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Staff Paper Series

Staff Paper P70-16

July 1970

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March 3, 1970

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Regionalism As A New Basis For Planning

John S. Hoyt, Jr.

Before we attempt to discuss how regionalism can form a new basis for planning, it might be a good idea to spend some time to make sure we understand one another. All too often we enter into this kind of discussion without any mutual understanding, or agreement, as to what the terms that are used really mean. We might begin, then, with an exercise in definitions. It will at least help us understand one another conceptually; from there we can proceed to agree or disagree on the basis of that understanding.

Regionalism. The concept of regions is not new. Geographic areas within which people share common bonds such as joint goals, aspirations, or objectives; similar assets, problems, or resources; and connective political and economic ties are perhaps as old as organized society. Regions take on almost an infinite variety of patterns: they can be as large as the NATO Alliance or as small as a township. By regionalism I mean the act, or the actions, of a group or groups of private or public individuals acting in concert on a problem whose manifestation is broader, geographically, than their individual perceptions. The problem may seem to focus on economic considerations such as low income or high taxes or inadequate employment opportunities or insufficient tax base. But it often brings with it the attendant considerations of institutional change, social conflict, and political parochialism.

Planning. By planning, I am referring to that group process that occurs when there is a mutual recognition of a problem; agreement that a problem-solution is possible; and the group identification of a method of action which, if implemented, would lead towards a solution of the identified problem. Note that I have said "lead towards the solution," not necessarily "result in a solution." In short, I define planning as a process through which the need for change is identified and in which the method of change is specified.

Small communities. Definitionally, I think this is the area of the greatest amount of general misunderstanding. There is no agreed definition as to what a "small community" is. Many economists and political scientists research at length and write in depth about the problems of the small community. When all is said and done, one finds that they are usually discussing non-metropolitan areas which have populations ranging from 5,000 to 50,000 persons. For my purposes - and, I think, for the purposes of the Upper Midwest - this is a totally inaccurate and inappropriate definition. For example in Minnesota, outside of the 7-county metropolitan area, we have 720 incorporated places. Twenty of them have populations that range roughly from 8,000 to the size of Duluth: 100,000. There are another hundred with populations ranging from 2,600 to 7,500 persons. There are another 600 areas, all of which are incorporated communities, which have populations under 2,500. As a matter of fact, over one half of all the incorporated areas in the state of Minnesota have populations of less than 500 persons. For our purposes today, I am going to label communities of roughly 7,500 to 50,000 population as "Micro Cities." Assignment of labels to the two smaller size groups is not quite so easy; but we might label the intermediate size community - that is, those having a population 2,500 to 7,500 - as "Midi Communities"; and the smaller size group could be tagged the "Mini Communities."

Rural-Urban Balance. We hear this phrase used often - by the President's Council on Rural Affairs, Moynihan, etc. Much of what we hear simply says that we don't have an urban-rural balance. Maybe this is the best we can say; we don't have one. We know that we need some sort of distribution between rural and urban America, whatever those two terms connote. That distribution is different than we now have. In other words, I think we can agree that the present distribution of population between the major urban centers and the rest of the country is not ideal. Furthermore, the continuing net migration of population towards these centers is undesirable. We can agree, then, that even though we don't know what the correct mix is, the present one is wrong. Planning and change which will move us in the other direction is therefore desirable.

Quality of Life. This is another phrase that is often used in the same imprecise sense; but let's try to define it. Basically, it seems to be that amorphous mix of economic opportunities, social equality, and political structures which make a community, be it an urban center, or a mini-, midi-, or micro city, a desirable place in which to live. In short, then, I am arguing that given two communities of equal quality of life standards, the choice as to place of residence between the two must be made by the individual (and/or the family) on the basis of their personal value system which weighs factors that may be other than pure economic, political, or social considerations. Perhaps the best way I can illustrate it is to re-state it in a personal sense. Given equal employment opportunities in terms of job status and potential; given equal social opportunities in terms of neighborhood structure, social amenities, church affiliation, etc., and given equal political efficiency in terms of school system, governmental services, etc. between two communities such as St. Cloud and the Twin Cities, I would choose the Twin Cities. My value system is based on experience that is different than many of yours; I was born and brought up adjacent to New York City; my personal values are oriented toward a major metropolitan center. I am simply arguing that a range of choice should be available so that individuals have an opportunity to make a choice. This is a goal towards which regionalism and many of the other societal goals are directed today.

