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Introduction

Many aspects of planning, infrastructure management, and community and economic development have historically been fragmented in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Challenges extend beyond the boundaries of single municipalities, townships, cities, and even counties. Regional planning involves addressing issues that span multiple jurisdictions, calling for a holistic approach to solving the economic, social, and environmental difficulties and disparities for a given geography. Both regional and urban planning may be necessary for a multitude of reasons, such as community building, accommodation of population growth, and economic revitalization.¹ In 2023, the Regional Competitiveness Task Force prepared a primer of regional planning agencies as a way to increase effectiveness of planning activities. Several case studies were presented from other regions within Pennsylvania to illustrate possible models to adopt in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This report will focus further on implementation of such a strategy.²

Three case studies were examined in the 2023 report:

- The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (LVPC) was founded in 1961 and serves Lehigh and Northampton Counties with a staff of approximately 20. The commission consists of 37 members appointed by each county government. The commission prepares bi-county comprehensive plans and other regional plans, serves as the regional MPO, offers technical assistance to municipal officials, reviews subdivision and land development activity in an advisory capacity, and functions in place of staff for several municipalities that do not have subdivision and land development ordinances (SALDOs).
- Northern Tier Regional Planning and Development Commission (NTRPDC) serves a rural region with a combined population of about 177,000 people. The commission, founded in 1970, has an executive committee of each commissioner from the five counties, a private sector representative from each county, and a sixth at-large private sector representative. Each county maintains independent planning commissions and staff, but NTRPDC serves as the MPO and coordinates transportation planning and also serves roles in regional economic and workforce development.
- The Tri-County Regional Planning Commission (TCRPC) was founded in 1966 and serves Cumberland, Dauphin, and Perry Counties. The board consists of 19 members appointed by commissioners of the three counties. They represent a combination of county planning commission members, county commissioners, and community members. The commission houses the regional MPO, oversees the regional growth management plan, and functions as the day-to-day staff of two of the three counties' planning commissions.

The 2023 report concluded that while Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties already collaborate in several areas, including the bi-county comprehensive plans and the metropolitan planning organization, a more centralized regional planning structure could result in better coordinated and uniform decisions. It could also produce opportunities to increase staff capacity, including the hire of specialized professionals such as engineers, urban designers, historic/farmland preservation staff, bicycle/pedestrian planners, or experts in municipal technical assistance and training.

Building the Case for a NEPA Regional Consortia

A regional planning commission can increase direct funding to northeastern Pennsylvania as these types of organizations are recognized as local public agencies by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. A regional agency works beyond traditional local boundaries and connects communities based on their local economies, transportation, and labor shed. This approach tends to address challenges more effectively, efficiently, and equitably than fragmented efforts. Regional planning commissions play an important role in connecting funding sources with various entities to effectively implement programs and initiatives. Through interagency cooperation facilitated by a regional planning entity, local governments can establish connections with the federal government, fostering stronger program integration and collaboration. Furthermore, by uniting typically separate issues such as housing and transportation, regional planning ensures a coordinated approach to address multifaceted challenges comprehensively. Given that Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA) consists of many small communities and governmental agencies, the area could benefit significantly with regional approaches and open access to other funding sources.³

The Institute recommends that regional leaders explore the concept of forming a regional planning entity with the capacity to address disparate building codes and zoning laws to encourage the best use of land; to coordinate transportation and ensure connectivity among job centers and housing; and to coordinate the availability of housing stock across various price points and types to accommodate diverse needs within the community. (This includes single-family homes, multi-family residences, senior housing, accessible housing, and housing tailored for individuals with intellectual disabilities.) Finally, a regional planning entity can convene regional economic and workforce development initiatives to prepare and plan for growth and sustainability. Social, economic, and environmental considerations would therefore be addressed.

This recommendation takes the initial Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) concept developed and promoted by The Institute in 2012 and aims for greater inclusivity. The RTA recommendation made by The Institute called for a regional agency consisting of the public transit systems, airport, and rail authority to come together under one umbrella and coordinate regional transportation. Despite several attempts and financial support from the Commonwealth, the entities could not agree on an action plan.

Review of Case Studies

Lehigh Valley Planning Commission

The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (LVPC) was founded in 1961 and serves Lehigh and Northampton Counties (a combined population of approximately 690,000 people). The commission consists of 37 members appointed by each county government. It includes elected and appointed officials as well as county residents. The commission employs a professional staff of approximately 20, with administrators, planners, engineers, data scientists, and geographic information systems (GIS) professionals.

