

# University of Virginia NEWS LETTER

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## Regional Governance: Why? Now? How?

..... Neal R. Peirce .....

*The author is a nationally syndicated columnist. This article is adapted from a keynote speech given to the Virginia Local Government Management Association in February 1991.*

Over the past two or three decades, we have been constantly increasing the *cost* of governance, while doing precious little, when you look at the big picture, with the *methods* of governance.

Time's ripe for some across-the-board re-consideration, not because we abhor government, but because we *support* government. We want it to work, to meet citizens' needs. To do that, government has to be affordable. And that means *system redesign*.

### **G**OLDEN CALVES & OTHER OBSTACLES

The administration of government itself, in city and county alike, will never be affordable if constant pressure can't be brought on government to reform its operations, just as private business must, to continue existing. There'll never be enough money for schools, if atrocious quality is tolerated—or enough money for police and courts and prisons, unless crime can be prevented.

*The Chesapeake Bay Watershed includes 2,600 units of government. Vast numbers of them will tell you that they, and they alone, ought to have final authority over land use decisions.*

There'll never be enough Medicaid dollars, unless we move soon to some earth-trembling shake-ups in how we deliver medicine. There'll never be enough money for the massive amounts of new roads and schools and fire stations and sewer systems that our patterns of endless and unfettered sprawl development demand.

There's no *guaranty* that regional arrangements can save money. But if thought through properly, they offer a golden opportunity we can't ignore.

Regionalism has had a tough road to travel in this country. As far as governance is concerned, we Americans are confirmed atomizers. We 'conquered' a continent single-handedly, and we don't favor people who might ever give us orders. We revel in having hundreds of cities, towns, townships, counties, and special districts packed within single so-called metropolitan areas. The God of Local Autonomy drives our political thinking. Examples of our Balkanized, splintered system abound.

Take, for example, the Chesapeake Bay watershed. We know of the dire threats to its future. Yet there are 2,600 units of government, from counties to towns to special districts, within the watershed. Vast numbers of those governments will tell you that they, and they alone,



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ought to have final authority over land use decisions—as if the intimate ecologic interdependency of their region didn't exist.

A classic example of American parochialism run amuck has always been Pittsburgh and environs. Within Allegheny County you will find no fewer than 4 cities, 82 boroughs, 26 first-class towns and 16 second-class towns. There are 17 authorities and special districts for parking, 37 for sewers, 24 for water, 7 for recreation, 13 for health, and 16 with miscellaneous powers. The county has 42 school districts—yes, 42! And in case you think some single council of government (or COG) is making sense of it all, forget it. There are 8 COGs in Allegheny County alone.

Of course it would be far too dangerous to mess around with such situations. If you change small-bore, close-to-home control, *who knows* what will happen next—perhaps some big metropolitan-wide government that might start mollycoddling blacks or browns or other poor folk, or tax the devil out of us.

So, bolstered by state laws that generally require majorities both in city and county to combine two or more governments, we have, across the country, allowed only 16 mergers of cities and counties since World War II (from goodness only knows how many possible mergers). Other great federated nations—the German Federal Republic, and now Australia—effect radical reduction in their numbers of local governments. We will have none of it. Home Rule is our golden calf. We'll stick with it.

True, a handful of odd experiments have sprung up here or there. Indianapolis got its so-called 'Unigov,' perpetrated by a single-minded Republican establishment. The Minnesota Twin Cities somehow approved a Metropolitan Council—appointed by the governor, not elected—after some crisis related to sewage percolating up into people's wells, and a discovery that polluted water doesn't respect municipal lines. Oregonians approved a Portland-area Metropolitan Service District (MSD) and even agreed to elect its chief executive and members directly. But then the state rationed out powers to the MSD at the same velocity that parochial school girls of the 1940s dispensed sexual favors—namely, *very* slowly.

State governments, which ought to see the compelling logic of it all, pay obeisance to the Home Rule calf and virtually never force the issue. That's particularly sad, given the states' clear governmental and constitutional duty to provide for the welfare of their own citizens and units of local government. We've now had a decade and more of rather remarkable state policy innovations. But structural reform, sad to say, has yet to appear on the resurgent state governments' agendas.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, some people in Washington, D.C., talked about federal power forcing

metropolitan cohesion. The federal government even wrote some laws, A-95 rules and the like, with hopes of coaxing better cohesion at the grassroots. But no longer. President Ronald Reagan, you'll recall, ended up deep-sixing the A-95 approval process in 1983.

