

5/28/08

Regionalization Breakout Session

Moderator: Mike Jaillet

Introductory Remarks: Joel Barrera

MAPC Project Director Joel Barrera commented: The basic business model of local government is failing. We see small and large cuts, effectively jerry-rigging our local governments. It's time to take a big look at municipal governments and how we can make them work.

The Hamill Commission brought together 25 mayors, academics, legislators and others to spend a year looking at municipal finances over 25 years, producing a 100-page report. It provides a framework for understanding municipal finance, and shows that pretty much every community is facing structural deficits. One of the things it highlighted was a set of reforms that are needed – telecom taxes, local option taxes (hotel, motel, meals) would help diversify revenues.

Local aid is another issue. The state has done a pretty good job of making investments in education, and police and fire are generally held harmless, but there are serious difficulties on non-school side.

Planning, public health and public works funding has really diminished over time and we're not delivering the kinds of services even that we used to. Public works funding has gone from from 15% of total municipal budgets to less than 9%.

The Hamill report recommended that we take a hard look at regionalizing services, and what can to be done to regionalize services over the next 30 years.

People often have negative connotations with regionalization efforts, and say that local communities are just in their own silos, with no history of regionalization, but that's not true. For example: Grace Shepherd, an MAPC Council member, is also a representative on the MBTA. Joel Barrera is on the MWRA board, which provides water and sewer to 50 communities. Education collaboratives provide specialized education services. Fire probably has the most advanced system of mutual aid of anyone. Law enforcement councils, public libraries, regional school systems, the Greater Boston Police Council, the Shannon Grant program are other examples. We are faced with a crisis and an opportunity to do more and be more efficient.

MetroFuture presents a few ideas:

- 1) We can and should do more joint procurement, as there are a lot of inefficiencies. If the Legislature made one simple change, allowing regional agencies to issue blanket contracts

like the state, it would create a change in how much more we could purchase jointly instead of recreating the wheel anytime we want to buy a tire.

2) Regionalizing health services – A recent report noted that Massachusetts has the most fractured health system in the country. Communities have their own boards of health, the vast majority of which are not staffed. We should work with local leaders to find out how to regionalize in a way that everyone, no matter what community, can get the same level of services the City of Boston can provide in terms of the sophisticated service now required after 9/11.

3) We lag other states in terms of giving municipalities the tools and incentives to come together on regional projects. New York instituted a \$25 million program for seed money for feasibility studies, capital, to implement services – the SHARE program. Connecticut has a program to bring communities together for joint public works, animal control, and recycling facilities. Almost every state, whether it was New Jersey or Maine, has a program like that in place. Massachusetts doesn't. We're pleased the governor included \$3 million for the REAP program in his budget. Neither the House nor the Senate included it, but at least the idea is out there. The House included District Local Technical Assistance in its budget. An incentive program is at the core of bringing people together, and interest will increase as we face this budget crisis.

4) Give locals more autonomy. We're working with the MMA on promoting an intermunicipal agreements act. It doesn't involve money, but says that towns can sign intermunicipal agreements without having to go to town meeting - just like local government boards can sign on with a private vendor. People have to step forward.

5) Regionalizing emergency dispatch – The entire state of California has 6 emergency dispatch centers. We have close to 200 in Massachusetts. The Executive Office of Public Safety, in its reauthorization of the 911 surcharge, has created financial incentives for regionalizing 911 centers.

6) Statewide mutual aid structure - We have a pretty decent system in place for fire and police, but nothing for public works, emergency management directors to work across boundaries. Other states, like North Carolina, have statewide mutual aid agreements which, in an emergency situation, allows workers to cross borders, and get federal reimbursement. There are tough turf issues in public safety. EOPS is planning to make this a big priority issue next year.

Westwood Town Administrator Mike Jaillet commented: Looking at the MetroFuture plan and what needs to be accomplished, we need to go way beyond that.

New land is being developed at community borders. The communities doing development get tax revenue, but neighbors might suffer from negative impacts. How so we share resources and revenue?

Constraints: legal authority and local autonomy.

- Authority: need to find ways through legislation to give authority to regional entities to engage in regional services.
- More regional planning and permitting is better than that done at the local level. When things are done on a more regional basis, there's less political sensitivity to the individual, better for overall planning process.
- Political will and courage is needed. It's especially important if the MetroFuture plan is to be implemented and make the radical changes envisioned that we all agree need to be made.