I don't think that equal quality of life standards in every community is a reachable goal. To be realistic, what we should be talking about is a minimization of differences rather than an achievement of a certain set of standards. I have mentioned the word "goals" and I would like to spend several moments on three aspects of that and then move to regionalism: What's happened in Minnesota and its probable future.

We might state our goals in a triad: economic efficiency, social efficiency, and political efficiency. By economic efficiency, we are talking about achieving a change that will improve the economic lot of a group or individual; but will do so without loss to another group or individual. If you stop and think about that; when you talk about economic efficiency, you are necessarily talking about economic growth. If you start with the premise that you aren't going to reduce the economic level of anyone (or group) but are going to try to increase the level of those who are deserving (by whatever your standards are) then you are talking about the increment of growth being directed towards these individuals or groups.

Social efficiency implies net improvement in the cultural, recreational, theological, and related life-style measures of the region. Again, it implies a growth that does not cause a loss to other areas. In this context, you might put a goal of the leveling of the income distribution curve as a social efficiency goal - provided that you're talking about raising the left leg of the distribution curve rather than flattening out, or lowering, the hump in the middle.

I can define political efficiency as the provision of public services at lower (or at least not at rising) per capita costs. In other words, a political structure which provides the appropriate mechanism for the delivery of public services either at lower costs than at present (or, more realistically, at a lower rate of increase.) In terms of economic, social, and political efficiency I am arguing for a sort of ESP reality: Let us not set goals in any one of these areas, or combination of them, which are not achievable - or at least towards which we cannot move. Let us keep in context the direction of movement and not set unattainable goals.

The responsibility of the Church in this area is the same responsibility that many of us have. The University has it, the public official has it. It is the business of communicating the alternatives; letting people know that the alternatives are so that they can participate in the decision process on their selection of an alternative. I would argue that it could be done as well, if not better, from the pulpit than from the campaign trail or from behind an academic desk. In many cases, you have an ability to get this communication process going that some of the rest of us don't have.

The Minnesota Experience. Back in the late winter of 1966, I became involved in a research project which was looking at industrial location: Why is industry located where it is in Minnesota? What were the characteristics that seemed to predominate in particular kinds of industries or firms as to where they were located? The reason for undertaking this effort was relatively straightforward. We wanted to see if we could find anything that would help in an economic development process. Could we identify characteristics that would lead us to tell a community or group of communities what direction they should aim their rifle instead of firing a shotgun at every smokestack that went by? It very quickly became apparent that we couldn't do this on a county by county basis. They simply weren't big enough as units; there wasn't enough industry in many counties for a characteristic to be significant. There was a great disparate distribution between the metropolitan area and the rural areas, and between the Red River Valley and the Iron Range and the cash grain crop area and the dairy belt, and so on. Again, we had the problem of how do we look at the State in terms of any sort of analysis in order to make sense out of it. Out of that work grew the recognition of a need for some sort of regional delineation for the state that would serve that purpose. That was how it began.

We became involved in looking at a number of concepts that were available; that had been used by various regional scientists and by others. We finally came down on a concept used in Iowa by Prof. Karl Fox called "functional economic areas." I'm not sure whether we "adapted" it or "adopted" it, because his concept doesn't fit precisely to Minnesota. Yet, it relates closely enough to

it that it is meaningful. It is a concept of a grouping of counties - we restricted ourselves to county boundaries; we said that we would not divide any counties in drawing a boundary. We stayed within state lines (which is a practical and political consideration). As a result we identified a set of regions which we felt were useful for research purposes. In addition when we began to look at them in terms of other points of view in terms of state and federal agency offices; where the major cities (mini-, and midi-communities) were located they began to make additional sense. They met the criteria of transportation access; they met criteria of newspaper distribution; they met criteria of similarity in industrial labor force mix, in population distribution, rate of population change, and so on. There was enough consistency using these criteria to assure us that we had a reasonable set of multi-county regions.

