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Regional Planning:
Common Sense or Nonsense?

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Regional Planning: Common Sense or Nonsense?

Why Plan?

•Because - if this conference had not been planned by someone you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't have known when to arrive, or where to come to, or what to do if you did get here, or even how to explain to your spouse why you were leaving home for 2 or 3 days. In short, planning not only makes action feasible; it also--in a very real sense--provides a mechanism for accountability.

Why Plan Regionally?

•Because when you open the faucet in your home you want pure water--but you don't want to have to pay an extra 20¢ a gallon to your local water company because it costs that much to remove the pollutants discharged into the natural water table by an industry in the adjacent county.

•Because if you don't have a seldom requested book in your library for a local borrower you'd probably like to know how and where to get it for him--and as quickly as possible.

•Because the time-distance horizon of our current society has shrunk so drastically and the public-services function of government has grown so rapidly that the "local" community can no longer survive as an island unto itself.

And it is because of this fact that America today--rural, urban, and suburban--finds itself on the horns of a dilemma. Nowhere else in the world does the combined public and private mix of social services--health, education, welfare, law enforcement, property protection and services, churches, sports, recreation, and culture--begin to match those available in contemporary American society. Yet we have our disadvantaged, discriminated, and depressed areas and people. They are demanding--and America's newly awakened social conscience is demanding for them--an equal access to opportunity. Not only economic and political opportunity, but social opportunity.

But the voices clamoring for change sometimes speak with a strange inconsistency. We--and our voices are among them--raise a socially justifiable cry for more and better for all at the same time that we demand "lower taxes," "fiscal responsibility," "accountability" and more "real" personal income to expend in the private sector.

Can we have both equal access to opportunity for all and economic gain for all? I believe we can achieve such a goal.

But we need to restructure some priorities. Priorities that are fundamental to the concepts of American society; that were literally gleams in the eyes of the Pilgrims and that are held as tenaciously today as they were 250 years ago. Radical? I don't think so, yet wait and see how the two preceding sentences will be taken out of context by the opponents of change.

Notice that I said "restructure" not eliminate, abolish, or even re-order. Structure means to organize in a logical fashion or, in another sense, a physical thing of some ordered shape and (implicitly) with a comforting sense of rigidity or security. Our priorities are already reasonably logical and ordered and their rigidity does provide at least an aura of security. It is not my intent to threaten that security nor to abolish the structure--or any part of it--that provides that security.

Neither do I believe that the implementation, in Minnesota, of the Regional Development Act of 1969 is "the" solution to the dilemma which I have identified nor is it "the" means by which all of the necessary restructuring can be accomplished. I am prepared to argue, however, that it affords a process through which we can begin to tackle some of our problems.

At this point in these remarks I have a choice of at least two alternative directions for the remainder of my comments. I could continue to philosophize on the merits of regional planning and development and hope to make "converts" of those of you who do not yet accept the concepts. Or, and this is the course I intend to pursue, I can set forth some facts that refute the charges and allay the fears created by some of the more vocal commentators on the contemporary scene.

There are those who argue that regional planning and development is such an innovative and new concept that Minnesota should not be the "guinea pig" to test it out--Let's look at the facts:

On February 1, 1971 there were 560 regional councils in the United States. They involve 80 percent of the nation's population and 55 percent of its land area. Some 308 of these councils were in metropolitan areas (such as the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council) and 252 were in non-metropolitan areas (such as the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission).

Prior to 1960 there were about 55 regional councils; between 1960 and 1966 another 180 regional councils came into being; and since 1966--in the last 4 years--another 335 councils have been formed. The statistics make it clear that the concept has been tested by others. They also make it clear that the concept is gaining acceptance in a rather rapid way. In fact, far from being an innovator at this stage of the game, Minnesota could find itself playing "catch-up" ball--not only in concept but in access to federal funding as well!

The rapid growth in these last four years that regional councils have experienced has been due to two basic reasons:

1. Stimulation from the federal government in terms of legislative and administrative requirements for federal aid; and,
2. An increasing awareness on the part of local governments that there is a need for regional cooperation and new solutions to domestic problems.

Critics of regionalization raise a legitimate question when they ask if regional councils are designed to replace local governments. The answer is a clear "no" but it is a rarely accepted answer. Let's look again at the facts about what regional councils are--and are not--and what they are doing.

Regional councils are serving to strengthen local government's effectiveness and to improve working relations with state and federal governments. This frame of reference is the most difficult to document in concrete terms and understandably the least acceptable to those who require visible evidence and/or dollars-saved. These activities deal with future payoff, rather than immediate, high-visibility benefits.

