

WASHINGTON APA'S GAME CHANGING INITIATIVE
INCREASE LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY WORKING GROUP

Learn More: Increase Local Government Capacity



Challenges to Increasing Local Government Capacity

A New York Times article from July 2012, reports a “Gloomy Forecast for States, Even if Economy Rebounds:

WASHINGTON — The fiscal crisis for states will persist long after the economy rebounds as they confront rising health care costs, underfunded pensions, ignored infrastructure needs, eroding revenues and expected federal budget cuts, according to a report issued here Tuesday by a task force of respected budget experts. - From a July 17, 2012, NY Times article by Mary Williams Walsh and Michael Cooper

Many local governments – especially small cities and rural counties – do not have the internal or financial capacity to accomplish their responsibilities. The gap between responsibilities and capacity includes planning under GMA, but goes well beyond that. Major funding gaps also exist for human services, criminal justice, basic infrastructure maintenance and other local responsibilities.

Immediately subsequent to adoption of the GMA, planning grants were made available to local governments to assist with compliance. As the State budget became tighter, funding levels for planning were reduced. They are now almost non-existent. As development occurs, property tax revenue is usually delayed by two or more cycles. Sales tax equalization has been reduced. Special districts take pieces of the overall tax levy. The 1% cap on property tax growth creates a structural decline in the ability of property taxes to fund essential government services.

Actions to Address Enhancing Local Government Capacity

One approach to enhancing local government capacity is regional collaboration. In Washington, regional collaboration includes the well-known work of formal transit agencies like Sound Transit, but also dozens of collaborative watershed partnerships organized around WRIsAs, interesting new social equity goals and programs advanced by traditional councils of government as in Yakima, 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!

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

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.

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 as well as one extended case study of regional climate action in Thurston County. These stories together highlight a remarkable variety of regional experiences and institutional forms.

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

- Introduction
- What are Regional Collaborations? Types, Lessons, Applications
- Mapping ‘regionalism’ in Washington State: thumbnails sketches from the field
- Extended case study: regional climate action in Thurston County
- Moving forward: an agenda for discussion
- 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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