Today we have a fiscally and intellectually bankrupt federal government, so inept in trying to do what it *has* to do that substantive policy adventurism apparently falls almost outside its ken. Is there any chance that Washington will soon reverse course and take active interest in the structure of local and metropolitan governance? There's about zero chance, for the rest of this century, and almost none for a generation to come, if you ask me.

Of course we know there are some problems local governments can't cope with. So we have tolerated the creation of some 26,000 special districts, coping with every problem from mosquitoes to trash burning. We let municipalities and counties form their own ad hoc methods of sharing or selling services to each other. Sometimes we're pretty ingenious about shared service agreements. City managers are especially good at working out such deals—spectacularly good at the game if they can carry it off without the politicians getting too aware of what's happening.

We've also allowed creation of councils of governments. Some are quite good at planning regional services, from transit to water to public safety. But let a COG *attempt a truly* courageous act, and the blood calls for its extinction echo across the political landscape.

As for governmental coherence where metropolitan areas straddle state lines—a phenomenon that appears in some 40 places—there's been precious little. The biggest exception is the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which has its own money flow from tolls and thus has undertaken some very interesting work over the years.

## **R**EGIONALISM RESURRECTED

If regionalism is as welcome most places as a rash, as utilitarian as a hang toenail, why bother to talk about it? Well, as strange as it seems, supposedly dead regionalism is rearing its head across the breadth of this nation today.

Maybe it's because the 'feds,' under Ronald Reagan, withdrew general revenue sharing and a lot of the other national largesse that permitted individual communities to go merrily along with redundant, wasteful practices, courtesy of Uncle Sam.

Maybe it's because our regions today face more serious environmental problems, especially air pollution and how to site LULUs (locally unacceptable land uses) like solid waste landfills or incinerators.

Maybe it's because in most metropolitan areas, the cities and towns have simply grown together, and so have started to recognize how little sense existing boundaries make. People *use* their region as a single entity. They pay scarcely any heed to the municipal boundaries we're told are so sacrosanct. Work, sports, concerts, restaurants, parks—who really cares what political jurisdiction they're in?

Sometimes it seems that only the politicians, the local officeholders, really care. They simply *suggest* that all the rest of us are ready to embark on vicious electoral retribution if officials should succumb to an urge to merge.

One class of people who seem less and less interested in parochial city and town lines is the progressive, nationally-oriented, and globally-oriented business community. These folks recognize that the only regions prepared to cope in the ferocious global economic competition of the years ahead will be those that can plan the future of their physical and human resources in unison.

I'm also convinced that the sheer physical growth of our time is behind a lot of today's metropolitan talk. The 1980s was the era when, from Boston to Miami, across Texas and Arizona, up and down the Pacific Coast, the United States' landscape underwent astoundingly radical change. Corporate giants and the smallest upstart enterprises flocked to the suburbs. The suburban bedroom communities, gas stations, and waffle shops of the 1950s became passe. The new order was signature office towers, luxury hotels, upscale housing, and high-tech firms in clusters described in one of the great oxymorons of our times: 'urban villages.'

Suburbia was fast becoming America's prime workplace. In 1970, only 25 percent of the nation's offices were located in suburbs. When the construction wave that began in 1989–90 is completed, nearly 60 percent of the nation's office space will be located in suburbia.

The 1980s wave of suburban and exurban growth was so massive, as Tony Hiss observed in the *New Yorker*, that it could be likened to "the work of the great beasts of the last interglacial period, whose browsing destroyed large areas of thick forest."

Northern New Jersey's 99.1 million square feet of office space, for example, today exceeds the combined volume of downtown Chicago and Los Angeles; by sometime in this decade, it will likely exceed the total of all of Manhattan. New Jersey is finding it may have laid aside its old symbol of oil refineries, pig farms, and garbage heaps along the turnpike. But what's the substitute? Ever-lengthening traffic pile ups and deep congestion—the most visible manifestation of what sprawl brings. "New Jersey doesn't have rush hours anymore," says Rutgers

University Professor James Hughes. "We have rush mornings and rush evenings punctuated by noon-time backups."

