

Learning to Think and Act Like a Region
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The Pawcatuck Borderlands illustrates what is fast becoming one of the major puzzles in land use policy – how to plan across boundaries. Countless examples across the country (and arguably the world) demonstrate two fundamental points (Foster 2001; Porter and Wallis 2002; McKinney et al. 2002). First, the territory of many land use problems transcends the legal and geographic reach of existing jurisdictions and institutions (public, private, and other). In the Borderlands area, the spatial dimension of the problems created by increasing population growth and demand for municipal services cuts across multiple jurisdictions.

This mismatch between the geography of the problem and the geography of existing institutions leads to the second point: the people affected by such problems have interdependent interests, which means that none of them have sufficient power or authority to adequately address the problems on their own, yet self-interest often impedes cooperation.

These observations are not new. The history of regionalism in America dates back to at least the mid-nineteenth century and the writing of John Wesley Powell (McKinney et al. 2004). As we move into the twenty-first century, there seem to be two basic responses to this planning puzzle. The first is to create new regional institutions or realign existing institutions to correspond to the territory of the problem, and the second is to start with more informal, ad hoc regional forums.

Some of the more notable examples of regional land use institutions include the Lake Tahoe Regional Planning Authority (1969), Adirondack Park Agency (1971), New Jersey Pinelands Commission (1979), and the Cape Cod Commission (1990). The impetus to establish such entities requires a significant amount of political commitment upfront, or sometimes legal pressure from influential court cases. Once the regional organizations are established, they tend to require a great deal of effort to sustain. This largely explains why there have been so few proposals to create such institutions in the past few decades (see Jensen 1965; Derthick 1974; Robbins et al. 1983; and Calthorpe and Fulton 2001).

Rather than create new institutions, leaders in more than 450 regions across the country have realigned existing institutions to form regional councils, which generally do not have the authority to make and impose decisions per se, but are designed to foster regional cooperation and the delivery of services. In New England, these organizations have evolved to fill the vacuum left by weak county government, and their boundaries often follow county boundaries, which may or may not correspond to the territory of the problem.

The second response, which is more common these days, is to bring together the “right” people with the best available information in tailor-made, ad hoc forums. This approach, which might be termed “regional network governance,” is more bottom-up than top-down, and depends largely on the ability of the participants to build and sustain informal networks to get things done. In some cases these ad hoc forums lay the groundwork to create more formal regional institutions in the future.

Obstacles to Regional Networks

Of course, building and sustaining regional networks is easier said than done. Our research and experience suggest there are four primary obstacles to planning across boundaries. First, the very nature of thinking and acting like a region raises questions about the participants and scope of the problem: Who should take the lead in organizing and convening regional conversations, and who else should be involved? What issues should be on the agenda? How should the region be defined? How can multiple parties – public, private, and nonprofit—share the responsibilities and costs to achieve identified goals? Even where regional planning councils exist, the rules governing or guiding such

efforts are not clear.

Second, the value of working together is not always apparent or shared. As with other forms of multiparty negotiation, it is difficult to mobilize and engage people unless and until they believe that they are more likely to achieve their objectives through regional collaboration than by acting independently. Public officials may be reluctant to engage for fear that such efforts will undermine their authority, and business leaders and real estate developers may view collaboration as something not worth their time. Local citizens often cringe at the idea of regional planning, thinking that someone who does not live in the local area will be making decisions about their land. Other stakeholders may simply have different priorities or a better alternative to satisfy their interests.

Third, many people are unfamiliar with the process of regional collaboration, and that uncertainty makes them feel uncomfortable and reluctant. In addition, people may lack the skills to organize and represent their constituency, deal with scientifically complex issues, and negotiate effectively in a multiparty setting. Others may be uneasy with the organic nature of ad hoc regional forums, and how they should be linked to formal decision-making processes.

Even if participants can overcome these obstacles, their effectiveness at regional collaboration is often limited by a fourth factor: lack of resources. In an assessment of about 75 established regional initiatives in the West, nearly all participants said that “limited resources” was the primary obstacle to more effective collaboration (McKinney 2002). Among the resources cited were time, money, information, and knowledge. People trying to initiate and support regional land use projects in three recent projects (in the San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado, the Flathead Valley in northwestern Montana, and the Upper Delaware River Basin) reported struggling due to a lack of financial resources and staffing capabilities.

In sum, the challenge of addressing multijurisdictional land use issues is not primarily a scientific or technical challenge, nor is it simply about managing land use more effectively and efficiently. At its core, regional land use is a sociopolitical challenge. It is a question of whether we can integrate the needs, interests, and visions of multiple jurisdictions, sectors, and interests. It is also a question of how society addresses shared and competing interests – in this case, land use.

