

Regional Approaches to Planning

by C. Gregory Dale, AICP

Editor's Note: The following article is the second in a series highlighting some of the key planning issues facing communities today.

What does “regionalism” have to do with you as a planning commissioner? Why not simply focus on the problems and needs of your particular community and let other communities do the same?

The reason why a regional perspective is important is that many quality of life and planning issues transcend individual jurisdictional boundaries. While most regions are fragmented into multiple local jurisdictions including counties, cities, villages, and townships, each of which have their own local planning autonomy, there are many issues that can only be addressed regionally. For example, air quality, traffic, storm water management, water quality, and natural environmental systems recognize no man-made political boundaries.

While most elected and appointed officials act responsibly and do their best to deal with planning issues, local jurisdictions tend to act in what they perceive to be their own best interest. Often lost sight of is how local decisions fit into the regional picture or affect other communities.

Current efforts to plan regionally fall into four broad categories:

1. Regional Government. There are a number of instances around the country where cities and counties have consolidated to create a unified approach to governance, including planning. For example, Lexington-Fayette County (Kentucky), Indianapolis-Marion County (Indiana), and Nashville-Davidson County (Tennessee) are examples of city/county consolidations which have enabled these areas to approach planning issues from a more regional perspective. Of course, this assumes that regions can be equated with counties, which is not necessarily true.

2. Regional Planning Agencies. There are a wide range of multi-purpose, multi-jurisdictional regional planning agencies. In many places they are called regional councils of government, in others, regional planning (or planning and development) commissions. Typically, these bodies act in an advisory capacity and do not have land use decision-making authority.¹ Regional planning agencies are usually comprised of members appointed by their respective local governing bodies, and are supported by a mix of technical and citizen committees and by staff.

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3. Specialized Functional Agencies. There are many regional agencies that have functional responsibilities related to specific aspects of regional planning and development. Most frequently, these agencies deal with regional infrastructure, such as highways, parks and open space, sanitary sewers, storm water management, or water systems. For example, the East Bay Regional Park District (covering the east side of San Francisco Bay) and the Metropolitan Sewer District in Cincinnati respectively provide park and sewer planning on a regional basis.

4. “Ad Hoc” Regional Organizations. A growing number of regional initiatives

1 In some states, such as Vermont, adopted regional plans do carry weight in certain state land use permitting decisions. There are also a handful of regional planning agencies which do exercise considerable power in regulating developments with regional impacts. Among the most notable examples are the Adirondack Park Agency (in upstate New York), the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (parts of California and Nevada), and the New Jersey Pinelands Commission (in South Jersey).

have occurred through a diverse mix of public, quasi-public, and private organizations seeking to fill what they perceive to be gaps in government-led efforts.² Some of these “ad hoc” organizations focus primarily on growth and economic development issues, while others are oriented towards natural resource and quality of life issues. Some examples:

- The Great Valley Center, which provides resources, technical assistance, and financial support in California’s Central Valley related to agricultural programs, leadership training, technology, and economic development.
- The Champlain Initiative (first organized in 1996 by the United Way to “create a community-wide strategic planning and visioning process for a healthy Chittenden County, Vermont”) hosts community stakeholder meetings, and addresses issues such as early childhood education, public health, and sprawl.
- The Southeast Massachusetts Vision 2020 Project, led by several regional agencies and involving business, community, and environmental groups, develops strategies for the region’s long-term economic growth and resource conservation.

Concerns about Regionalism

Despite the multitude of regional agencies and organizations, I think it is fair to say that in most parts of the country, important planning decisions continue to be made at local levels, with relatively little regard to their regional impact. Why does that remain the case? Let me offer three reasons:

First, local autonomy is a much-cherished and defended concept. Local access to elected leaders is a fundamental value in our system of democracy and is not one that people will (or should) easily give up. The ability to go to “your” city, town, or village council or board helps

2 See “Exploring Ad Hoc Regionalism,” by Douglas R. Porter and Allan D. Wallis (Lincoln Institute 2002); (www.lincolninstitute.edu)

to strengthen a sense of community and belonging. There is also the matter of direct accountability. If your local city councilor, for example, makes a decision you strongly disagree with, you have direct recourse at the next election.

Another concern raised about regionalism is that it will foster homogeneity, with individual communities losing their distinctive identities. For example, from a regional perspective the fact that the Chicago metropolitan area has hundreds of individual communities making localized land use decisions may seem confusing, not to mention inefficient. However, many citizens value the diverse range of choices that are created by what can seem to be a crazy quilt of varying local policies.

