

Guest Editorial # 3 Regionalism: An Economic Catalyst

The best description of a region comes from a publication by the Center of Governmental Studies written in the late 1990s: “A region is a community of interests that may be as small as a single neighborhood or as large as several states or even nations. Thinking regionally means thinking beyond political boundaries to the boundaries of those sharing a common interest. It means understanding that planning within a region is not synonymous with regional planning. It means building coalitions that often are informal and tailored to specific projects focusing on job creation, tourism, transportation, land use, housing, any combination of these, or any other issues with a regional impact.”

There are several strategies that can be implemented to achieve regionalism. The first method is to utilize government to consolidate or collaborate. The collaboration can be informal — or as formal as creating a “regional government.”

The second strategy is to utilize the expertise of the private and non-profit sectors (in cooperation with the public sector) to take on initiatives that can be formally or informally organized and create a form of regional governance.

Regions are fluid. One geographic area may partner with another area on land use and transportation issues and partner with yet another area on economic development programs. Regions can still compete, yet they can come together on common issues to solve problems, plan, or create a vision. The reasons for partnering may be for short-term issues or projects, or a long-term partnership.

Many of us live, work, shop, and play without regard to political borders. Rarely does a person live, work, and purchase all of his/her goods and services in a particular community. Businesses do not buy all their goods and services, hire all their employees, and sell all their products in one community. Therefore, most individuals and businesses operate within more than one region.

Elected officials deal with regional issues. Airports, roadways, and major venues are not based on political boundaries. They are regional assets. Regardless of political affiliation, all communities deal with public safety, essential services, and administrative duties.

Regional cooperation is much more than inter-governmental cooperation. Regional cooperation brings together government, education, private, and non-profit sectors. A common interest exists in creating sustainable communities and social equity. This practice is called civic leadership or regional stewardship. It exists when the various stakeholders develop a commitment to the long-term well-being of a place or places. This commitment could lead toward regional governance as described above.

Regional stewardship is responsible for many successes across the nation. California used it to shape statewide public policy; Silicon Valley used it to develop a regional

vision and plan. Others have used it for business attraction, tourism marketing, and broadband initiatives.

In northeastern PA we already see traces of this concept being utilized through the regional business attraction efforts led by Penn's Northeast, interstate transportation through the Focus 81 project led by NEPA Alliance and the technology initiative through NEPA Technology Institute.

Looking at it from the public sector side, regionalism does not necessarily mean breaking up or eliminating governments or creating another level of government, i.e. regional government. Regionalism can mean regional governance that includes combining and sharing government functions, services, goals, and expectations, all for the greater good of an area.

By regionalizing, our area can better position itself for federal funds in a number of programs, ranging from housing to economic development. Collaboration and partnerships are key to many federal grant programs. Regionalism allows for financial savings, delivering quality services, greater political and economic clout, realistic community plans, resolution of environmental concerns, and a balancing of community strengths and weaknesses.

Local governments in Illinois have used regionalism for airport planning. Illinois and Iowa formed a regional entity for a rail project. In the Denver area, county and municipal governments have joined together in a voluntary compact to establish an urban growth boundary.

We are beginning to see interest in expanding regional opportunities. This already exists in the formation of the Luzerne County Government Cooperation Commission. County Commissioners from Luzerne and Lackawanna County share seats on the Airport Authority Board for the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton International Airport. We also see some partnering from local Councils of Governments (COGS) on transportation issues in some of our smaller suburbs.

The Joint Urban Studies Center (JUSC) will continue to highlight examples of successful regional efforts across the nation and attempt to convene both regional stewards and local governments to work cooperatively on regional issues.

JUSC is a research-based think tank founded by Wilkes University. In partnership with College Misericordia, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Penn State/Wilkes-Barre, and the University of Scranton, JUSC was formed to educate, strategize, and convene on urban renewal, community and economic development.

Teri Ooms is the Executive Director of the Joint Urban Studies Center. A native of Scranton, Ooms has returned to northeastern Pennsylvania after serving as President & CEO of a regional economic development corporation in southern California.