## **R**ECENT RELIEF EFFORTS

The most arresting cry of pain and demand for relief has come from California. There, citizen-driven antigrowth ballot initiatives became one of the most dramatic growth industries in the 1980s. To grasp how serious things are out in the West, consider the LA 2000 report, issued in Los Angeles in November 1988 by a broadly representative group of businesses, citizens, and government.

The issue is that Los Angeles, the Golden State mecca always ready to define the future for the rest of us, is getting scared. Los Angeles, the city and county, are already cramped, their population spiraling, air quality imperiled, crime rising, roads crumbling. They will gain 6 million new souls by 2000, some by immigration but most by births exceeding deaths. There's a grave job and home mismatch: the great majority of jobs are going into western Los Angeles and Orange Counties and the bulk of new housing into Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, many freeway-miles away. Within a few years, rush-hour freeway speeds could well sink to 5 or 6 miles an hour, threatening an effective end to Los Angeles as a viable economy and workplace.

The LA 2000 committee warned of "a Balkanized landscape of political fortresses, each guarding its own resources in the midst of divisiveness, overcrowded freeways, antiquated sewers, ineffective schools, inadequate human services and a polluted environment."

There's no way, the group concluded, that Los Angeles and its surrounding counties can cope when 157 local governments jealously protect their prerogatives, with minimal attention to the regional welfare. Glendale sewage ends up in Santa Monica Bay. South Bay industrial emissions throw a pall over the San Gabriel Mountains. South Center drug gangs roam free and wide.

Today Los Angeles' 2000 Partnership, a successor group to the LA 2000 Committee, is calling for sensible growth management, combining single-purpose agencies, whether for transportation or air quality or waste disposal, and creating a new Southern California Regional Council with strong planning powers.

The social issues that accompany rapid-paced, typical sprawl development can be very significant. The suburban office development of the 1980s moved rapidly *away* from, and ignored, our concentrations of low-income and minority people. In Atlanta, vast office and commercial projects, with their thousands

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of jobs, flowed to Buckhead and other developments on the affluent and overwhelmingly white northern periphery. Growth moved farther and farther from the underemployed and unemployed, from black, poor south Atlanta. In the San Francisco Bay Region, development has spread up and over the hills to the east and into the central valley, while comparatively little is done to either revive grand old downtown Oakland or offer accessible jobs to its troubled populations. I call this pervasive national phenomenon our own *American apartheid*. I fear we'll be stuck with it long after South Africa has corrected its own.

Last spring I met with San Francisco's so-called Bay Vision 2020 Commission, a blue-ribbon group designated by leading elected officials of the region. It's been trying to calculate how the San Francisco Bay Region can manage and survive under its severe growth pressures. A draft report, recently released, challenges the state to get really serious about growth management. It calls for a new regional planning agency to combine the Association of Bay Area Governments (their COG), the Metropolitan Transportation Board, and the regional air quality authority. Local government officials and a group of specially appointed public members would sit on it. They didn't quite have the moxie to suggest the new body be elected, but several members of Vision 2020 would like to see that.

Bay Vision's tough political challenge will be to figure out how to get the California legislature, and Governor Pete Wilson, to pass the laws making it possible for, or even mandating, full regional governance. Last year California Assembly Speaker Willie Brown introduced legislation calling for a single regional development and infrastructure agency, with extraordinarily broad powers, in each of the state's air basins. I think the San Francisco and Los Angeles groups, plus Governor Wilson, would prefer something more permissive, sensitive to local wishes.

I believe that regional governance, when it suddenly dawns on us, will be in some disguise—growth management, air quality control, what have you. But once the critical regional powers are focused in a bellwether state like California, metropolitanism in our country will have taken a giant leap forward.

Up the Pacific coast, in the Puget Sound area, the last two years have seen the start of several efforts to rewrite the charter of King, the leading county, to give it true region-wide powers. I got pretty familiar with the Seattle situation a year ago when I worked with Curtis Johnson to prepare, for the *Seattle Times*, a series of reports on the present and future of the entire Puget Sound region—one of the hottest growth areas on the continent today. In one of the articles, we quoted a veteran player in

Seattle city government as noting, "All the things people are worked up over, they're 'governance' issues. But most folks don't know it yet."

