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OVERVIEW

Overview of the Presidential Symposium Entitled: Devolution and its Implications for Local Communities

John C. Leatherman*

This is the fifth year that the *Journal of Regional Analysis & Policy* has published the presidential symposium, a series of invited presentations organized by the president elect at the Mid-Continent Regional Science Association annual meeting. This year's symposium focused on the implications of the continuing trend toward the decentralization of public service responsibilities from broader units to local units of government, popularly termed devolution.

Many members of the MCRSA and readers of *JRAP* are involved with research and outreach to local communities. Regardless of our research interests or disciplinary orientation, probably all of us have wondered how local communities might fare in a climate increasingly characterized by the devolution of service responsibilities.

In many areas of the country and certainly here in the Great Plains, we wonder whether many communities have the wherewithal to assume more responsibility. Despite relatively good economic times throughout the 1990s, many communities in this part of the country continued to experience economic decline and population out-migration. Despite any misgivings, there is the strong ethic in Kansas and elsewhere that the closer decision making is to the problem, the better the solution will be. That is, whether we are talking welfare-to-work, juvenile adjudication, labor force training, or child welfare services, the mind set is to pass through the responsibilities from the federal and state governments to cities, counties, or multi-county regional entities.

Yet, at the local level, there is not necessarily the same confidence that all is resolvable simply because local folks are on the job. At a recent conference for state and local policy makers in Kansas, even communi-

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ties of considerable substance and resources expressed grave misgivings about the avalanche of new responsibilities passed on by the state over the past decade. Local officials called for greater involvement and assistance from state agencies while at the same time chaffing over state-imposed restrictions relating to public finance and other local decision making. In light of these trends and circumstances, it was decided to focus the symposium on this thing called devolution and explore what it may mean for the communities with which we work.

In the first paper of the symposium, Suzanne Leland presents the context with which we may better understand today's current push toward decentralization. She points out that rather than starting with the Republican Congressional ascension in the 1990s, the current wave of decentralization dates to the Nixon presidential administration. Indeed, the current trend represents only the most recent in the ongoing ebb and flow of power and responsibility between the states and federal government under our federalist system of government in the U.S.

Speaking of Nixon, we asked the authors of the second paper to "follow the money" to see whether there have been tangible and discernable shifts in the flow of public funds that might provide some greater insight about exactly how and in what service areas the shift in responsibilities seems to be occurring. Dave Swenson and Steven Deller took up the challenge, tracking shifts in state and federal spending for different service functions through the 1990s. Rather than finding any clear pattern, they observed a somewhat confusing financial picture. Clearly, states have increased their spending across a variety of functions, but they may not be doing so in ways federal aids to states might imply. That is, there appears to be a fair amount of shifting of funds across different functions and needs that may be more influenced by individual (state-by-state) circumstance than any tide wave of commonality across states.

Despite the murkiness of the financial picture, we still might ask - in light of the clearly increasing number and types of responsibilities cities and counties are assuming, are they likely to have the capacity that will allow them to cope successfully. Beth Walter Honadle, long a leader on issues relating to public administration, management and capacity building, answers: "well, it depends." Indeed, she points out it's almost a moot point to wonder whether sufficient local capacity exists, because the federal and state governments - with considerable support and backing by the general electorate - has already decided local governments will do more. The real question is what can broader levels of government do to assist local governments and ensure their success.

Finally, John Leatherman and Steven Deller bring the symposium to a close by considering what many of us who have research and outreach responsibilities relating to local community welfare can do to help facilitate the transitions underway. They outline what they call a "technical

assistance toolbox,” a variety of analytic techniques that can help inform decision making as local officials choose among policy and service alternatives. They point out that the provision of such services creates a teachable moment in the community whereby local officials must lay bare their assessment of local need and capacity in order to make the most effective choices. Facilitating learning at that teachable moment is where we as outreach providers can have greatest impact.

So, will this current shift toward decentralization be a net success? Well, as Ms. Honadle point out, there’s no sense worrying about it because it’s what we are going to do. That having been decided, we might as well get on with the task at hand - facilitate the successful transition to the new, emerging reality. And, all of us who work in rural and community development can make a great contribution to the success of that transition.

Special thanks to all of the authors who participated in the symposium. We hope *JRAP* readers find the ideas presented interesting and helpful.