Regional councils, as organized in Minnesota, are not operating units of government.

They do not provide direct services to the public. If they did, they would probably not be supported by their member local governments. The voluntary, non-governmental nature of regional councils is what makes them acceptable to existing local governments. As presently structured, regional councils are not a threat to local government powers or resources.

One of the most important changes in local government in recent years has been the growing awareness of the need for cooperative activity. People are no longer restricted to the boundaries of a single city or county, whether rural, suburban or urban. The rapid growth and modernization of our nation has brought with it a highly mobile, highly demanding public which is involved daily with a number of local governments. Today's citizen rarely works, lives, shops and enjoys his recreation within a single jurisdiction.

Then too the cost of local government is increasing, requiring that local government officials pool administrative operations for economy and efficiency.

Finally, many problems facing local governments cross jurisdictional boundaries and can be solved only on a broader geographic basis. Such problems include transportation, economic development, environment, law enforcement, health protection, and many other activities. Local governments have been forced to find new solutions to these problems. This has resulted in a search for new cooperative mechanisms to more effectively meet the needs of people on a larger and more coordinated basis.

The most promising development in our federal system and for local communities, in the search for new mechanisms, is the regional council. Regional councils are areawide organizations which involve cities, counties, towns and often school districts within a total community. Their prime purpose is to increase communication, cooperation and coordination among local governments in planning and implementing programs to meet mutual challenges and problems. Each local government has the opportunity for full involvement in the policy-making and programming of the council.

Regional councils are advisory in nature and lack the normal governmental powers of taxation, regulation and direct operation of public facilities. Their purpose is to provide a forum for dialogue and joint decision-making within a regional context. Regional councils have no direct power to implement these decisions. They must rely on the elected representatives of member local governments to see that the decisions become a reality.

Regional councils operate through a planning/decision-making process, which includes essentially data collection, identification of area challenges, review of means to meet those challenges, adoption of a plan for action, and finally initiating the implementation of that action.

A basic regional council program would fall into the following framework:

- Regional programs to better meet the needs of people at the local level.
- Regional planning and management in specific functional areas such as air pollution control, solid waste disposal, transportation, law enforcement, water quality, land use and settlement, manpower and economic development.
- Relate functional planning in these areas to each other and to overall planning for the region.
- Establish goals and priorities for the region.
- Forum for communication among local governments.
- Technical assistance and joint services for local governments, which provide economies of scale when carried out on a regional basis. Cooperative purchasing, regional training academies, regional jails and correction centers, and areawide solid waste disposal facilities. All of these projects save the taxpayers money when performed on a larger, regional scale.
- Coordination and review of local government activities within the region to avoid duplication and overlap. It is poor economy for two adjacent jurisdictions to build new crime labs, when they can pool their resources and have a better facility at a lower cost to each.

But, having said these things about the validity and soundness of the concept of regional development have we convinced those who unalterably oppose such a structural change in the way we do things? Probably not, because it implies a change to them and change is a most traumatic experience for most of us.

Perhaps I can best close with a statement which reflects my opinions about what regional councils--or regional planning and development as we call them in Minnesota--are and what they will be.

I suggest that it is entirely probable that if regional councils do not do enough, then some more fundamental experiments and changes must be made in the existing structure of local governments and state-federal agencies and programs.

To those who evaluate performance, I would suggest they consider these four observations:

1. In five years, regional councils, without any authority or power have changed local government relationships with each other, within the federal system. There is now a process, a stage, for cooperation between central city and its suburban or rural communities.
2. The average citizen is conscious that there is a regional community beyond his or her city or county, but more intimate than the state. The citizen is also increasingly aware that his present community cannot meet all of his needs. But he doesn't want the state or federal governments to take over local responsibilities either.
3. The powers and responsibilities of local government are changing. For political, economic and technological reasons, local government structure is being remodeled. The regional approach is basic to that remodeling.
4. At this point in history, regional councils are diverse experiments to make local governments more effective and responsive. Their effectiveness on specific substantive matters, such as how many housing units they got started may be measured. But a more important contribution is that regional councils are working to provide more democratic and effective ways to serve people.

Your challenge, in these next two days, is to take the concepts and the constructs of a regional approach and apply them to the problems of library services. You may find them wanting in terms of final, or best, solutions but I suggest to you that they will provide the single, present, best solutions to most of the achievements you wish to accomplish within your profession.