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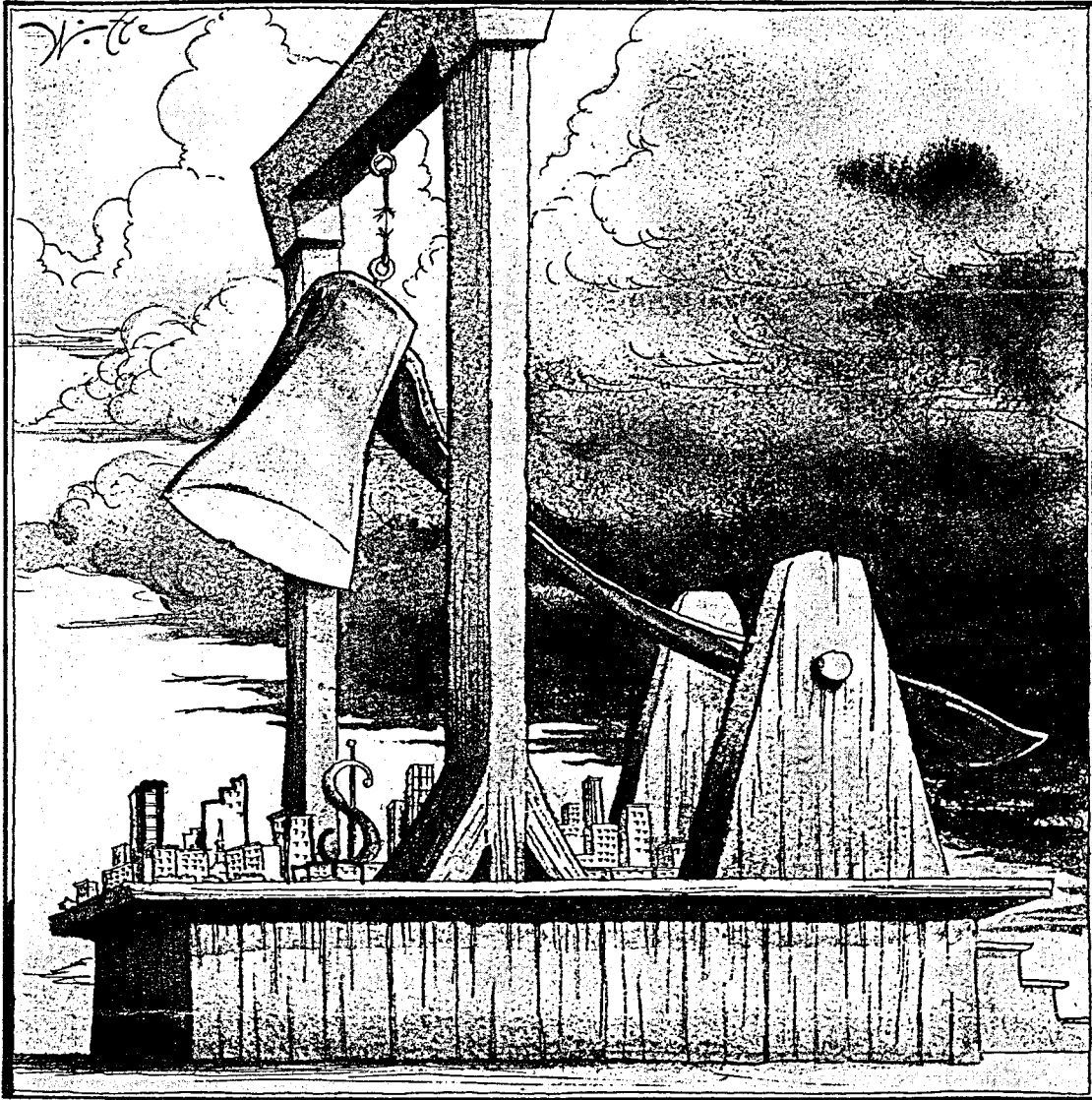
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GOING IT JOINTLY

REGIONAL SOLUTIONS FOR LOCAL PROBLEMS

Service sharing is hot. Outright consolidation is not. In between, governments are finding plenty of other ways to gang up on the demands of the '90s.


