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EDITORIAL

Regionalism: A Bigger Idea

As The State's 169 Towns Grapple With Ever-Escalating Costs In A Worsening Economy, It's Time To Tear Down The Walls

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Forty-nine years ago, the General Assembly voted to abolish county government in Connecticut. There wasn't much left of it by then, just county jails, high sheriffs, courthouses and a couple of lesser functions. As advocates saw it, the measure, effective in 1960, got rid of a vestigial, redundant, patronage-driven anachronism. Few if any legislators thought that regional entities such as the state's eight counties might have some future use.

But in 1959, cities were still strong, costs were relatively low and growth was the byword. Times have changed. A severe economic downturn, stagnant growth and the sharply rising cost of local government have many wondering if regional consolidation might not only be desirable but essential to maintaining many programs and services.

The stirrings are there. The state's 2005-2010 Conservation and Development Policies Plan calls for "an ethic of regional coordination." Voluntary partnerships among towns are on the increase. The legislature made \$11 million in incentives available this year for towns to work together.

But these are preliminary steps, a toe in the water. Sharing brush chippers or animal shelters is one thing. Merging core services such as police and fire protection, and ceding power to a regional organization is quite another. We in Connecticut like our towns pretty much as they are.

We like running into the town manager in the coffee shop and having a neighbor on the school board. We like the Memorial Day parade. We have been willing to pay a premium to have 169 municipal governments in a state that is smaller than some Western counties.

But the plethora of towns involves replication of services, and that may be a luxury we can no longer afford. "People are looking at the ever-escalating cost of local government and asking, 'Why can't we do something about it?'" said Robert M. DeCrescenzo, a municipal lawyer who has served as mayor of East Hartford and as a Glastonbury councilman.

The key to successful regionalization in Connecticut would be to achieve economies of scale and other benefits without losing our sense of community. It is a difficult challenge, but not impossible.

WHAT IS IT?

"Regionalism" is a rather bureaucratic and imprecise term for expanding the geographical base on which a particular government service is performed. It is a deceptively hard concept to get across, in part because it's rarely clear what the optimal size of a region should be for the delivery of a particular service. This is reflected in the regional entities we do have. Despite the state's almost sacred sense of localism, we have, according to a 2000 study by the state Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations, about 1,000 intergovernmental ventures of various types and sizes. These range from two-town health districts to a eight-town sewer and water authority, and from a 39-town police mobile communication system to a waste disposal authority that serves 118 communities. These tend to be voluntary, single-function entities that are helpful without ceding local control.

State statues authorize regional efforts in more than three dozen areas, but most of these laws allow one function at a time — health districts, for example, which provide licensing, regulation, emergency planning and other public health services to member towns.

The question is whether we want to up the ante, to consolidate more services and strengthen the state's metropolitan regions.

WHY DO IT?

This is the Land of Steady Habits, the place that change forgot. Why break out of a centuries-long comfort zone and change the way we organize ourselves?

Three pressing reasons:

- *The status quo is getting frightfully expensive.*

Connecticut towns are heavily dependent on revenue from the property tax. With near-stagnant growth, grand lists — towns' rosters of taxable property — are growing at an average rate of 1 percent a year, while operating costs are rising at a rate of 6 to 7 percent a year, according to Lyle Wray, executive director of the Capitol Region Council of Governments. As a result, towns are forced to grind out budgets each year, sometimes going to four or five referendums and enacting budget cuts that threaten the quality of their schools and other services.

Lessening reliance on the property tax would help solve this problem, but that is the Gordian knot of Connecticut politics, something that has resisted change for decades.

Reducing spending via regional efficiencies should be an easier sell.

The fiscal pressure on towns is further exacerbated by budget strain at the state and federal levels. As former U.S. Comptroller General David Walker and others have pointed out, federal dollars are being eaten up by debt and entitlements such as Medicare and Social Security. The state budget picture doesn't look rosy either, with a \$300 million deficit projected for the current fiscal year.

- *Some problems cannot be solved on a local level.*

Transportation initiatives almost always involve multiple municipalities. Water and sewer systems, recycling, workforce development and an increasing number of other issues are best addressed at the regional level.

Also, the lack of regional authority often means single towns make decisions that should be made regionally. For example, the tiny town of Preston in eastern Connecticut happens to be the home of the former Norwich State Hospital. In July, Preston residents voted to negotiate with a developer who proposed building a \$1 billion luxury resort on the property. A project of such magnitude would affect transportation, housing and employment in the entire region of more than a quarter-million people, but 805 Preston residents made the decision. The deal appears to have fallen through.

- *Metro regions are the economic engines that drive the nation's prosperity.*

Regions have the educated workers and infrastructure to nurture innovation and deal-making. And the better-functioning regions such as Portland, Ore., are the most prosperous. This point has been made by writers such as David Rusk and Neal Peirce, and is the theme of a multiyear initiative from the Brookings Institution called "Blueprint for American Prosperity — Unleashing the Potential of a Metropolitan Nation."

Brookings says the "nation's largest 100 metro areas generate a massive 75 percent of the nation's gross domestic product, and 42 of America's metros — if treated as nations — would rank among the world's largest 100 economies. The bottom line: America is a metropolitan nation."

"We argue this is an area of critical national importance, given the economic implications of these regions," said Mark Muro, policy director of Brookings' Metropolitan Policy Program. He and his colleagues are urging the federal government to support metropolitan regionalism in new ways.