These are the activities of the planning commission:

- Comprehensive planning, including preparation of the bi-county comprehensive plan
- Transportation planning, by serving as the region's MPO



- Preparation and maintenance of a regional sewer and water plan, with advocacy for consistent policies at the local level
- Open space planning, farmland preservation, and park planning
- Stormwater management planning for all 16 watersheds in the region, in accordance with Act 167 (LVPC also reviews subdivision and land development plans within both counties for compliance with stormwater standards)
- Technical assistance, model ordinances, courses for municipal officials, and assistance for municipal comprehensive plans
- Review of all subdivision and land development activity in an advisory capacity, with function as professional staff for several municipalities that do not have subdivision and land development ordinances (SALDOs)
- Research, publication, and mapping

Tri County Regional Planning Commission

The Tri-County Regional Planning Commission (TCRPC) was founded in 1966 and serves Cumberland, Dauphin, and Perry Counties (a combined population approximately 600,000 people). The board consists of 19 members appointed by commissioners of the three counties. They represent a combination of county planning commission members, county commissioners, at-large members representing entire counties, and individuals representing designated planning areas within each county. The organization employs a professional staff of approximately 11, with planning, GIS, communications, and administrative staff.

These are TCRPC's primary activities:

- Oversight of the regional growth management plan
- The Harrisburg Area Transportation Study (the region's MPO)
- Function as the day-to-day staff for the Dauphin County planning commission and Perry County planning commission

The organization also provides training and technical assistance.

Northern Tier Regional Planning and Development Commission

Northern Tier Regional Planning and Development Commission (NTRPDC) serves Bradford, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, and Wyoming Counties – a rural region with a combined population of about 177,000 people. The commission, founded in 1970, has an executive committee of each commissioner from the five counties, a private sector representative from each county, and a sixth at-large private sector representative. Although each county maintains independent planning commissions and staff to perform most planning functions, NTRPDC serves as the MPO and coordinates transportation planning.

Several other government services, such as grantwriting and information technology assistance, are provided on the regional level. NTRPDC also serves a role in economic development. It acts as the local development district (LDD) and coordinator of Partnerships for Regional Economic Performance (PREP) in the Northern Tier region. Furthermore, NTRPDC administers regional workforce development and business assistance programs. In Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, some of these roles are performed by NEPA Alliance, which also houses an MPO that covers several counties (but not Lackawanna or Luzerne).

Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)

The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) was formed under the state of Georgia's planning act to help local governments in their planning efforts. ARC is one of 12 in the state, with the mission *"to foster thriving communities for all within the Atlanta region through collaborative, data informed planning and investments."* Their work covers transportation, housing, economic development, aging services, water resources management, workforce development, and homeland security.⁴ The organization has developed strategic goals with multiple objectives under each focus area, and invites citizen members to serve on its board along with the elected officials.

The organization develops specific plans for the areas under its purview and ensures that each plan is connected and coordinated with the other. Many of its initiatives receive federal funding to support the work. The organization implements several of its own initiatives in addition to collaborating and supporting other organizations.

Metropolitan Area Council

The Metropolitan Council serves the greater Minneapolis area. It was formed in 1967 with the acknowledgement of regional challenges and the need for regional solutions. The Council sets policy to guide growth and includes 181 cities and townships, seven counties, and a combination of other public or quasi-public agencies, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Residents are invited to serve on various subject matter committees.⁵ This Council provides transit services, wastewater collection, and affordable housing, and also conducts the regional plans involving growth, transportation, outdoor recreation, water management, and aviation.

The program work highlighted in the case studies exhibits diversity and some similarities. It is apparent that the organizations evolved over time and expanded their scopes. They all demonstrate collaboration among stakeholders, citizen engagement, the realization that regional coordination leads to a variety of efficiencies in operations, and – more importantly – improved quality of life for the residents in their regions.

Roadmap to a Regional Planning Authority

The organizations profiled above were all founded in the 1960s and 1970s, and the formation of regional planning organizations in the 21st century is far less precedented in the Commonwealth. Therefore, a move toward a regional planning commission in Northeastern Pennsylvania could take one of several forms. The roadmap that follows provides an incremental path toward a bi-county regional planning commission.

Exploratory Phase and Stakeholder Convening

The first phase of implementation requires the convening of all relevant stakeholders from county governments, including county commissioners/council members, administrators, county planning commissioners, and senior members of planning staff.