Five rural counties in eastern Alabama have formed a waste management authority that will negotiate a single contract this year with the company that operates the landfills they use. They'll have more clout at the bargaining table that way, officials think, because together they can make a credible threat to open their own landfill if the contractor's price isn't right.

The arrangement is simultaneously unusual and typical. Unusual because the biggest problem with landfills in most parts of the country is that it's hard to find a place to put a new one. But typical because local governments everywhere are joining together, at an accelerating pace, to deal with the ever-increasing variety of problems that defy solution within established political boundaries—problems that require a regional approach.

"Somewhere around the middle of the 1980s," says Pittsburgh-based consultant William Dodge, "local leaders came to realize that almost any issue that was worth getting incensed about was one that you couldn't go it alone on."

Going it jointly takes many forms. There are efforts, still largely untested, by state governments to impose regional cooperation from the top down, however much they try to disguise that intent.

Some of the old Councils of Governments, mostly created in the 1960s in response to federal legislation, retain their vitality, prodding local officials to undertake new regional efforts and coordinating them. (The CoG for Lee and Russell counties in Alabama, which pushed the joint landfill contract, is one such.) Several CoGs have even been transformed into regional entities that amount to multi-purpose special districts, with real powers.

 And there continue to be efforts at outright consolidation of city and county governments, although they meet strong voter resistance, especially in suburban areas. Only two have been approved in the past 15 years.

The most common, and the most rapidly growing, form of regionalism in government, however, consists of simple agreements to consolidate specific services, cooperate in their provision, or shift their provision from one government to another. Such arrangements are sometimes authorized by the appropriate legislative bodies, but at least as often they are informal and extralegal.

Public safety agencies lead the parade in service sharing. Police departments and sheriffs' offices keep joint records, operate joint radio bands and 911 emergency numbers, share crime laboratories, do joint investigations, establish regional automated fingerprint identification systems, follow uniform rules for police pursuits when they cross jurisdictional lines and, in a variety of ways, share the costs of training law enforcement personnel. Jails are shared, or simply taken over by the jurisdiction with the healthier revenues. Fire departments, with a long tradition of coming to the aid of their neighbors, have added agreements requiring the fire station that is closest to answer the first alarm, regardless of political boundaries.

All manner of regional arrangements are involved in the planning, financing and management of solid waste disposal. There may be a swap of services; Monroe County, Georgia, dumps its solid waste in Crawford County's landfill, but Monroe must maintain the road to the dump.

Recreational facilities are shared; school systems let the county use school swimming

By Eileen Shanahan

pools in the summer if the county maintains them. Counties run the zoos for financially strapped cities.

Joint purchasing agreements, undertaken to get volume discounts or more favorable treatment, keep expanding, and they increasingly cover purchases not only of goods but also of services, such as employee health insurance.

Joint planning and funding of new infrastructure and maintenance of old is popping up all over the map. So are joint economic development efforts, possibly the most diverse of all the cooperative arrangements.

In northwestern Pennsylvania, for example, Erie County

is helping revitalize its townships and boroughs by restoring the historic facades of their downtown buildings. "These municipalities are in competition with malls and plazas throughout the suburbs," says David Skellie, the county's director of planning. "They have to look attractive to the customers." The work on 16 buildings in Waterford, which was laid out by Pierre L'Enfant, the French engineer who also laid out Washington, D.C., was completed recently, and "some of the business owners tell us their gross receipts increased by 10 percent," Skellie says. Furthermore, he has found federal and state money to pay for most of the work.

In rural south-central Missouri, the Meramec Regional Planning Commission decided that the area's high illiteracy level could discourage potential new industry, home-grown or otherwise. Now, volunteer tutors, trained with the assistance of a local vocational-technical school, are available in every county. Local, state and federal funds are all helping pay the freight.

