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REINVENTING REGIONALISM

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REINVENTING REGIONALISM

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Reinventing Regionalism

Patricia E. Salkin



As part of the Quality Communities initiative, New York should explore the theme of reinventing regionalism. Environment, transportation, economic development and efficient delivery of an array of public services need to be addressed from a larger vantage point than the narrow confines of the borders of our individual municipalities and special districts.

From the creation of the Adirondack Park Agency in 1971, followed by the Tug Hill Commission in 1972, to the more recent models embodied in Hudson River Greenway Communities Council (1991) and the Central Long Island Pine Barrens Joint Planning and Policy Commission (1993), New York has been a laboratory for experimentation with various forms of regionalism and regional planning. Stories documenting the creation of these entities and others fill the pages of textbooks, treatises and articles in New York and around the country.

Many of our attempts at regional planning center surround a specific natural resource, such as Lake George, the Hudson River, the Erie Canal and parks such as the Catskills and the Adirondacks. Municipal planning organizations (MPOs) like the Capital District Transportation Committee have proven to be innovative and effective in guiding regional transportation initiatives. In addition to special commissions and agencies created to address a particular need, state law enables the creation of inter-county regional planning councils to deal with some cross-jurisdictional issues and to provide information on a region-wide basis. State law also empowers local governments to enter into myriad combinations of intermunicipal agreements for all kinds of planning services, programs and studies. In fact, local governments may be limited only by their own creativity in the use of intermunicipal agreements for planning purposes.

Examples of cooperation abound across the state, but what do we really know about regionalism in New York?

While there are successes to be shared, not every attempt at regionalism has achieved its intended results. Who is benchmarking regional planning in the state? What are our goals and what criteria shall we use to evaluate our progress? With no agency or office particularly charged with providing oversight or evaluation for the myriad regional planning programs that exist in the State, we know precious little about the big picture of regionalism in New York. The lack of coordination and study of these various regional experiments is a missed opportunity to identify the lessons learned so that we may refine and reinvent, where necessary, programs to better enable our regions to achieve intended results...quality communities.

The Office of Local Government Services at the Department of State has done a good job of documenting many examples of intermunicipal cooperation over the last ten years from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Consolidation of Local Government Services to the Quality Communities Demonstration Grant Program. However, other state agencies have either jurisdiction over or connection with different regional planning models that must also be examined. For example, the NYS Thruway Authority launched the Canal Recreationway Commission, and the Pine Barrens Commission and Hudson River Greenway Communities Council were created under the Environmental Conservation Law, not the Executive Law (where other independent agencies such as the Adirondack Park Agency are found). With the exception of filing of local laws and barring the receipt special state funds with reporting requirements, there is no formal requirement or mechanism for the reporting of the details regional activities to the state level.

The first step in reinventing regionalism is to convene an invitational statewide summit that brings together the professional staff in each of the var-

ious regional planning programs. Many of the executive directors and senior staff of these important entities do not even know each other. The Lt. Governor could consider initiating this gathering under the theme of partnerships adopted by the Quality Communities Task Force. Attention is needed to effectively study and evaluate each of the various models individually and comparatively to analyze which efforts have yielded more desirable results and why. In some instances, local culture and politics will prove to be instrumental in the success or failure of particular approaches. In other cases, the incentives will prove to be enticing or simply not strong enough in efforts to encourage cooperative problem-solving solutions. This examination will provide the state with needed feedback on what does and does not work to encourage local participation in regional affairs.

An inventory of regional planning activities is needed that includes fiscal audits either proving the theory that regional solutions are cost-effective or dispelling the theory as myth. The fiscal argument, when proven, will likely be the most compelling evidence in the movement for increasing regional perspective and acceptance of shared responsibility and decision making. This is an area where the Municipal Affairs Division of the Office of State Comptroller may be helpful.

Periods of fiscal conservatism provide opportunities to re-examine existing policies and to explore opportunities for greater regionalism to increase public cost saving efficiencies and job creating economic competitiveness. Together, we can make it happen.

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