

Regionalist Paper No. 15

What Gets in the Way? Understanding Why Regionalism Gets Shunted Aside

This is the way our region has grown over the years; it has always been this way; it has historical roots; don't rock the boat; or why change for change's sake - these are some of the less informative reasons sometimes advanced to oppose a regionalist approach to issues in our area. However, other more thoughtful reasons do exist, and they warrant careful examination. Four of these reasons are addressed below. Let's consider the arguments:

1. Fear of loss of control of government. It is the American way to have small governments, to hold town hall meetings, and to give governance responsibilities to people you know and to whom you have reasonable access. Government close to the people is a compelling ideal. Grand government on a large metropolitan scale is the antithesis of this ideal. Instead of City Council members representing 30,000 citizens, metropolitan council members might represent 300,000 citizens, thus diluting the individual citizen's voice and vote.

Around the country, this viewpoint alone has stymied the development of regional governance efficiencies perhaps more than any other. At the same time, we should note that if we are content with having state and federal representatives with large electorates, then regional representatives - especially if directly elected - can also be made accountable to the regional citizenry.

There are modern ways to retain local governments and at the same time have regional governance where needed. Annexation or consolidations are no longer favored methods for building metropolitan governance. Rather, a variety of other satisfactory structural solutions have been implemented around the country. These so-called two-tier or federated structures retain local jurisdictions and their locally-elected governing bodies while concurrently creating regional management entities in the form of districts, authorities or commissions with either broad or narrow powers. Individually, the regional entities may be responsible for a narrowly bounded set of specific government functions, but simply as the result of sheer population growth these functions eventually require regional perspectives and regional solutions¹.

¹ "There is little question of the significant advantages offered by a governmental structure in which those governmental functions which can best be provided on an area-wide basis are performed by an area-wide governmental unit, and those functions which should be performed locally are retained by local governmental units", Marshall Hahn, Jr., *The Report of the Virginia Metropolitan Areas Study Commission* (Senate Document No. 14, 1967), p. 14.

The range of such structural arrangements is enormous, but there are three basic models: (a) voluntary coordination of local government functions where the regional body has no powers other than those of the participating members, (b) regional bodies with powers limited to those necessary to carry out their charter-assigned government functions, or (c) metropolitan government with full powers of authority. The basic distinction is the degree of governing authority—none, some, or all².

In Hampton Roads, the Planning District Commission and Hampton Roads Partnership are examples of the voluntary or type (a) model, while the Metropolitan Planning Organization and Southeastern Public Service are examples of the region's various type (b) planning and public service organizations. The region has no type (c) organization.

In any case, whether the regional structure actually involves a reasonable degree of citizen control probably depends more on whether the directors are directly elected to the governing board or are appointed, and if the latter, whether they are elected local officials or non-elected private persons. It will also depend in practice on how open the governing process of the regional body is to public consultation and media scrutiny.

2. Fear that it will create another layer of government³. This is always a spontaneous and strong dissenting reaction to the idea of regionalism. It assumes regionalism means additional expensive bureaucracy, additional red tape, and additional taxes. The reality, however, can be much different provided the allocation of functions between local and regional levels is designed to avoid duplication and achieve economies of scale.

In Hampton Roads the various authorities, service districts and commissions already constitute a regional layer of entities with some of the attributes of government. Some are not well known: In most cases their boards are appointed rather than elected, they operate largely out of the public eye, and some are responsive to the state rather than the local governments. They are actually more economical than separate city or county

² See Regionalist Paper No. 8, *Regionalism As Advanced Elsewhere; the Spectrum of Regional Structures that has arisen in North America: What are Our Options?*

³ "Most critics of regional governance argue that it would violate the principle of local autonomy and unnecessarily add another layer of government. However, effective, efficient regional governance strikes a balance that allows local control over issues best addressed by smaller local governments (such as public safety, licensing, street maintenance, garbage collection, and purely local land-use or zoning issues), while promoting cooperation among local governments on larger issues affecting the entire region (such as highway and sewer investments, affordable housing, transit, land-use planning, air and water quality, and economic development)", Myron Orfield, *American Metropolitcs: The New Suburban Reality*, (The Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2002), p. 148-149.

departments. And as they need only cover costs rather than earn a profit and pay taxes, they may be more economical than a corresponding private sector service if they are operated efficiently.