The role of the Meramec commission, another CoG that is still going strong, "is to be a catalyst for economic development and to take advantage of every source of money that's out there," says Richard A. Cavender, the commission's executive director.

What's more, both federal and state sources of money seem easier to tap for development projects involving a number of local governments. Robert E. Shepherd, executive director of the Land-of-Sky Regional Council in western North Carolina, thinks his four-county area would never have gotten federal funding for turning the trash-filled French Broad River into an attractive recreation area if the counties hadn't been working together on it.

Montgomery County, Ohio, has forged an extraordinary new arrangement for funding development with 23 of its 31 municipalities, including Dayton, the largest. "We are competing in a global economy in a region that includes Columbus, Indianapolis and Cincinnati," says Montgomery County Administrator Donald Vermillion. "We have to change the way we've done our economic development."

The county has committed itself over the next 10 years to give \$5 million a year out of its sales tax revenues to the participating cities and townships. The local governments will compete for the money, which would have to be used for some purpose relating to economic development. That might be anything from infrastructure that would permit a business to expand to an enhanced interna-

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Rena Cusma heads the Portland, Oregon, area's Metropolitan Service District, which numbers recycling facilities among its many responsibilities.

tional marketing program.

The 23 municipalities must also put money in the pot, according to a formula based on the growth in their property- and income-tax collections since 1989. Thirteen percent of that growth is the maximum any municipality would have to contribute, and no municipality will pay in more than it gets out. "It's not a tax sharing program but, rather, a comprehensive development program," says Vermillion.

None of this adds up to regional government. But Portland, Oregon's Metropolitan Service District is exactly that, and maybe more: "a national model for the next generation of regional governments," in the view of its director of planning and development, Richard H. Carson. It is the nation's only regional authority with multiple responsibilities run by officials directly elected by the people.

The most dramatic task assigned to Portland's Metro, which covers parts of three counties, is growth control. As the regional executor of Oregon's land-use law, it enforces boundaries for urban development, beyond which there may be no water mains or sewer systems. The boundaries are updated every five years, so that continuing urban growth is possible but leapfrog development, with its expensive demands for roads and sewer and water systems far outside the compactly developed areas, is not. Another power: Metro can require that a high-rise apartment building or shopping mall be placed where it will be readily accessible from the light rail system the region is building.

Metro does all transportation planning and water quality planning for the region; has a variety of environmental responsibilities; and runs the zoo, the coliseum where the Trail Blazers play basketball, the convention center (which it built) and several facilities that deal with solid waste and recycling.

Rena Cusma, the elected executive officer of Metro, has powers like those of a strong mayor under the 1978 referendum that created Metro and simultaneously eliminated

the old CoG. She has a veto over the actions of the 12-member elected council; a staff of 1,200, of whom 800 work in the various recreational facilities and functions; and a budget of \$227 million, funded entirely by various charges, mostly tipping fees at landfills.

Cusma is at some pains to note that no existing government was put out of business by the creation of Metro and to dispute those who call it an extra layer of government. "We think it's a pie, rather than a cake," she says. "We have authority over a slice."

She is also fervent in her belief that Metro could not have maintained citizen support over the years if its leaders had not been directly elected. The citizens voted Metro in and the old, appointed Council of Governments out, she says, because they felt they had no influence over its decisions.

Cusma's view is shared both by officeholders elsewhere and academics. "Elections," says Professor Royce Hanson of

the University of Texas, "are the only way you can build a constituency for officials, and thereby for the government. The mandate, the legitimacy, is renewed, over time, by people running for office. An appointed agency is not renewing any mandate, so if it's doing anything important, the people begin to ask, 'Who elected these guys?'"

But other places, the Minneapolis-St. Paul region for one, have found it impossible to persuade state legislatures to set up regional agencies run by elected officials. The reason: Legislators fear that anyone who could win such a regional office could effectively challenge them for their own jobs. (See accompanying article, page 75.)