During these exploratory meetings, several external entities can be engaged to provide technical assistance and guidance. These entities may include:

- Pennsylvania's State Planning Board
- The Governor's Center for Local Government Services
- Organizations of public officials, such as the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania

- The Institute and the Regional Competitiveness Task Force

After one or more exploratory meetings, working groups can be formed to educate county and municipal elected officials and employees. Group members can solicit feedback, answer questions, and if necessary, revise the workplan in response to input received.

Before any official actions are taken, public input and participation should also be solicited.

Development of Charter and Makeup of the Planning Authority Commissioners

Development of an official charter and workplan for the regional planning authority should begin on the foundation of the existing Lackawanna-Luzerne Metropolitan Planning Organization, which is the designated MPO for both counties. In addition to preparing the region's Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), the MPO coordinates other regional plans such as the Bi-County Comprehensive Plan.⁶

A new charter and bylaws can be drafted to expand the MPO's coordinating committee and reflect the Authority's purpose as the region's primary planning entity.

Startup of Northeastern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Authority

After a charter for the Regional Planning Authority is developed, the participating counties can adopt policies transferring some planning responsibilities to the new authority. This can be treated as an expansion and restructuring of the existing Lackawanna-Luzerne MPO.

The organization should begin the process of combining existing plans into a complete regional plan that includes the additional functions of the Authority and which aligns with current legislation.

Act 230 governing county planning commissions was enacted in 1953. There have been a series of updates since that time. Title 53 now consolidates the various laws related to regional planning commissions and regional planning. The most recent update pertains to commission members, stipulating that the members of the Regional Planning Authority Commission primarily consist of elected officials from the participating counties and residents of those counties who are not county employees but who have subject matter expertise.⁷ According to Subchapter C, section 2344, a commission adopts its own rules for the transaction of business and members (municipalities) may be requested to conduct special studies or surveys to support various aspects of the commission's scope of work.

Existing planning staff are critical to an uninterrupted transfer of work to the Regional Planning Authority. The first 30 – 45 days of establishment should focus on ensuring all routine tasks are covered, there is no duplication of efforts, and new initiatives are underway. A program of cross-training should be implemented to instill a collective understanding of the work to be done.

Delegation of County Planning Commission Duties to Regional Body

In the case of Tri-County Regional Planning Commission (TCRPC), two counties use the organization as their own planning commission while the third (Cumberland) retains its own planning commission and is a part of TCRPC for regional planning only. Only those two are represented in the makeup of the Planning Commission.⁸

When the Regional Planning Authority has been formed as an independent entity, counties in Northeastern Pennsylvania may also choose to transition the powers and responsibilities of their

planning commissions to the Authority. They may discontinue operations of their own planning departments after transferring planning department staff to the new entity.

Also, in the case of TCRPC, day-to-day planning staff for the participating counties are housed within the regional commission headquarters. The organization also houses a separate county planning commission for both Perry and Dauphin Counties, which are comprised of members from their respective counties. An approach such as this in NEPA may afford counties additional flexibility and present fewer legal or procedural hurdles to establish, though a single decision-making body with full county membership would likely result in closer alignment in planning decisions that have potential regional impact. For example, a housing development spanning more than one municipality does not have to have its plans submitted, approved, and inspected by more than one public agency nor will it run into conflicting rules and regulations that could be in place in adjacent municipalities.

Capacity Building for Special Projects and Municipal Technical Assistance

Consolidating resources of multiple counties' planning departments into a single office allows for economies of scale that could prove beneficial after a startup phase. Most importantly, a regional entity provides for cohesive planning and implementation of planning and land use functions.

The entity will also be a vehicle for municipalities to become eligible for state and federal grants and other funding opportunities. The organization could establish performance standards to ensure consistency and potentially create excellence benchmarks, making municipalities eligible for increased funding or enhanced services based on their performance.

Subsequent Opportunities to Expand Regional Planning

Economic and Workforce Development

Economic and workforce development are interconnected. Economic development efforts focus on business attraction, retention, creation, and expansion while fostering an environment in which businesses can operate efficiently in a "place" where employees want to live.

Many organizations outside the County governments conduct economic development work. They include nonprofits, Chambers of Commerce, and local government. A regional planning entity could pull the disparate providers together and collaborate to ensure that efforts are complementary. This would also facilitate great parity for each county. Many businesses conduct activities across jurisdictional lines, so this regional approach would benefit the private sector.