And, indeed, the issues riling people in the Seattle region—nightmare traffic jams, air pollution, threatened fresh water quality, rapid-fire physical growth—all are fundamentally regional, and governmental. We noted, "There's not a ghost of a chance that any of these problems can be dealt with in the absence of a realistic governmental structure, some kind of a mechanism to drive the hard choices." With the Seattle region's 4 counties, 71 municipalities, and a cacophony of special purpose regional bodies, we noted, "No one's in charge.... A private corporation that operated this way couldn't even manage its way into bankruptcy court."

Nor is this just a Pacific Coast phenomenon. Within a single week last spring, I found myself in Charlotte, North Carolina; Rochester, New York; and then Columbia, South Carolina—talking with business and civic groups that are inquiring more and more into the potential of coherent area-wide governance. The new state growth management bills passed in recent years in states like New Jersey, Florida, Georgia, and Washington all contain significant regional components. Metropolitanism, officially 'out' of public debate for two or more decades, is decisively 'in' again, everywhere one travels around America.

## SHAPE OF TODAY'S REFORMS

When reform gets mentioned these days, it's with a distinct difference from the past. Today nobody even seems to *think* about such straightforward suggestions as a single, all-powerful metropolitan government that would expunge the cities and towns below. Everyone recognizes that's simply unsellable politically—and probably unwise, anyway. The vast majority of city-county consolidations have lost at the polls. And people *do* feel a real need for government close to them—generally their own city or town government, but sometimes even authority devolved all the way to the neighborhood level.

We may, indeed, face a promising era of the devolution of providing services, and making numerous policy decisions, right down to neighborhoods. This may be especially promising in troubled neighborhoods where there are community organizations to act as mediators with large social service bureaucracies. The alienation between poor communities and the middle-class service providers has become so vast that a rebuilding from the grassroots may be a much wiser way to go. Community development corporations, churches, and other entities could be employed to work person-to-person and family-to-family,

pushing tenant-managed housing, intensive neighborhood-based counseling for troubled young parents, peer-to-peer drug education and recovery programs, neighborhood-run schools, community-based policing, and much more. My one-sentence prescription for where we need to head in our socially troubled areas is toward radical *decentralization* and radical *personalization* of government's services and outreach.

But coherence at the regional, metropolitan level is just as compelling. Only a limited set of functions is appropriate for *exclusive* attention by a single city or suburb. One might list, for example, street maintenance, fire and community police services, codes and inspections, and detailed zoning decisions. But not many others. More of the *critical* issues, from air quality to mass transit, from highways to land use, from workforce preparedness to economic development, need in significant measure to be seen as *regional, metropolitan-wide* concerns.

In a fall 1988 meeting in Denver, the National Civic League for the first time in its nine decades of history endorsed metropolitan-wide governance. The league's board predicted that life in urban and suburban America from now into the next century will decline seriously if the 'big' governance issues, from education to social services to land use patterns to assuring a quality work force for the future, are *not* guided and ultimately directed on a region-wide basis. The league said a two-tier system was essential, where most existing subunits are left in place, but new metropolitan authorities are formed with the power to plan regionally and resolve conflicts between existing cities and counties.

Does regional authority threaten individual municipalities? Not necessarily, the league suggested: City leadership, beset with shrinking tax bases, rising costs, and development forces playing one municipality off against another, should not just welcome, but demand some effective regional rule-setting and governance.

What's more, the two-tier structure of metropolitanism makes it clear that very few local governments are going to find themselves merged or dissolved out of existence. All that's being said is that, for the pressing issues of our environment and society, we need responses at the appropriate geographic level. My personal belief is that this will never work well unless there's a governmental 'there, there' on the metropolitan level—namely, a metropolitan council, directly elected on a one-person, one-vote basis, possibly with heads of local governments appointed as ex-officio members, to encourage their active participation. To make any of this happen will eventually require a mandate from state government. Otherwise, some municipalities will simply 'opt out' and make a travesty of the process.

## SOCIAL COSTS OF INACTION

It's tough enough to get people talking about regionalism on obvious issues like highways, transit, land use, and air quality. Expand this discussion into the social arena, and you can find yourself on political quicksand. This happens principally, I believe, because of people's fears of integration by class or race.