Last January, long after most of the nation had forgotten the once-popular idea of consolidating cities and counties, Athens, Georgia, and Clarke County officially became one unified political jurisdiction with a single government. Theirs was not merely the first consolidation of the 1990s. It was only the second, if a strict test is used, in 15 years.

Why did they do it? A sense of crisis. Fear that a fragmented government would not be able to deal with the imminent arrival of the Atlanta metropolitan area at the county's borders. "We knew we had to have something better to handle the rapid change that is coming," says Paul T. Hardy of the Institute of Government at the University of Georgia, who wrote the new government's charter.

A crisis was also the impetus for tiny Lynchburg, Tennessee (population 668), and Moore County (population 4,510), the only jurisdictions to consolidate in the 1980s and the smallest ever. A city in the next county was threatening to annex a part of Moore county that included an elementary school. That would have set the stage for a further annexation in two years that could have included the county's only high school. By converting to what Tennessee law calls a "metropolitan county," they could block both moves.

Service sharing, and other forms of cooperation among governments, it is clear, can often be put in place when no one except the officials involved sees the urgency of it. But the lesson from Athens and Lynchburg and Portland and many other places is that structural change in government requires the public at large to feel the sense of crisis as well. Otherwise, the necessary referendum will not pass. The lesson is demonstrated, in reverse, by places like Sacramento, California, where city and county residents alike rejected a consolidation plan.

"We were asking the voters to have some foresight, to look

into the future," says Paul J. Hahn, who was deputy executive director of Sacramento's charter commission. "But the services were being provided, the garbage was still being picked up and the police were still on the streets. We were asking them to change something they knew for something they didn't know. All the opponents had to do was raise doubts."

It is estimated that five out of six attempts at consolidation fail. The idea is not dead, however. Tallahassee and Leon County, Florida, are formally working on a consolidation plan now, and other places are discussing it. But there are good reasons why consolidations are less popular than they once were.

One is that, in many places, a single county is no longer a self-contained economic region. That is why consolidation backers in Des Moines and Polk County, Iowa, abandoned their effort two years ago, before it ever came to a vote. They recognized, as they worked on the plan, that any sensible consolidation should also include parts of two other counties. They plan to try again, with a broader approach.

It is also true that most of the consolidations of the 1960s and '70s were in the South, and the suspicion, long attached to many of them, is that the motivating crisis was the growth of black voting power in the cities. Nowadays, efforts to dilute that power run afoul of the federal Voting Rights Act. That is what happened to Augusta, Georgia, and Richmond County, whose voters approved a consolidation at about the same time as Athens and Clarke County, only to have it rejected by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The great exception to the rule that it takes a crisis to bring about a city-county consolidation is Indianapolis. In 1969, Richard Lugar, that city's Republican mayor, watched people moving to the suburbs and new businesses locating outside the city, and concluded that something had to be done. Just a year later, the Republican-led legislature had passed, and a Republican governor had signed, legislation that made Indianapolis and suburban Marion County one political jurisdiction. It is the only city-county consolidation in living memory to be enacted without a referendum, and Indianapolis Democrats still complain that the real motive was to keep the GOP in power forever. The Republicans don't even bother to deny it.

Indianapolis today is flourishing and proud. Its population and economy have grown. Its tax rates are low for a place of

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TWO SIDES OF REGIONALISM IN THE TWIN CITIES

The planning and coordinating agency that operates in the seven-county Minneapolis-St. Paul area has long been cited by students of local government as the very model of effective regionalism. The Metropolitan Council fell on hard times during the administration of Democratic Governor Rudy Perpich but now, under the new Republican governor, Arne H. Carlson, hopes for a comeback.

While the council has been having its ups and downs, however, another, less-noticed element of regionwide management in the Twin Cities area is continuing to have a powerful impact. This is the unusual 20-year-old tax-sharing program—actually a sharing of the tax base rather than the revenues—that is aimed at producing healthier growth by reducing the competition among the various governments for development at any cost.

