changed dramatically. They

were beginning to rebuild as data sharing, joint services, and regional service bodies. Even the councils still designated for metropolitan transportation and planning saw a decline—the land-use elements formerly funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the environmental planning for wastewater treatment and air quality formerly funded by the Environmental Protection Agency had to be absorbed by DOT funds, which were at the same time being stretched thinner by the addition of a large number of new urban area designations following the 1980 census.

The federal economic development and Appalachian programs, though suffering significant cutbacks, managed to survive, maintaining some planning and other support to many of the nonmetropolitan regional councils. Thus, the federal abandonment of regions, though drastic, was not complete.

Through the 1980s, as the areawide councils struggled to adjust to the decline in federal support and raised their local government dues, state support remained almost as it had been. The state support, of course, differed greatly from one state to another at the beginning of the 1980s, and that remains true today. In those few states that provide direct financial support to the regional councils and rely on them for delivering federal and state programs, the councils have been somewhat insulated from the federal abandonment, but the number of states taking this position did not change much in response to the federal action. Independently, those few states that enacted new growth management programs during the 1980s tended to give additional important roles to their regional councils.

The 1990s

In 1995, we cannot write the whole story of the 1990s. But we can begin.

The most significant occurrence so far has been the enactment of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA). For those metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) designated to satisfy ISTEA planning requirements (about 47 percent of which are areawide metropolitan regional councils), the federal funding and expectations have increased significantly. But, the clear consensus is that the increase in expectations has been greater than the increase in funding.

Before discussing this development further, it is significant to note that about 75 percent of the MPOs had been areawide regional councils in the mid-1970s when the federal government was intentionally supporting those organizations.

A recent U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) study of the capacity of MPOs to meet the expectations of ISTEA turned up mixed results:

A broad range of participants in eighteen MPOs across the country agreed that ISTEA had brought about many desirable changes, including the following:

- increased public participation,
- more air quality planning,
- better intergovernmental coordination,
- better relationships between the state department of transportation and the MPO,
- new or increased attention to intermodal issues, and
- new or increased attention to long-range planning.

But, these same interview respondents identified many difficulties they were encountering:

- increased regulatory and workload burdens,
- unachievable expectations,
- uncoordinated deadlines among the various federal requirements and between the federal requirements and related state and local requirements,

- disrupted relationships within the MPO, and
- new strains in the MPO relationship with the state DOT.

Of course, great differences exist from one state to another, and these findings are generalizations from cases that spanned the country.

Nevertheless, the bottom line of ACIR's *MPO Capacity* study, released in May 1995, was that MPOs need a lot of help to keep up with the great expectations of ISTEA. The challenges they face are institutional, technical, and political—and the political ones were seen by all as the most difficult. ACIR recommended a comprehensive capacity-building program for MPOs, but the political part deserves special note.

The MPOs are intergovernmental **processes**, not governments. But ISTEA assumes that they are governments with strong independent decision-making powers capable of speaking with a single voice for all local governments in the region and competing on an equal footing with the power of the governor, the state DOT, and a variety of federal and state agencies. In reality, even the best of the MPOs are lucky to be able to bring all these parties together to reach a modicum of consensus on a few of the key issues.

The MPOs, of course, must help themselves. No one can perform their roles for them. Striving for excellence in everything they do should be their first priority.

Nevertheless, they cannot do it alone. And, on the key political power issue, state support is crucial. ISTEA sets the MPOs in a mutual veto situation with the governor, the state DOT, and the air quality agency—and the MPO's veto is the weakest one by far. If the MPO process gets to the veto stage, it is probably a failure. Therefore, it is essential for all parties to use the MPO process as a good-faith bargaining forum in which everyone tries as hard as they can to

reach consensus and to adhere to the agreements reached there.

Where We May Be Headed

Not much indicates that the multistate regions are on their way back. The only hint I have seen of that is the proposal in Congress to replace the Economic Development Administration (EDA) in the Department of Commerce with a series of eight regional commissions—modeled after the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). These multistate regions, with a federal co-chair, would make grants to the metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areawide regions in economically depressed parts of the country, as EDA does now. But this proposal is not expected to pass. Meanwhile, there are continuing proposals to do away with ARC itself—proposals that must be continuously defended against, year after year.

At the areawide level, there may be two different tracks—one for MPOs and one for the majority of regional councils that are not MPOs. The MPOs now have a strengthened federal planning role, and they may be able to make something of it *if* the state DOTs let them. The other areawide regional councils appear headed for a much more limited local services role—a non-planning role. But both of these tracks are quite uncertain.

On the MPO track, the state DOTs already have signaled that they will challenge the enhanced roles for MPOs in ISTEA when that law comes up for renewal next year. The recently adopted policies of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO)—spurred by the thirty-one Republican governors—call for cutting back on the planning funds for many of the MPOs and giving special weight to the planning of only the MPOs with populations of 1 million or more. If the state does not see that its own success is

tightly linked to the success of all of its MPOs, then the MPOs probably will not be able to do what ISTEA expects. And there is little likelihood that the federal government will step in to save the MPOs in the current political environment, which is leaning heavily toward giving the states greater leeway in determining their own policies.

For the other regional councils, the local services function is one that increasingly will not attract federal or state funding. So it will have to be justified primarily on the basis of saving money for the local governments. Activities of that type—joint purchasing; shared personnel, equipment, data, and technical services—are important, but they leave the most significant regional issues untouched: issues such as infrastructure, the environment, and the social and economic disparities between inner cities and suburbs. The local consensus approach cannot deal with controversy unless there is also some outside-the-region mechanism for forcing the tougher issues to be confronted.

So, where should we look for hope of a better region? I have three suggestions for you to ponder:

- the business community,
- reality, and
- benchmarking.

The Business Community

In the Washington area, the Board of Trade has taken a hand in pushing for (1) a solution to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge replacement—a three-state facility on the area's only beltway, which is too narrow, has a draw-span that opens too much, and is in danger of collapse from overuse; (2) thinking more generally about the region's gridlocked transportation problems; and (3) marketing the whole region as a good place to do business. It also has taken the lead in convening joint meetings of public and

private leaders to explore key public policy issues together. There is nothing earth-shaking here, except that it does show a recognition that businesses operate throughout the whole region and have more on their minds than the concerns of the individual localities.

Reality

Sooner or later, reality will catch up with us, and something will have to be done. The Woodrow Wilson Bridge may actually fall down. The beltway may actually grind to a halt. Regional problems are not imaginary. They do make a difference in the lives of people, and they demand response—however ad hoc that response may be.

Benchmarking

The way to make the federal, state, and local governments accountable to the people and regain the people's trust and confidence is to set quantified goals, devise methods of measuring progress toward them, and report their status back to the people to show that they are actually getting something for the taxes they pay. This "benchmarking" system sets up a new kind of public dialogue about the effect governmental activities have in the lives of real people. Is the environment getting cleaner? Is congestion easing? Are our lives getting safer?

San Diego's growth management process is designed around such a "quality of life" performance measurement system. We should watch to see whether it makes a difference in restoring people's confidence in their governments. If it does, we may have another path open to us for helping to solve regional problems.

Conclusion

I wish the future were more clear for those of you following the regional path. The only real advice I can give you is to keep at it. We need regional approaches to regional problems, because regional problems are real. Sooner or later, our approaches to these problems will get real, and you will be there to lead the way. ☀

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