

WASHINGTON APA'S GAME CHANGING INITIATIVE
ENHANCE REGIONAL DECISION MAKING WORKING GROUP

Learn More: Enhance Regional Decision Making



Regional Decision-making Challenges

In the conclusion of their book, *Regional Planning in America: Planning and Prospect*,¹ Editors Ethan Seltzer and Armando Carbonell state:

We believe that the challenges facing our nation and the world - climate change and the threat of ecological collapse, the goal of sustainability, inequities from uneven development; and looming shortages of energy, water, and materials, to name a few - will increase the need to create useful regional plans.

Enhancing regional collaboration in multi-jurisdictional policy environments— often just referred to as “regionalism”— has long been an important problem in the US planning profession. Ebenezer Howard thought we needed it. So did Lewis Mumford. The severe financial crisis in local and county governments in recent years has only reenergized these older interests in regionalism and regional planning. While most forms of regional collaboration still evoke visions of regional planning across large metropolitan areas, in particular improved cooperation between cities and suburbs, it is important to remember that regionalism within Washington State as elsewhere takes many different forms, and occurs in all kinds of communities who are struggling with all sorts of complex problems.

For example, regional collaboration in Washington includes the well-known work of formal transit agencies like Sound Transit, but also dozens of collaborative watershed partnerships organized around WRIAs, interesting new social equity goals and programs advanced by traditional councils of government as in Yakima, various MPO funding and policy visions, county-wide (and multi-) county planning policies associated with GMA mandates, rural-area economic development visions, specialized inter-local service agreements, tribal development and environmental conservation initiatives, ‘community-based’ regionalism, and more recently, regional collaborations around global climate adaptation and mitigation! Regionalism in Washington is actually quite widespread, then, but ironically it is poorly understood, under-studied, insufficiently-assessed, and probably still under-appreciated by the general public. For these reasons it forms a major area of professional planning concern.

Viewed at the local level, it is clear that our most pressing planning challenges such as transportation, economic stability, ecological management, climate change adaptation, resource land protection, etc. must be addressed at the regional scale as well as the local and municipal scales. At the same time, local governments,

¹ Seltzer, Ethan and Armando Carbonell. 2011. *Regional Planning in America: Planning and Prospect*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

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including some larger municipal and county governments are searching for ways to provide needed services and functions more cost-effectively.

Additionally, the state also has a strong role to play in the larger regional issues. However, other than planning for state transportation facilities, no framework exists that requires state agencies to develop overall plans that are consistent with and implement local or regional land use plans. Issues include:

- Individual agency operational and funding decisions
- Ineffective coordination
- Lack of a coherent state plan for public investments

The need for regionally based strategies and implementation structures and the opportunities for localized inter-governmental cooperation are two ends of the same issue. One is top-down while the other is bottom-up, but there is no reason they can't meet in the middle.

It is necessary to have a strong collective vision and sound planning/implementation for addressing these issues if we are to be successful. This is especially problematic when plan implementation requires coordination with multiple overlapping services providers and special districts. Resulting problems include:

- Inter-jurisdictional inconsistencies
- Competition for revenue generating uses (annexations)
- Planning decisions disconnected from special districts location and investment decisions

Our current regional governance and institutional structures are not up to the task of effectively addressing emerging challenges.

Actions to Address Enhancing Regional Decision-Making

As part of the “10 Big Ideas for Washington’s future,” University of Washington, Tacoma Professor of Urban Studies Yonn Dierwechter and some his undergraduate students have been conducting initial empirical research on some of the many kinds of contemporary regional planning experiences across our state. Based on their work, a report is being prepared provisionally entitled “Enhancing ‘Big Ideas’ through cross-jurisdictional collaboration: regional value added in Washington State.” Drawing on new student research, the report provides “thumbnail sketches” from the field. These stories together highlight a remarkable variety of regional experiences and institutional forms.

The ultimate goal of the report is to provide an agenda for further discussions on how to move forward. The content of the report is as follows:

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- Introduction: purpose and claims
- Regional redux? From dramatic dreams to feasible collaborations
- Thumbnails sketches
- General conclusions
- References

Using this background report as a springboard, we are planning to hold a one-day workshop in Seattle in early fall, 2015, where various participants around the state can reflect on the problems and potential of regional collaborations in our state. This site will be updated with further information following that workshop.

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