The need for a fresh approach to regional governance inevitably arises as the economy and the populations grow unabatedly. In Hampton Roads, specific current-day challenges - such as the adjustments dictated by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission, or the dearth of transportation funding - draw public attention to the need for regional action. Whatever they may be, future challenges will similarly arise needing capable and effective regional governance.

3. Fear that it will cost more money. This argument is the mirror image of the prior one: It assumes regionalism means more bureaucracy, regulation, and taxation. Not necessarily. On the contrary, one of the core motivations for considering regionalism is to cut costs and to move down the efficiency curve to an optimum point of cost-per-citizen versus citizen quality of life. This is a constant pursuit of life and business, and it should be a goal of any governance structure.

Suppose, for example, that each one of our sixteen local governments can afford to employ an average of only five persons on some particular function - that's 80 people - but a regional organization would use only 50 employees to do the work. That kind of integration implies not only a huge cost reduction but also a much more professional operation led by more competent technicians and management. Some such prior calculation supports the present existence of our regional trash disposal and water treatment authorities.

Whether a service consolidation works in practice is entirely a matter of the necessary structure of service delivery and the required amount of management and other overhead functions. A service that requires a large staff close to the citizen "customers" and only a few persons in charge may actually deliver less economy in a consolidation than will a service that is relatively heavy with headquarters personnel in each municipality. If intermediate layers of management must be added in order to create the consolidated entity, no economy may result at all.

Nevertheless, given computers, modern communications, faster travel times, and up-to-date management practices, the presumption is warranted that many of the functions performed by sixteen governments in the relatively small region of Hampton Roads could easily be combined to produce significant savings. Our local governments should therefore be encouraged to deal with their fiscal stress by getting together to look for economies

from shared services⁴. On another level and with the future in mind, community leaders need to study and to adopt the right kind of modern regional governance structure that best fits Hampton Roads for the coming decades.

4. Being satisfied with a cosmetic solution. This “argument” is never stated openly as a reason for shunting aside effective regionalism. But taking the easy way out in confronting problems, or bringing to bear less than an in-depth effort, is a typical human failing. Introducing regionalist concepts and processes is not at all an easy thing to do because it calls for changes in behavior and structures. Reform is not for the faint of heart.

Regional problems are usually confronted initially by just a handful of well-meaning and bright community leaders, or by huddled organizers in a quiet back room, distrustful of public opinion. Also the effort is often deemed to be one that can be achieved by voluntary methods. Cooperation is said to be enough, neither necessitating legislation nor clear assignments of authority, nor accountability nor even much public awareness. But in the current literature on regionalism, practitioners uniformly point out the sharp limits of the “voluntary” approach to regionalism.

Local leaders may consider that the macro or regional view is not their business, that regional issues are for the state or federal government to handle, or that new methods of regional governance are too complex for the public to understand. In this regard, authors on the subject strongly warn that one must manage one’s own region rather than wait for guidance from elsewhere. Where regionalist success has been achieved, either (a) the need for regional reform had reached clear and even dire levels, or (b) forward-looking leaders guided reform and the development of regional governance, tailored to their particular metropolitan area. In reacting or planning ahead, the leaders and citizens involved in these modernizations of governance cases did not underwhelm the effort.

Regional reform also often takes time, especially where there is a need to build considerable community awareness. It took twenty years for the public to decide to approve a regional government for Louisville, KY. Toronto only metropolitanized after decades of losing ground to the then more competitive Montreal. Similar experiences were shared by Nashville, the Twin Cities Metro, the Portland Metro, Miami, Greater Dallas, and others. Their reward has been better economic performance and an enhanced quality of life for their regional citizens.

These experiences suggest that any effort to improve regional cooperation calls for comprehensive evaluation of existing practices, careful analysis of alternatives, extensive public discussion, and determined leadership.

Ray Taylor and James F. Babcock, *Future of Hampton Roads*, November 2005

⁴ See Regionalist Papers No. 11 and 12, *Funding Regionalism: What are the Options?* and *Revenue Sharing as a Component of Regionalism: What are the Issues?* for related discussions.