An Emerging Framework

During the past few years, the Lincoln Institute has taken a leadership role in studying and evaluating regional collaboration on land use issues through policy and research reports, educational programs, and regional land use clinics. This collective body of work suggests at least three overarching lessons.

First, regional initiatives vary greatly in terms of who leads the project, as well as its scale, purpose, issues, activities, and structure, including funding and time frame. While some initiatives augment existing government institutions, others are more ad hoc in nature, filling gaps in governance at different levels. Whether formal or ad hoc, regional initiatives create public opportunities that would not otherwise exist to address land use issues that cut across multiple jurisdictions.

Second, regional collaboration includes both a procedural element (how to plan across boundaries) and a substantive element (policies, programs, activities, and other outcomes to address a particular regional land use issue). The Lincoln Institute’s work on the procedural aspects of regional collaboration complements and builds on its land use dispute resolution program, although it is different in two fundamental ways: regional collaboration deals primarily with multiple jurisdictions, which raises the key question of convening diverse stakeholders; and it has more to do with designing new systems of governance (both formal and informal) than with resolving disputes per se.

Third, there is no single model for planning across boundaries, but rather a set of principles to guide regional collaboration (see Figure 1). This “theory of change” posits that the implementation of something like this set of principles leads to better informed, more widely supported, and more

effective solutions to multijurisdictional land use issues (see www.umpri.org).

Guiding Principles for Regional Collaboration

- Focus on a compelling purpose
- Mobilize and engage the “right” people
- Define regional boundaries based on people’s interests
- Jointly name and frame issues
- Deliberate and make collaborative decisions
- Take strategic action
- Be flexible and adaptive to sustain regional collaboration

Some Outstanding Questions

Who should take the lead in organizing and convening regional conversations?

In many professional circles there is an ongoing debate about the role and ability of government to convene effective collaborative processes. Many people argue that government cannot successfully organize and convene such efforts given its built-in institutional resistance and lack of responsiveness. Citizens, by contrast, often can provide more effective forums through organic, grassroots initiatives. Throughout the West, there is a growing movement where citizens, frustrated by government’s lack of responsiveness, are convening place-based groups to address a variety of land use issues – ranging from growth management to endangered species to water allocation (Kemmis 2001). In the Northeast, citizens in adjacent towns and states are recognizing their shared resources, values, threats, and opportunities. They are committing to joint planning projects, regional economic development campaigns, and applications for official designation for their regions.

Recent studies indicate, however, that participation by one or more levels of government is essential to the effectiveness of the more ad hoc, citizen-driven processes (Kenney 2000; Susskind et al. 1999; Susskind et al. 2000). Governments not only provide financial and technical assistance, but also become critically important if the intent of a regional initiative is to shape or influence land use policy. Official government institutions, after all, constitute the formal public decision-making processes in our society.

Neither top-down nor bottom-up approaches are inherently superior, and in the final analysis the two ends of the spectrum need to come together to facilitate positive change. Whether a regional initiative is catalyzed and convened by citizens, nongovernmental organizations, businesses, or public officials, it is most effective when the people initiating the process exercise collaborative leadership. Such leaders facilitate development of a shared vision by crossing jurisdictional and cultural boundaries; forging coalitions among people with diverse interests and viewpoints; mobilizing the people, ideas, and resources needed to move in the desired direction; and sustaining networks of relationships. In this respect, regional collaboration is more like organizing a political campaign than preparing a regional plan.

Three vignettes – the first two based on regional clinics sponsored by the Lincoln Institute – illustrate the need to have the right convener and to employ the characteristics of collaborative leadership. In the Upper Delaware River Basin, two government agencies initiated a regional conversation, but they framed the problems and solutions prior to consulting with other stakeholders or citizens. Not

surprisingly, many people who were not part of the initial process criticized both the definition of the region and the scope of the project.

In the San Luis Valley in Colorado, citizens and interest groups tried to organize a regional land use planning effort, but the local elected officials dragged their feet and characterized the participants as “rabble rousers.” This experience shows what can happen when citizens get ahead of decision makers, that is, when civic will outpaces political and institutional will.

On a more encouraging note, leaders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, as well as academics, the media, and others, have jointly convened Billings on the Move – a conversation on what is needed to promote and sustain the economic vitality of the region in and around Billings, Montana. One of the primary reasons for this project’s success is that all of the key stakeholders bought into the project from the beginning, and they jointly identified problems and framed solutions.