Each year, 40 percent of the increase in the area's industrial tax base is placed in a pool, and the base is then allocated to the various jurisdictions, under a formula based on population and need, to tax at their own rates. As a result, the differential in the tax base between the richest and poorest communities is only 4 to 1. Without the base-sharing, it would be 22 to 1.

Most of the public doesn't even know the system exists. Most who do know about it think it has worked. Good growth has occurred in the suburbs without rendering the two big cities stagnant or impoverished. St. Paul has been the biggest beneficiary of the system; Minneapolis is currently a net contributor to the tax-base pool.

As for the Metropolitan Council, the blame for its decline is mostly laid on Perpich, who is from the sparsely populated Iron Range region and, people say, just never understood the need for such an agency in a metropolitan



Mary Anderson now heads the Metropolitan Council: 'It lost its focus on the key issues.'

area. The governor appoints all 17 members of the council, which in the past has wielded considerable power over development.

"Perpich loaded it up with hacks and then bypassed it on major decisions, like the siting of the World Trade Center and the racetrack," says Steven Dornfeld, deputy editorial page editor of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, echoing the sentiments of many others who would not be quoted by name.

But Dornfeld thinks the council may now have an

opportunity to regain its old importance because of frustration over metropolitan area transportation problems and the effort to create a light rail system. "The situation is similar to the one that led to the creation of the Met Council in 1967," he says. "Then it was sewage, inadequately treated and dumped into rivers that were also a source of drinking water. The legislature tried for eight years to solve it and just couldn't. Now, we have the same situation over transit. Perpich, in effect, ordered Met Council to stay out of it, but now under Carlson it has been freed to try to take hold of the transit situation."

Carlson's appointments to the council also stir some optimism. The new chairwoman, Mary Anderson, mayor of suburban Golden Valley and the first elected official ever to head the council, is respected. "I think the council *was* in decline," she says. "After the first few years, it lost its focus on the key issues: sewage, transit, urban sprawl, preserving green space. It became too involved in monitoring day-to-day operations." Now, she says, the new governor "sees it as a planning agency with a vision for the region. He will be using it and expecting it to act in that way."

Carlson has told the council, publicly, that it must either change or disband. —E.S.

its size. A visitor notices immediately that the city-county building, built back in 1963, is sparkling clean, in contrast to most others around the country.

All is not paradise. Democratic Councilman Rozelle Boyd criticizes a political structure that has made him one of only four black members on the 29-member city-county council, when the population ratio indicates it should be six or seven. There's a lawsuit pending over that. The schools (along with the police and fire departments) were left out of the consolidation, as they have been almost everywhere else, in a deep bow to suburban fears, and the present mayor, Re-

publican William Hudnut, admits to concerns about the quality of the city-area schools. Still, even the cab drivers, that fault-finding breed, sing the praises of Indianapolis.

Top-down regionalism, by whatever name, is the latest trend. It is being attempted by states desperate to make progress toward the interrelated goals of controlling growth and air and water pollution; building and maintaining adequate infrastructure, especially roads and mass transit systems; and fair sharing of sites for low-income housing. These efforts at statewide solutions,

SERVICE SHARING: HOW TO DO IT

More information on regional cooperation arrangements is available from several sources. Pennsylvania's Department of Community Affairs has a 47-page how-to-do-it pamphlet, called the *Intergovernmental Cooperation Handbook*. It contains everything from a warning not to forget liability coverage when sharing equipment to a discussion of cost-sharing alternatives under joint programs to a look at the best ways of using circuit-riding professionals who serve several communities. Available from the Publications Office, Department of Community Affairs, 318 Forum Building, Harrisburg, Pa. 17120. Phone (717) 783-0176. Free while the supply lasts.