Of course, perhaps the most important reason why it is difficult to make land use decisions regionally, rather than locally, is good old-fashioned politics and power. Very few local officials want to give up their authority to a regional agency. Combine this sentiment with the fear many citizens have of “regional government,” and it is understandable why there is a great deal of resistance to regionalism.

Learning from Las Vegas

However, regionalism *can* work. Over the past few years, I have been involved (as a consultant) in a fascinating project that has sought to develop an effective approach to regional planning, while recognizing the strongly held concerns citizens and local officials have about regional government. I’m referring to the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition (“SNRPC”), a body established

four years ago by the Nevada Legislature to deal with rapid growth in the Las Vegas Valley.³

The Las Vegas Valley is the fastest growing region in the country, with its population increasing by about 75,000 per year. This growth is perceived locally as a mixed blessing. While it has meant economic prosperity and job opportunities for many, it has also placed enormous stress on infrastructure (such as roads, water supply, sewers, and schools), and on the environment.

In establishing the SNRPC, the Nevada Legislature was looking for a way to better manage the Valley’s growth. In recognition of the importance attached to local control, the Legislature envisioned that the SNRPC would seek regional solutions through a collaborative, problem-solving process.

The enabling legislation called for the preparation of a Regional Policy Plan focusing on a broad range of regional issues (including not just land use in a narrow sense, but also questions related to public facilities, air and water quality, and the promotion of infill housing and development). The legislation also framed a “conformity process” to better ensure consistency between local plans and the newly developed Regional Policy Plan.

The Regional Policy Plan was adopted two years ago. As its title indicates, it is a policy-based plan. Most importantly, the

³ The SNRPC is comprised of elected officials from the cities of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson, and Boulder City, along with officials from Clark County and from the Clark County School District.

Plan identifies a number of regional initiatives that the Valley’s local governments and other entities can cooperate on, and sets out ways in which development standards can be made more consistent between different jurisdictions.⁴ The Plan *does not* include a regional map that attempts to allocate future growth among various jurisdictions.

Following adoption of the Regional Policy Plan, the SNRPC engaged in a collaborative process of working with approximately twenty local, regional, and state agencies to review their individual plans to determine whether they were in conformity with the regional plan (and if not, to identify steps to bring them into conformity). As a result, there are now a series of “conformity agreements” between the SNRPC and the local jurisdictions that identify incremental changes to move them closer to the adopted policies of the Regional Policy Plan.

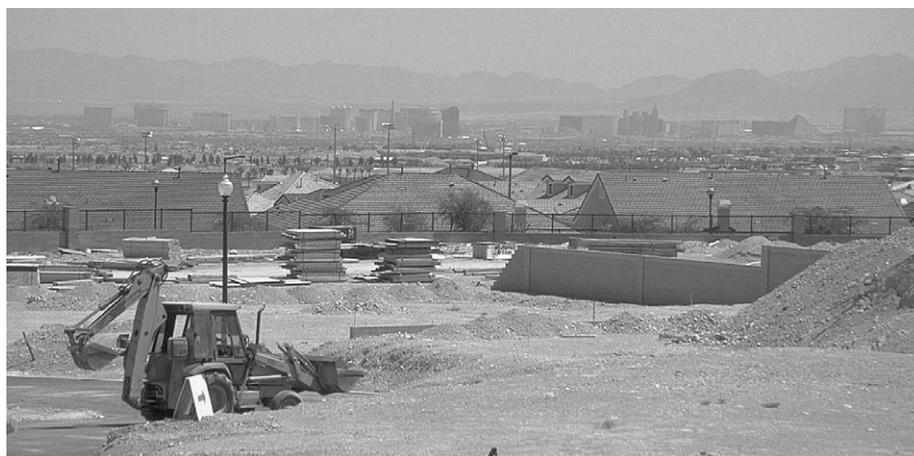
SUMMING UP:

Clearly, no one solution will fit all regions. But as you consider the relationship between local land use decision-making and regionalism, bear in mind that this does not have to be an “either-or” choice between local autonomy and regional responsibility. Be willing to participate in a dialogue about how you can have both. ♦

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⁴ Among the initiatives recommended: creating a series of mixed-use development centers in newly developing areas; convening an interjurisdictional planning committee to improve the identification of school sites; developing a long-range plan to address the issue of homelessness; and creating incentives for infill development. The Plan also includes a number of policies related to development standards, such as: limiting non-contiguous development; requiring local governments to have capital improvement plans consistent with their land use plans; and developing model local regulations and standards for controlling access on major arterials. The Policy Plan can be downloaded from the SNRPC web site: <www.snrpc.org/PolicyPlan.htm>



Housing development in Las Vegas.