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Overview of the presidential symposium entitled: new frontiers in community economic modeling

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This is the third year the Mid-Continent Regional Science Association has sponsored a presidential organized symposium, the papers of which are to be published in the association's journal, *The Journal of Regional Analysis and Policy*. This year's symposium focused attention on a national initiative aimed at improving the outreach education mission of regional scientists and the institutions of higher education in which they tend to conduct research and teach. The focal point of this work is in the area of community economic modeling and socioeconomic impact assessment. The three papers that made up the symposium are outline below.

As noted in the Scott and Johnson paper as well as the Deller and Shields paper, the environment in which local communities function has undergone significant changes over the past decade. Changes in technology, economic and social patterns, and political philosophies have altered the rules of the game by which local communities operate. Under the banners of fiscal federalism, new governance, or devolution, the responsibility, but not always authority, for public decisions is being removed to the lowest levels of government. These responsibilities now include decisions about economic development, land use, natural resource management, education, health care, public safety, and social and cultural amenities, to name just a few.

While many communities have embraced these new challenges, most smaller communities do not have the human resources or technical expertise to respond in a proper and timely manner. For most communities, particularly rural ones, local leaders are more commonly concerned citizens who have no formal training in public administration, economics, planning, or political science. The cry for help has been loud. As state agencies are overwhelmed, many of these community leaders are turning to institutions of higher education for help. The pressure of universities and colleges, particularly public universities, to respond is real. Universities are establishing outreach offices, centers, and institutes to help organize faculty and staff. While many universities, such as the land grants,

have a rich tradition for outreach educational services, many faculty find themselves in demand for services that are outside normal functions. Given the issues with which many of these communities are struggling, regional scientists are uniquely positioned to be of assistance.

The three papers comprised by this symposium speak directly to a new national initiative aimed at positioning universities to be able to respond to a focused set of issues with which local communities are struggling. The focus of this effort is the development of a family of economic and fiscal impact models that can be used to help local leaders and concerned residents better understand the structure of their local economy and the impact of change on their community.

The first paper, by James Scott and Thomas Johnson, provides a historical overview of outreach education programs that have relied on economic impact assessment. They pay particular attention to MicroIMPLAN and the impact that this USDA Forest Service effort has had on regional economics research and applied policy analysis at the federal, state, and local levels. They outline in detail a national initiative designed to bring together a network of regional economic modelers with the sole purpose of enhancing our ability to provide solid and useful information to federal, state, and local decision makers.

The second paper, by David Swenson and Daniel Otto, outlines the economic and fiscal impact modeling system that is being used as a core modeling approach to this national effort. They sketch the theoretical foundations for the modeling approach, overview empirical issues related to data and estimation issues, and close with a look at their work in Iowa.

The third paper, by Steven Deller and Martin Shields, provides an overview of the various approaches developed by and used by community economic development practitioners. One approach is providing technical assistance to communities. This is a role that many university faculty and staff feel particularly at ease with because the implicit role is that of a consultant. An alternative approach follows the more traditional approach of community development in which the service provider aims not at providing specific answers, but rather useful information and a process to digest that information that can be used to help local decision makers make better decisions. Using the community economic modeling approach of the first two papers, a specific outreach education program is outlined followed by a discussion of some of the issues associated with working with communities.

While not all members of MCRSA will work directly with federal, state, and/or local policy makers, the opportunities to affect real change contained in these papers, I hope, will stimulate members to think outside the box. On behalf of the other symposium authors, I would like to thank MCRSA members for this opportunity to share our ideas on this exciting challenge. Finally, I would like to

thank John Leatherman for providing critical comments on each of these manuscripts.