Workforce development is currently conducted at regional levels that do not entirely match labor shed areas and the efforts appear to be driven through a state plan as opposed to an effort to address local needs. For example, Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties share a labor pool, yet they are placed in different workforce development regions. This systemic challenge has resulted in 36 workforce development programs operating in Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties. There is limited or no collaboration among those programs or among the workforce development boards. A regional effort could encourage collaboration in program delivery, thereby improving outcomes.

Environmental Resources and Climate Change

The Regional Planning Authority could also adopt a climate action plan that would set goals for emissions, prepare progress reports, and monitor change. Federal grant opportunities could fund this

type of work. The Lehigh Valley Regional Planning Agency does include climate change planning under its purview.

A regional plan could incorporate measures to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollutants, with transportation being a significant focus area given the authority's jurisdiction over transportation matters. Other areas could include manufacturing, waste and materials management, agriculture, and commercial and residential building.

Further, water resource management presents another environmental challenge that the Regional Planning Authority could address. Despite the existence of various river basin organizations and municipal water supply companies, there's potential for the Agency to facilitate information sharing and foster collaboration among stakeholders.

Public Health

Public health and wellness naturally align with initiatives related to environmental and climate change planning, transportation, housing, and equity. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, The Institute completed an assessment of public health in Pennsylvania and identified an opportunity to create a connected system of resources in the region. Lackawanna County has since moved to form its own public health department (which is nearly operational at the time of this writing), and the City of Wilkes-Barre has one as well. There is no connection between the two, however, and many areas in the region are reliant on disparate and limited state offerings. Prior Institute research has highlighted economic interdependence in the region and illustrated that people move beyond the small jurisdictional boundaries. There lies an opportunity to connect resources and serve uncovered populations by incorporating a public health component into a regional planning agency.

Public health can naturally improve through housing and environmental factors, but education and vaccination as well as a regional public health emergency plan have the propensity to enhance resident health while also protecting communities in the advent of a public health emergency.

Housing

Regional planning can benefit housing as well. The factors that contribute to local housing needs, such as employment and transportation, are regional in nature. Housing, like most other elements discussed in this report, does not respect jurisdictional boundaries. Housing is also based on economic conditions and a regional economy is that basis. By adopting a regional approach, smaller communities can benefit from a more equitable playing field in terms of human and financial resources. Regional housing strategics can include policies, programs, investments, and collective or individual development.

Collaborative regional efforts are instrumental in addressing housing shortages and affordability, thereby fostering more equitable solutions that ensure housing is distributed fairly among communities. This approach is particularly crucial because zoning policies that restrict multi-family or affordable housing options can perpetuate economic and racial segregation.

A regional planning entity could collect housing data as part of a broad needs assessment and use it to craft regional strategies and funding streams to balance supply and demand at various price points for different types of housing across all communities in the region. Even with a regional strategy in place, each municipality could develop its own priorities that align with the regional framework. Perhaps the most important feature of a regional housing plan is the flexibility for funding to be pooled (and perhaps

matched by other sources) to support development and ensure availability of multiple family homes, single family homes, accessible homes, and housing for seniors.

There are many examples of regional housing strategies that are developed by consortiums of local government partners and public private partnerships. Some focus on housing only and others incorporate transportation. Strategies provided in the examples [here](#) could form a basis for incorporating housing into a regional planning entity.⁹ Additionally, there are many examples of housing being incorporated into formal regional planning entities. The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) is both an MPO and COG for the San Diego region. This organization includes elected officials and representatives from the transportation sector, including the Port and the Water Authorities. The Denver Regional Council of Governments and the Puget Sound Regional Council connect planning, housing, and transportation under their regional planning organizations.¹⁰

Equity

Several regional plans detailed in this report emphasize the importance of incorporating social equity considerations, particularly through the integration of affordable housing with other developments. For instance, the Atlanta Plan's framework acknowledges that the racial and ethnic profile of Atlanta's population is undergoing a dramatic shift and assumes there will be no majority racial or ethnic group in the near future. In addition, it considers demographic changes that are affecting the composition of households and points out that future development must accommodate these changes. Envision Utah also points to the importance of providing housing opportunities for a range of income types, and Chicago GoTo 2040 prioritizes livable communities and workforce development in which social equity considerations are implicit.