Is it possible to mobilize and engage people “upstream” in a proactive, preventive way, rather than “downstream” after a crisis, threat, or regional land use dispute has emerged?

In the San Luis Valley, citizens and leaders from all walks of life came together some years ago to fight and defeat a proposal to export precious groundwater out of the valley. This effort clearly demonstrated sufficient civic will and political capacity to organize regionally in response to a real external threat. However, the same people are now struggling to organize around land use issues when there is no immediate crisis. Some observers believe that if they do not act soon, however, the valley will eventually become another expensive tourist destination like Aspen, Sun Valley, or Jackson Hole.

In response to this concern, we are working with the Orton Foundation to determine if the use of technology – in particular the visualization and scenario-building software known as Community Viz – may provide the necessary leverage to mobilize and engage people, to help them see what is at stake, and to evaluate how regional collaboration can help to address issues of common interest. The challenge here is not only to focus on a tangible problem, but also to build the social and political capacity of the region to think and act more proactively.

How do we measure the success of regional collaboration?

The question of what criteria or metrics should be used to evaluate efforts to plan across boundaries takes us back to the distinction between the procedural and substantive aspects of regional collaboration. If one agrees with this distinction, then any framework to evaluate success should include metrics that focus on both process and outcomes.

A recent study evaluated the success of 50 community-based collaborative initiatives in the Rocky Mountain West that were regional in nature, encompassing two or more jurisdictions (McKinney and Field 2005). Twenty-seven indicators measured participants’ satisfaction with the substantive outcome of the effort, its effect on working relationships, and the quality of the process itself. The evaluation framework also allowed participants to reflect on the value of community-based collaboration relative to other alternatives.

The people who responded to the survey were generally satisfied with the use of community-based collaboration to address issues related to federal lands and resources. Seventy percent of the respondents said that all 27 indicators were important contributors to their satisfaction with both the process and its outcomes. Eighty-six percent of participants stated they would recommend a community or regional process to address a similar issue in the future.

Participants tended to rank “working relationships” and “quality of the process” as more important than “outcomes,” suggesting that people are at least as interested in opportunities for meaningful civic engagement and deliberative dialogue as in achieving a preconceived outcome. These results also support the value of community-based or regional collaboration – particularly when compared to other forums to shape land use policy and resolve land use disputes. Future evaluation research is necessary to affirm or refine these findings, and to clarify the impact of regional collaboration on various social,

economic, and environmental objectives.

Conclusion

Planning across boundaries – or regional collaboration – is slowly emerging as an essential component of land policy and planning in the twenty-first century. For example, the 2005 White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation – only the fourth White House conference ever held on conservation – convened several sessions on reaching across boundaries to promote shared governance. Whether the issues to be addressed in such forums focus on rapid growth and its consequences or the need to retain and expand the local economic base, these problems are often best addressed by planning across the boundaries created by government jurisdictions, economic sectors, and academic disciplines. Indeed, in many cases, this is the only way these problems will be resolved effectively.

The Pawcatuck Borderlands

The Pawcatuck Borderlands on the Connecticut and Rhode Island state line is part of a largely undeveloped region within the megalopolis that stretches from Boston to Washington, DC. This landscape is one of the largest intact, forested areas in southern New England, and its abundant wildlife ranges from bears to songbirds. The remarkable diversity of the Borderlands includes hardwood forests, pitch-pine woodlands, wetlands, lakes, and rivers, as well as numerous small, rural communities where people have lived and worked for centuries.

Nearly 40 percent of the Borderlands is protected by the Pachaug State Forest and the Arcadia Management Area, and the relatively undisturbed natural character of the region creates a high quality of life for its residents. However, this open space in the heart of the northeastern megalopolis is also popular with visitors for its recreational opportunities and world-class tourist attractions. Located between Providence and Hartford, the Borderlands faces increasing demands for housing, roads, and shopping centers. Unlike many other rural areas, the opportunities for employment and investment are good, making this a financially attractive location for families and businesses.

Between 1960 and 2000, the population of Borderlands towns grew by more than 95 percent. Traffic is escalating on local roads and highways, and finite water resources are being overused, impacting both the quality and quantity of water in local watersheds. This increasing activity is eroding the existing infrastructure and requiring local residents to pay for additional roads, schools, and other essential services. All of these trends threaten longstanding social, historic, and environmental values.

Choices about the rate and pattern of future land conservation and development in the Borderlands must be addressed by decision makers in two states and ten towns. As in much of New England, each town retains land use authority and is governed through town meetings and the decisions of numerous local commissions and boards. Each of these jurisdictions has historically tackled land use issues independently, but the nature of existing trends and emerging challenges calls out for a different approach.

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