Around the country, other regions are organizing and leveraging their assets and working together at a much better pace than Greater Hartford is, on projects such as transit, transit-oriented development and affordable housing. Mr. Muro said the most important benefit of this is "increasing the capacity of the region to streamline decision-making and move more rapidly to seize opportunities."

Greater Hartford is not without strengths. Its companies are productive; its workers are well-educated; its inner suburbs are viable; it is close to major markets; and it offers an enviable quality of life. The MetroHartford Alliance is a strong regional economic development organization, and the Capitol Region Council of Governments provides transportation planning, purchasing agreements and other regional services.

But the combination of the local property tax system and strong home rule tradition tends to slow the region to a crawl. While places such as Charlotte and Minneapolis were building transit systems a couple of years ago, several towns in Greater Hartford were battling over who would get the new ING office and the tax revenue it would bring.

The key, Mr. Muro said, is to find a middle ground, a regional system that doesn't disenfranchise towns and residents, but is able to make decisions and solve problems in a timely manner.

ARE THERE MODELS?

There is no silver-bullet template. Regions around the country have found different ways to strengthen themselves. Portland, Ore., has an elected metro government. Cities such as Indianapolis and Jacksonville merged with their surrounding county governments. But given the long-standing tradition of localism in Connecticut, any move toward regionalism here would probably have to be voluntary, and retain town government and identity. Some models that might be instructive are:

- Louisville effected a hybrid city/county consolidation in 2003. The county's 83 cities and towns kept their identities and maintain their own tax collection, police departments and elected councils. They can choose to provide these and other services, or buy the services at reasonable cost from the metro Louisville government. Local officials say the still-evolving merger has given the city a psychological bounce, helped corporate recruiting and increased efficiency. More than 700 duplicative jobs have been eliminated.
- Sacramento, long beset by sprawl, developed a six-county plan for growth that limited development in some areas while concentrating growth more densely in others. The emphasis is on keeping jobs near homes.

The Wall Street Journal reported in July that the voluntary plan shows signs of working. It has the backing of ordinary citizens, politicians, developers and environmentalists, and has encouraged the building of more apartments, condominiums and townhouses and fewer large-lot subdivisions.

- Denver gets the CEOs to the table. The Metro Mayors Caucus is a voluntary, collaborative regional organization made up of the mayors of 38 cities and towns. The organization, founded in 1993, attempts to reach a consensus on regional issues and influence policy accordingly.

The group was hugely instrumental in winning voter approval of a \$4.7 billion regional

light-rail system in 2004. The organization has also moved policy changes in water conservation, affordable housing and growth management, among others. Though it is not a governmental entity, its communities represent 2.2 million people, nearly half of the state's population of 4.7 million, and so wields real clout.

WHAT ARE THE ROADBLOCKS?

Three hundred and fifty years of local government have not prepared Connecticut to engage in regional activity, though the urgency to do it is compelling. To get there, we will have to overcome inertia and other obstacles, such as:

- *Turf protection.* The Central Connecticut Regional Planning Agency published a study in 2005 showing that the city of Bristol and four surrounding towns could save more than \$1 million a year among them, and probably improve service, if they created a regional emergency telecommunications center instead of having each town run its own.

But police chiefs and others have been reluctant to give up their own 911 services, and so nothing has happened.

On the other hand, 11 towns in the lower Connecticut River valley have a regional emergency communication network that dates to 1976.

- *Schools.* Local control of schools is the giant simian in the room, such a delicate issue that it was taken off the table in some city/county mergers around the country. Greater Hartford's possible advantage is that it has been building regional magnet and charter schools for more than a decade, thanks to the decision in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* school desegregation case.

- *Jobs.* The consolidation of services would likely involve the elimination of some jobs, many of them managerial. Organized labor should be part of the process, to see that workers are accommodated.

- *Time.* Making a regional entity work takes time, and many towns are run by part-time mayors and first selectmen who don't have much time.

WHAT'S THE PLAN?

Regional consolidation will get nowhere unless an airtight case can be made that it will offer real, tangible benefits to the people who live here.

The legislature should authorize a major study to determine as quickly as possible if core services can be less expensively and more efficiently delivered on a regional basis. Towns should open dialogues on the subject.

Regions should not be drawn along old county lines, which date from the 1600s and don't fully reflect today's settlement patterns. Rather, the focus should be on the federally

established standard metropolitan areas, which typically involve a central urban core and surrounding areas that are economically or socially connected to it.

Mr. DeCrescenzo suggests that such a study might allow towns to look at governance with fresh eyes. It could become apparent, for example, that a regional building inspection office makes sense. Towns might see the value in outsourcing such services as tax collection or information technology, possibly to local insurance companies, who do both quite well. The region could use the same police hiring procedures to create a pool of qualified applicants.

Towns could end up with fewer employees, but be in a position to recruit more qualified workers for the jobs they retain, and pay them better.

The towns should initiate a major public education program, so residents understand the cost benefits and other aspects of regional service-sharing.

The state should then make substantial challenge grants available to regions that want to merge some core services.

At the same time, we should look at the imaginative enhancement of existing regional entities. A bold example would be to merge the boards of the Capitol Region Council of Governments and the Metropolitan District Commission. The resulting entity could be the kind of strong regional presence that gets things done.

If Connecticut were being planned today, it almost assuredly would not be divided into 169 cities and towns. It would not have contiguous metropolitan areas crisscrossed with ancient town boundaries. But that is what history has bequeathed the state, and now its people need to find a way to make it work better.