Transportation

Several modes of transportation affect regional planning. Although standard motor vehicles comprise most local transportation, bikes, rail, trucks, airplanes, and other vehicles must be considered. Additionally, in a city or any densely populated area, organizing efficient and accessible public transportation can be of great benefit to residents.

The creation of efficient traffic patterns that mitigate congestion is a major challenge associated with development of regional transportation infrastructure, however. Traffic volume continues to increase every year, with rural interstates experiencing the largest surge. During the regional planning process, there are several ways to establish an effective and unified traffic system that prevents congestion.¹¹

Transportation planning is coordinated primarily through Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs). These entities are responsible for development and administration of Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPs) and Long-Range Transportation Plans, which guide federal and state funds toward specific transportation projects. Many MPOs conduct other planning activities related to transportation.

Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties currently operate with a joint MPO serving both counties and staffed by planners from each county planning department. This is one area in which a regional approach is already underway, though most MPOs in Pennsylvania are organizations with their own planning staffs separate from county governments.

In 2012, The Institute developed a policy statement on regional transportation planning. The organization recommended that the public transit agencies, airport, and regional rail authority form a

Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) similar to SEPTA in the greater Philadelphia region. This entity could become the third largest in Pennsylvania, and as a result would be eligible for federal funding opportunities that are not available to smaller, separate entities. Efforts moved forward with a state grant for planning, but activities quickly stalled. If it advanced, the region would likely have had a decade of federal transit money available for projects.

Incorporating transit with land use planning allows for integration based not just on growth patterns, but existing commuting patterns.

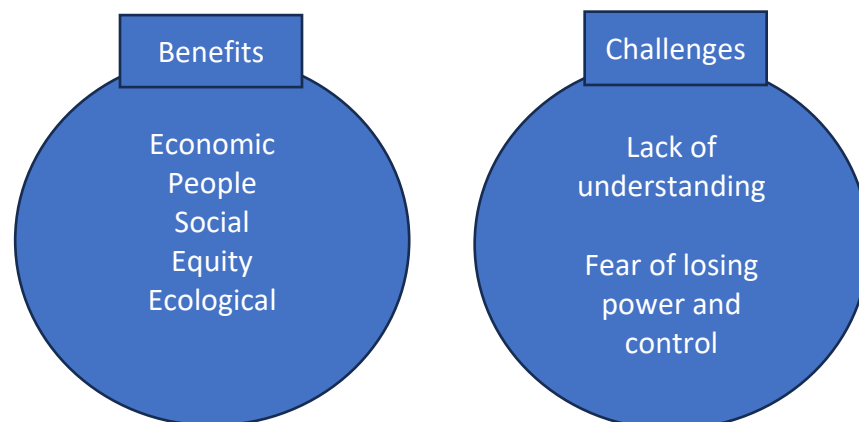
Stakeholder Benefits and Challenges (or Challengers)

Benefits to regional planning commissions in economically interdependent regions appear to outweigh the detriments. From an economic perspective, there is more public funding available for regional initiatives and less chance for duplication of funding efforts when there is a regional approach. Therefore, regional planning commissions are financially efficient. Given that all sectors face workforce challenges, a shared workforce also enhances efficiency by reducing talent competition among individual agencies.

Stormwater and floodplains necessitate regional solutions because they defy municipal boundaries. Human activity disregards such boundaries as well. Coupled with the facts that individuals do not live, work, or play in only one municipality and each municipality borders a number of others, social, ecological, ethical, and equity considerations can be better addressed on a regional level than at the municipal level.

Furthermore, history in northeastern Pennsylvania already demonstrates that sprawling development and lack of coordinated transportation are substantial barriers to economic prosperity and quality of life. Similarly, residential development is impeded when swaths of land cross municipal boundaries – leaving potential for conflicting regulations and twice the planning, permitting, and inspecting needed for a single project.

Upon review of regional planning history and case study, no significant challenges or failures were discovered. It appears that human resistance may be the biggest challenge to forming a regional planning organization. This hesitation results from lack of understanding surrounding the potential and benefits of regional planning commissions, and fear of losing power and control.



Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Based on the successful case studies both within and outside of Pennsylvania, the successful long history of regional planning commissions, and the current fragmented approach to problem solving and planning, The Institute and the Regionalism Task Force strongly encourage regional leaders to convene a summit to discuss forming an exploratory task force for a regional planning commission in northeastern Pennsylvania.

Endnotes

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