

Overcoming barriers to regionalism



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“A region ... is an area safely larger than the last one to whose problems we found no solution.”

-Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Big message(s) up front ...

- One overlooked barrier to regionalism is we advocates: how we talk about it and what we actually mean.
- Here in Madison/Dane County, we actually have more regionalism than we think.
- Today's regionalism needs to be flexible, adaptive, ad hoc, incremental, pragmatic, entrepreneurial, stakeholder driven, problem focused, consensus based, etc.
- There are many alternative institutional arrangements, strategies and policies to accomplishing the goals of regionalism, other than having one centralized regional government or strong regional planning agency.

3 big questions:

- What do we mean by regionalism?
- If regionalism is the answer, what is the question?
- What is the opposite of regionalism?

- These are variants of the fundamental evaluation questions: What is the “problem” to which regionalism is a solution? How is regionalism relevant to the problem? Is regionalism the only and/or best solution to the problem?
- These aren’t just “academic” questions but they go to strategies of implementation, institutional design.

What do we mean by regionalism?

- A centralized, elected regional government ala Portland?
- A regional planning agency with some power or ability to force/incentivize local land use plans to be consistent with a regional plan?
- Voluntary intergovernmental cooperation? Shared service agreements?
- A forum for collaboration and discussion such as a Council of Governments or regional commissions?
- City-County or City-City consolidation?
- Functional regional agencies/special purpose districts (metro sewer districts, transportation authorities, etc.)?
- Shared authority, federal-state-local partnerships such as MPOs (metropolitan planning organizations)?

What do we mean by regionalism?

- A lack of consensus among advocates/proponents of regionalism as to the purposes or goals of regionalism.
 - In fact, there are often deep value conflicts between and among regionalism advocates.
- Our discussions of regionalism are frequently ambiguous and unspecific enough to scare some and inspire few!
- Often, we have focused on the question of institutional design first, rather than on goals first.

What are some major goals typically associated with various regionalism(s)?

1. Regional economic development and competitiveness. (How a region can compete in a global economy).
2. Environmental protection, water quality and open space. (Managing regional resources for quality of life and sustainability).
3. Regional equity. (Improving affordable housing, challenging exclusionary zoning, mitigating fiscal disparities, environmental justice).
4. Regional transportation systems. (Reducing traffic congestion, encouraging public transportation and non-motorized travel, increasing travel choice, jobs-housing balance, accessibility).
5. Urban revitalization. (Infill development, revitalization, redevelopment, historic preservation, urban design).
6. Regional growth management/Smart Growth. (Compact growth, mitigating sprawl, coordinating infrastructure, protecting working landscapes).

Again, the problem may be us ...

- Significant difference in how we might rank the importance of those 6 goal areas.
- Are we willing to admit the goals may be in conflict over some policies/priorities?
- The diagnosis of the “problem” or barrier(s) to achieving each of those 6 goals differs.
- We haven’t had an extensive regional conversation about the winners/losers, strengths/weaknesses, and costs/benefits, tradeoffs of regionalism or non-regionalism on each of these 6 goals.
- Imposing “solutions” through policy changes or institutional changes without adequate stakeholder engagement, goal formulation, consensus and “buy in” may lead to unintended consequences, controversy and may backfire.
- Expand concept of regionalism to include alliances, non-profits, business community, chambers of commerce, etc.

Regionalism in Dane County: glass more than half full

- Although not functionally integrated into a centralized agency, we have workable, pragmatic, incremental regionalism(s) with many pieces in place:
- Functional/sectoral authorities (Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District, Regional Transit Authority, etc.)
- Regional transportation planning organization (Madison Area MPO)
- Regional planning commission/water quality management planning agency (CARPC)
- Regional economic development entity (Thrive)
- Cooperative boundary agreements
- Contracted/joint service agreements (e.g. Madison metro provides bus service to other municipalities.)
- Regional organizations such as Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, etc.
- Strong community development capacity; energized and experienced non-profit sector...
- Already adopted local and county comprehensive plans...

The (perceived) benefits of localism...

- The opposite of regionalism is localism (fragmentation of decision making authority into multiple local jurisdictions).
- Competition between jurisdictions offers potential residents many different tax/service-level choices.
- Inter-jurisdictional competition causes municipal efficiencies, thereby keeping tax rates low(er).
- Local governments are more democratic, accountable, and responsive to citizen engagement than are regional governments or large urban governments.
- Homeowners are more able to monitor local decisions which may adversely affect their property values.
- Local governments less likely to be dominated by bureaucrats or special interest groups.
- Cultural preferences for smaller governments; ideal of New England Town Meeting; suspicion of concentrated political authority.

Differing diagnoses of the problem

- What is the problem to which regionalism is a solution?
Implied is some defect within localism.
- Benign view: local governments respond to their constituents, do the best they can, but are not aware of nor tasked with dealing with spillover effects – “externalities.”
- Good housekeeping view: regional systems require regional governance.
- Economic competitiveness view: fragmented authority makes coordination of economic development difficult.
- Equity view: competition among jurisdictions results in inequity
- Strong regionalist view: local governments, without supervision, are likely to do too much of the wrong things and not enough of the right things.

Identifying barriers to regionalism

- The big 3: money, power, race: sharing and reform not automatic.
- State budget, legislative structure, statutes
- Institutional inertia
- Strong preference for local control, accountability

Overcoming barriers to regionalism

- In successful cases around the country, one or more of the following factors were present:
 - Lawsuit or consent decree
 - Funding contingency from higher level of government
 - Entrepreneurial political leadership
 - Funding incentives from state
 - Fiscal or economic crisis
 - State mandate

Alternatives to regional institutions

- Achieving regional goals without formal regional organizations:
- State: tax base equalization to mitigate fiscal inequities. In Wisconsin we have it (sort of) for school districts and had revenue sharing (somewhat) for municipalities until 2003.
- Some states (not Wisconsin) have case law or statutes to address exclusionary zoning and the distribution of affordable housing.
- Some states mandate vertical or horizontal consistency in comprehensive plans.
- States can incentivize informal partnerships, intergovernmental agreements, collaborative planning, etc.
- Does every regional problem require a regional institution?

Overcoming barriers to regionalism ...

- Build political constituencies, alliances around specific regional issues.
- Avoid regionalism for the sake of regionalism.
- Give up Portland envy.
- Build incrementally on success.
- Convene stakeholders and elected officials
- Identify alternative mechanisms of achieving goals.
- Negotiate and compensate