Discussion:

- Communities aren't failing, they're underresourced.
- County government could be the best vehicle for regionalization.
- One of the things we have to consider is conservation of resources, including money.
- Counties are one way to go about regionalization. The other is for communities to join around topics, functions, not creating a new level of government, which seems to be what's being talked about when we hear about legislation enabling communities to join together. Would advocate for that rather than renewal of county government.
- If we become too regionalized, we may become too homogenized.
- That's the problem we run into all the time though, nostalgia. We can't afford to keep everything local. The state should say, we're not going to renovate some schools for so few kids. Build one school for 3 towns and move on. Could have one police dept. -- same amount of officers on street, but do away with bureaucracy. We're going to be forced into this. Legislation would be great to allow boards to have authority to enter into regional agreements. State could aid small towns – state police could run regional detectives. Court officers could be regionalized.
- We don't have the political will in MA. There should not only be incentives, perhaps should be mandatory or penalties.
- Need staff support to get conversations going to find out where there are commonalities. One blessing in county government was that we had staff we could use to get county together or subregions
- Hamill Commission report is an extremely valuable guide. We had a very contentious override for school this year. We have regionalized library, emergency

services, but find we are essentially in a confrontational relationship with the state and unfunded mandates heaped upon us. One of the reasons we got rid of county government was to get rid of a level of bureaucracy. We have two police, fire, DPWs, town administrators a mile away from each other. Sure procurement has to be regionalized, DPW, at least heavy machinery. But we've got to limit whole layers of bureaucracy. There's that resistance to change. And having part-timers running the town doesn't work.

- In the UK, there's the same trend to regionalization. Also a trend to cutting power to counties. Counties still very much a strong leader for most expensive public services.
- Has to be progress on 2 options outlined earlier.
- Fear of change goes with the territory here. Have to get back to notion of what's in the public interest. Budgets are forcing the issue. Bring in penalties, bring in mandates for change, only way to make change is political courage.
- MAPC subregion meetings like MAGIC aren't well attended. Part of regional school district for K-12, but we still have local schools – a good way to deal with regionalization. Good suggestion to regionalize by topic vs. government. Started a group to meet once month on ways can work together, led to group purchasing through the school district for the town. Have to allow local towns to do what they want to do. Prop 2 ½ a blessing and curse.
- Need a new way of organizing. Could get together based on topography. Watersheds are a great way to get together.
- Town government isn't broken. We're facing very difficult situations. In certain areas, regionalization should be a natural. Our Chamber of Commerce meets on a regular basis with regional town administrators – lets townspeople get together on issues. Provides forum to begin to move further. Pleased to be here today. Maybe chambers of commerce are a source people don't often think of. Maybe they can be the convening authority. They can go out and advocate for them on state level. It's really important before we make things happen to first have everyone at the table.
- Towns need support and assistance thru removal of legislative obstacles. This is a wonderful window of opportunity for all of us really capitalize on, to make new alliances, to bring together existing orgs. Need to work to remove any perceived barriers. Has to be one of our key missions, make sure everyone feels free to work with everybody else.
- Need legislation to make regionalization cost-effective. Essex county regional dispatch is being discussed, for example.
- Attending subregional meetings is important to know what's going on.
- The biggest roadblock to regionalizing public safety is the unions. Should be looking at problems holding it up. All agree it's a good thing, but have to come up with a common denominator to convince fire, public safety to do something about it.

- Regionalization is not something to blindly go into. A classic bad example is NESWIC.
- In MetroFuture, what is the region's overall reliance on the property tax? What is the region's goal number to reduce that? We should strategize – 50% would be a good goal.

1) Recommendation that generated the most interest?

- Floating regionalization based on commonalities

(different kinds of structure and authority)

- Incentives and tools to make it easy

(state-provided, money, penalties)

2) Most-heard recommendation?

- Overcoming existing legal barriers with legislation
- Political will

(flagmen example, focus on public good)

3) Appropriate balance in MetroFuture? Does it go far enough?

- It doesn't go far enough.
- Need to make a push through subregions and go to the selectmen

(Cities and towns need to take more responsibility)

- Need to hear more about successes of regionalization, like at recent MMA event.
- Noted that 2 state government officials were in the room
- If state government is beginning to get the regionalization idea, maybe we need a bit of seed money to begin some efforts – to overcome fear, provide sufficient info for municipalities to feel comfortable in pursuing a regional opportunity.
- These efforts need to be staffed. Can't be staffed by towns, it's too much. Got to pitch in and pay for staff time to make it happen. These things don't happen by themselves, has to be someone's job to make it happen, and that costs money.
- Local aid has got to become more institutionalized and dependable, to be counted on from year to year.