The National Association of Regional Councils has a database describing successful programs that councils of government are involved in, along with the name of a contact person for each. NARC will make the information available to local officials who want it, but asks that the request be as narrowly tailored as possible: for example, law enforcement training programs, not just law enforcement. Available from the National Association of Regional Councils, 1700 K St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. Phone (202) 457-0710. Free.

The National Association of Counties has information on inter-local service-sharing arrangements from 232 large counties, organized in 14 functional categories. The reports can be ordered by category, which are: economic and community development; education; finance; administration; judicial and legal services; land use; natural resources; parks and recreation; police and corrections; public health; public safety; public utilities; social services; and transportation. Available from the National Association of Counties, 440 First St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. Phone (202) 393-6226. Free to NACo members; others will be charged a fee for copying and handling, which will vary according to the volume of reports requested.

The American Bar Association has a *Model Procurement Code for State and Local Governments* and an accompanying publication, *Recommended Regulations*, both of which deal, in part, with joint and cooperative purchasing. Available from the American Bar Association, Attn: Order Department, 750 N. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, Ill. 60611. Phone (312) 988-5555. Cost: \$29.75 for the set. —E.S.

regionally administered, are not far enough advanced for any overall evaluations. New Jersey is still wrestling with implementing a law passed in 1986. Georgia has given itself until 1995 to implement its 1989 law. Florida has put into effect the "concurrency" provisions of its law, requiring that infrastructure be in place at the same time as development, but other aspects remain to be dealt with.

The political trouble with this kind of regionalism is its inevitable diminution of the power of local governments. Georgia has been trying to obscure recognition of that simple fact by calling its law a "regional development plan" and by trumpeting that it operates from the "bottom up" rather than the "top down," even though regional agencies review local plans and a state agency sets minimum standards.

California is still in for a battle over enacting a comprehensive regionally based growth management law. "The struggle is over who will govern," says Judy Nadler, a member of the city council in Santa Clara. "There are things people want from their local government, and one of them is access to their directly elected council members. They may not get that through some regional body." That is the position

taken publicly by the Republican governor, Pete Wilson, while the second most important politician in the state, Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, a Democrat, is insisting on the need for powerful regional authorities.

But supporters of both men predict enactment of a bill next year, and one Wilson lieutenant suggests the process that will bring that about: "If you tell people up front that they've got to accept a regional bill, they'll never do it. But I believe that if we tell them, 'We have to solve these problems; you have to grapple with these issues,' they'll come to that conclusion. You have to give people the time to decide that for themselves."

It is hard to measure the achievements of even the long-established regional approaches. Do government services get cheaper, or better, or both? There are almost no independent assessments worth mentioning, though in a survey by the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, 22 percent of municipalities and 28 percent of counties that participate in cooperative purchasing programs reported savings exceeding 15 percent. Only 3 percent of the municipalities and 4 percent of the counties reported no savings.

It seems clear that some governmental functions offer economies and some do not. Adjacent municipalities sharing, say, one road grader, are almost certainly saving money. But when a city and county consolidate their duplicated services and blend work forces, salary disparities usually have been equalized with raises.

But intangibles can matter more than money. "More than anything else," says Erie County's David Skellie of his downtown restoration program, "it has restored pride in our communities."

In Indianapolis, it is the sense of community itself that people speak of. Deputy Mayor Paula Parker Sawyer says "we all took the blame" in 1986 when the city finally focused on black infant mortality statistics "that had been glaring at us for years"—the nation's highest among large cities. Furthermore, she says, the Campaign for Healthy Babies, which she heads, "didn't have to convince different agencies that we needed to join hands and work together without concern over who got the credit or blame, because it was all one."

Michael Carroll, who was deputy mayor of Indianapolis at the time of the consolidation, believes that it is the unified government itself that has created the sense of community. "It involves suburban residents in the city; they vote on local sewers and also on public housing."

This may be the most significant achievement of the many and varied moves toward regionalism: They diminish the alienation of city from suburb, town from countryside. □