



A partnership among Keystone College, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Commonwealth Medical College, University of Scranton, & Wilkes University

Regionalization

Pennsylvania is a state that exhibits fragmentation on a number of levels, which affects both its public and non-profit sectors. Such fragmentation results in duplicitous efforts, undermining of economic stabilization and wasteful spending. In northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA), residents often do not work in the same town in which they live in, nor do they buy all their goods and services in a single jurisdiction. While the region has changed, its governmental framework has not kept pace.

NEPA is a region that consists of a multitude of local governments that share a common market and depend on one another for the free flow of goods, services, consumers and ideas. The region, however, is divided into hundreds of small political jurisdictions that often compete for residents, businesses and property tax revenues.

Every borough, township, city and county in NEPA requires investments in roads, physical infrastructure and money to support public services, safety, schools, social services and non-profit organizations. All of these services rely on local government, in full or in part, to fund such initiatives. Currently, local government is not able to fully fund public safety and public services to the desired levels, including 24 hour coverage and enough officers to conduct ongoing criminal investigations and complaints. Schools continue to raise property taxes, with the increasing costs of education, including facilities, salaries, benefits, and pensions, all while state support is decreasing. Tough economic times have reduced philanthropy and increased the need for various social services to address increased poverty, homelessness and the uninsured and underinsured.

No longer can we look at single jurisdictions as islands, or allow for isolation between business, government, non-profits and institutions. While geographic boundaries and political districts matter for certain activities, they impede progress and innovation in other areas, the most common of which include:

- Police
- Fire
- Public education / school districts
- Government
- Economic Development
- Planning

Police

Local governments are struggling to pay for public safety services. Some jurisdictions survive with no full-time staff, while others rely on state police to fill gaps during evening hours. Some jurisdictions have just one officer on duty at a time, which can result in many incidents remaining unmonitored. This also reduces police time needed to investigate crimes, and therefore results in a lower number of crimes solved. None of these factors benefit community residents.

However, if two or more communities join together to support a regional police force, then crime fighting power is increased. Depending on the nature of the agreement, regional efforts can save money over time and result in improved public safety.

While this approach makes sense, the process involve in getting there isn't easy. Planning must occur and choices must be made. Decisions concerning unions, benefits, organizational structure and leadership are critical.

There have been many attempts in NEPA to regionalize policing, but all have failed. There are cases where leadership doesn't want it, as well as where compromises cannot be reached. Five Luzerne County planning committees representing various contiguous communities began the planning phase of regional policing in the mid-2000s; all failed.

Documented success stories pertaining to regional policing, both within and outside of Pennsylvania, should be evaluated as potential models. Numerous case studies present important best practices.

Fire

Very few municipalities in NEPA have paid firefighters on active duty 24/7, with most relying on volunteers. From community to community, this results in varying levels of coverage, response times and overall service reliability.

Public Education / School Districts

The sheer number of school districts within each county, given the size of the region and its population, is disproportionate. Many states have one school district per county, which allows for the sharing of property tax revenue that evens the playing field among school districts, regardless of the socio-economic status. Cost savings in salaries, benefits and pensions, as well as increased buying power for negotiating the costs of needed goods and services, is a strong reason to regionalize, as cost savings realized could be used toward bettering education itself.

Government

Similar to school district regionalization, the government playing field could be leveled by more collaboration/consolidation among communities. The same economies of scale referenced above apply to government. Consolidating health and pension plans to reduce administrative costs, hiring professional managers or additional staff to fill in gaps, less major equipment purchases and/or better utilization of existing equipment are all opportunities to improve buying power.

All of the aforementioned areas have the ability to improve quality and depth of service while reducing tax payer burdens. In addition, socio-economic imbalances could be reduced. While these would all be considered wins, the process to regionalize government would not be easy. It would take time, cost money, and perhaps everyone would have to make some concessions, but in the end the average resident reaps the benefits.

Economic Development

Economic development is another area which could benefit from a regional approach. There are a number of area organizations involved in economic development and many compete with each other. There is also a lack of understanding that economic development is more than business attraction, it is also the creation, expansion, and retention of business while working to create an environment conducive to business growth and sustainability. Successful economic development deals not only with the business regulatory environment, but also encompasses every aspect of quality of life.

Planning

In NEPA, there now exists a Regional Use Plan to help guide future development. It is critical for the plan to be implemented and followed. A challenge the region faces is the decline of retail in its downtowns. The once vibrant Steamtown Mall, in Scranton, is now working to reinvent itself after a number of stores relocated to The Shoppes at Montage, in Moosic. Likewise, some stores at The Shoppes at Montage have closed and now only operate at regional malls in Dickson City (Viewmont Mall) and Wilkes-Barre Township (Wyoming Valley Mall); and so the problem continues. A regional plan may have helped to identify niche retailers that

would be successful in the local market while at the same time complementing the region's existing retail establishments.

Conclusion

NEPA is at a cross roads. As the recession lifts, there remains relatively high unemployment, with incomes not keeping pace with the increasing cost of living, population increases, and nearby Marcellus Shale development. However, more and more studies identify that economic regions are performing better and in a stronger position to address issues and capture new opportunities.

With the state and federal government at a loss to assist municipal governments as their own fiscal issues take center stage, communities around the country are working together as regions to harness their collective power to solve problems. For example, regions in California, New York, and Ohio are working together to attract new business and industry. Other regions in California, Colorado, and Oregon are working on regional smart growth/green strategies to increase efficiency and improve the environment. Still others are working on regional transportation networks. There is recognition that quality of life factors that are maintained and improved attract talent. Talent attracts jobs!

Policy

The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties implementing a unified regional approach to regional problems in an effort to increase economic growth, sustainability and social equity. As such:

- The Institute supports the formation of regional police and fire forces.
- The Institute supports and encourages collective implementation of the Bi-County Comprehensive Plan.
- The Institute supports regional transportation and infrastructure planning to make targeted investments to improve all forms of infrastructure.
- The Institute supports collaboration among non-profits to reduce duplicity to direct more funds to initiatives that address problems.
- The Institute supports housing initiatives that encourage mixed use, infill, redevelopment, transit oriented development and fair housing initiatives that reduce segregation and concentrated poverty.

- The Institute supports collaboration amongst local government in terms of public services, public safety; back office operations; group benefit and pension programs that allow communities to reduce administrative costs and take advantage of pricing economies of scale; investment in machinery and equipment; purchasing coalitions; code enforcement; aesthetics; and infrastructure investment.
- The Institute supports regional tax base sharing.