These "Economic Regions" were published and circulated among the academic community; through the State Planning Agency, they also circulated in the state agencies. They were reviewed by the State Planning Agency, its Advisory Council, and by senior agency officials throughout state government. The result was an executive order in November of 1967, which identified the eleven regions and directed that for the next 12 months, all state-wide planning was to be done on the basis of those eleven regions. In the interim (in the 12 months) the regions were to be reviewed and evaluated; and if necessary, re-structured and a new order issued. That review and evaluation was done in the subsequent year. In April, 1969, the eleven regions were again the subject of an executive order. This time, however, a total of 30 counties were identified as "transitional counties"; that is, they were counties peripheral to groups of counties around major urban centers, and the residents, through their local elected officials, were asked to indicate to the governor towards which set of urban counties or core counties they wished to relate their county for development planning. Many counties have made their indication; they were all being asked to do so by April 3, 1970. After that date, we expect a new executive order from the Governor which lays out, in essence, a "final" delineation (and final should be put in quotes because last May the State Legislature passed the Regional Development Act of 1969 which, among other things, provides for any county at any time to request for reassignment. It can go to the state planning officer and request reassignment, and if he turns it down the county board has the right of appeal to the Legislature.)* The boundaries are not fixed in any legal sense of the word. And we would expect change; for example, if the Twin Cities continues to grow, it may be more than a 7 county metropolitan area in the future.

The Regional Development Act is enabling legislation; it is not mandatory. This fact is important in terms of the communication process. Most of our problem in Minnesota with the Regional Development Act is worry, and the worry is there because of a lack of communication. Let me cite a few things that the Act does and does not do:

- It does not in any way change the rights, perogatives, functions, or powers of the local government. It provides to them an opportunity - at their initiative - to do things together that they might not be able to accomplish alone.

*The new executive order was issued on June 12, 1970.

-It provides no funds to the Regional Development Commission for sewer and water or other physical, hardware-type, grants; either from the federal or state government. These still go to the communities. The Commission is asked to comment on these applications - but it is a comment, not an approval or veto.

-The representation on the Commission includes at least two representatives from every county - the county commissioner and a representative of local municipalities. In a few counties with larger micro-cities, there may be another representative from that city. Although the commission's chairman is appointed by the governor for the first two years, after that it elects its own chairman.

The act is, as I said, enabling legislation whose intent is to help very directly local government in meeting and solving some of the problems that face us today -- decreasing tax base, a shifting population, the delivery of public services, the application for Federal grants. There is a list of rural development grants available from the Federal government available in a book form. There are over one thousand federal programs which provide money or assistance in one way or another to levels of government below that of the state. Is it reasonable to expect the part time public officials of the 600 mini-communities to be familiar with the provisions of all those Federal-grant programs and the state programs on top of that? Or does it make sense to have the professional staff of a regional development commission which can assist these communities? We have argued that higher education institutions could serve as resource centers for these commissions when and if the commissions are formed. The first commission has been formed in the Arrowhead Region (the Northeast part of Minnesota); its chairman has been appointed and the University of Minnesota-Duluth has received approval from the Higher Education Coordinating Commission for an initial grant to assist the Arrowhead Region.

The Future. What are the prospects? In the short run, I suspect one or two more regional commissions in Minnesota will be organized and tested. In the long run, many of us can see the eventual disappearance of most townships and some county boundaries; but I firmly believe that that disappearance must come on the basis of local initiative. I think that counties have to ask the state legislature to merge or consolidate. I think that townships and villages have to ask for this sort of authority where they don't have it already. In one sense, counties, villages, and townships are creatures of the state legislature. In fact they are, for they derive all their powers from the powers the state legislature has given to them; just as the Federal government derives all of its powers from those which the state has given to it. The state is the ultimate "court of last resort" in this country under our constitutional system. But in view of the lengthy history and structure of local government in this country (and in this part of the country in particular) any change that comes will have to come on the basis of local initiative. The regional commission forms a vehicle for that change to take place more rapidly and more efficiently than it might otherwise take place.