But in the long run, can suburbs really afford to let the central cities 'go to hell in a hand basket'? Many think and act so, as if their city's border were a Berlin Wall behind which to hide, hopefully in perpetuity. But the long-term answer is clear. The society that accepts deepening social divisions will, in time, forsake the American dream of social mobility and advance.

A few weeks ago, while interviewing for a special *Baltimore Sun* series on the future of that city and region, I found some prestigious people arguing that separatism is a reasonable, cost-free scenario for suburbanites. But I think that *is* erroneous thinking, and I've developed a checklist of five reasons why it is.

1. THE 'PAY NOW OR PAY LATER' RATIONALE. Political boundaries do *not*, in the long run, seal off problems of ignorance, poverty, inferior child care, teenage pregnancies, crime, and intergenerational dependency. Fail to address social problems now, and the bill—in higher welfare costs, failed schools, and packed prisons that cost us \$20,000 or more per inmate per year—will come back to haunt everyone through substantially higher taxes.

2. THE PHYSICAL SAFETY ISSUE. Significant pockets of high crime increase danger of physical harm, at one time or another, for *every* resident of a metropolitan region.

3. PRODUCTIVITY LOSSES. Socially distraught families are nonproducers. The human potential of most of their members is lost to the city and region.

4. THE WORKFORCE ISSUE. America is developing a shortage of qualified workers, not just engineers and highly skilled kinds of people, but all manner of service personnel. Employers in suburban office centers are finding it tough to find qualified clerks, salespeople, restaurant help, or other service workers. The inner cities present the most likely labor pool. But the connections will never be made if they're plagued by social chaos. Or you could emulate cities like New York and Miami, which keep tapping new labor sources by taking in big gobs of immigrants and shoving their human discards deeper into the pile of unproductive population.

5. SUBURBAN SPRAWL. An abused, depopulated central city forces growth farther and farther into suburbs and exurbs. Splendid inner-city areas with flavorful architecture, fine parks, and all the rest get underused as middle-class people, who are fearful of crime, bad schools, and the like desert the city.

Only citizen power can set the political groundwork for shared and focused metropolitan governance. so that politicians can then respond.

More exurban land gets chewed up, population gets dispersed, mass transit becomes impractical, and air pollution escalates. And hundreds of millions of dollars worth of schools, water systems, and fire and police facilities have to get duplicated on the metropolitan fringe.

## ESSENTIALS FOR SUCCESS

Yet formal government does remain important. And we need to ask: Can local governments be counted on to lead a march toward truer regional government? Not often or easily, I'd suggest. No task seems more politically impossible for officeholders. Other driving forces must gain the popular and political support for shared and focused metropolitan governance—forces like citizen leagues, neighborhood and environmental coalitions, corporate leaders, and community foundations. Only citizen power can set the political groundwork, so that politicians can then respond.

On the other hand, only the experts in the management of government can lay the factual groundwork, the rationale for metropolitan cohesion. The efforts of local government managers are desperately needed to give *credibility* to the campaigns led by citizens and businesses. It may be time to put aside some of the city manager's traditional coyness and avoidance of all risk, and at least take the step of gathering colleagues at the metropolitan level to thrash out some of the issues of regional governance. If local government managers can talk the issue out among themselves, then, as the professionals at the

business of governance, they are in a position to lay the options and realities in front of elected officials and the public. They need, in short, to be thinking about the strategic needs of their communities and regions in the 21st century, and then communicating their conclusions.

As for metropolitan governance in interstate regions, I see no alternative to accomplishing that through interstate compact. In a talk to Washington's Council of Governments (COG) last November, I proposed such a compact to create a metropolitan government for the national capital area, resulting from negotiation among four sovereign powers—Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and the United States Congress. Some people are now playing with the idea of having the Washington regional COG take the lead in an interstate compact that would represent a critical trade-off. The three jurisdictions involved would please development and business interests by creating a reliable fund source for critical transportation improvements. In return, to benefit the environmental/conservation side, there would be agreement on region-wide standards for growth management controls aimed at helping to save the Chesapeake Bay and more of the region's open lands, for everyone's posterity.

These ideas, of course, merely illustrate the potentials before us. Regionalism, as an issue for the 1990s, goes far beyond the critical debate over either the ideal governmental form or efficiency. Ultimately, the discussion about metropolitanism reaches the question behind all others: What kind of society do we hope for ourselves, and for our children, to live in?

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