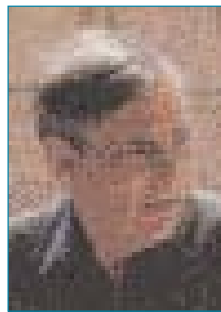


## AD HOC REGIONALISM: MANAGING GROWTH THROUGH SPATIAL PLANNING – LEARNING FROM THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

François Vigier, John Driscoll and Christa Lee-Chuvala

The sprawl of large cities beyond their municipal boundaries became characteristic of industrialized countries in the late 19th century, driven by improved public transportation – commuter rail, streetcars and subways. As both households and economic activities moved to peripheral areas where land was cheaper, the receiving municipalities had to start supplying a range of public services they were ill-prepared to provide. Practically all major cities moved to annex developing areas as a way to not lose property tax revenue.



*François Vigier*



*John Driscoll*



*Christa Lee-Chuvala*

Perhaps the most dramatic spatial extension of municipal powers was the creation of a new County of London by the 1888 Local Government Act with an elected municipal council responsible for the planning and management of an area whose population had reached 4,243,000. Its broad powers enabled it to address vigorously such critical problems as slum clearance, the provision of piped water and sanitary sewers, education, and the construction of affordable housing units.

Complex regional spatial structures consisting of urbanized areas interspersed with densifying suburbs became prominent after World War II, as increasingly affordable cars, first in the United States, later in Western Europe, made longer journeys to work possible. They are now characteristic of all metropolitan areas and annexation is no longer a practical way to manage growth. New ways to plan for the integrated development of large, multi-jurisdictional areas had to be found. This



was particularly so in the United States where the management of spatial growth through zoning and other development controls is the responsibility of local governments, and the role of the federal and state governments consists primarily in the construction and maintenance of major transportation infrastructure, the application of environmental standards, grants-in-aid to local governments – of which welfare is the major component – and a limited number of economic incentives to promote the economic revitalization of depressed areas.

The need for larger than local planning has often led to the adoption of *ad hoc* solutions that offer many of the benefits of regional planning without imposing a new administrative level over the individual jurisdictions that comprise a functional region. Rather, they are either driven by the need to address a specific problem – environmental management, economic development – or by the decision of adjacent local governments to engage in a voluntary association when facing common growth management issues – reducing the inefficiencies of urban sprawl, responding to a perceived threat to their economic competitiveness or jointly capturing an economic development opportunity.

The cases described below demonstrate that building upon the existing powers of local governments can often achieve the efficiencies of large-scale spatial planning. It is thus possible to capture

many of the benefits of coordinating the management of growth at a regional level without imposing an intermediate administrative level in the relationship between local, state and national governments. This type of *ad hoc* regionalism can preserve a strong voice at the local level and allows considerable flexibility in the definition of a region as well as in structuring the responsibilities and powers of an institution created to address specific growth management issues. The approaches they embody should be of interest in the Irish context where the current effort to reconcile the broad visions described by the Regional Development Strategy (Northern Ireland) and the National Spatial Strategy (Republic of Ireland) has become a primary concern.

They can be regrouped into three categories, each representing a different approach to regional planning:

- The need to supplement the powers of local governments to manage a region that is defined primarily on environmental grounds.
- The voluntary association of local governments to jointly manage growth and share the public benefits of future development.
- Special purpose regional agencies whose primary role is to provide information and advice to local governments.

### Supplementing local powers

The ***Cape Cod Regional Planning Commission*** was created in 1990 by the Massachusetts legislature to preserve the natural and cultural assets of Cape Cod, a peninsula south of Boston whose natural beauty attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists (and \$1 billion) each summer. Once composed of rural coastal communities, the Cape has experienced a sharp rise in population in recent decades coinciding with the explosive growth of Eastern Massachusetts. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of year-round residents on the Cape grew by 26%, and by another 16% from 1990 to 2000. This growth led to increasing development pressure that threatened to damage the region's ecological, historical and cultural assets. The Cape Cod Commission was created with the primary objective of ensuring the protection of the region's assets by supplementing the local governments' review and approval of development projects.<sup>1</sup>

Sixteen of its 19 members are selected by each of the municipalities and the Barnstable county government and another three are appointed by the Governor of Massachusetts: one Native American and two minority representatives. While the Commission's activities include providing affordable housing, managing coastal and marine resources, economic development, and the protection of natural resources, its statutory responsibilities pertain

specifically to planning and community development.

- *Develop and implement a Regional Policy Plan.* The Commission prepares a Regional Policy Plan (RPP) that must be reviewed and updated every five years. The RPP is both a planning and regulatory document that lays out a regional growth policy, establishes a framework for local planning, identifies regional resources, and provides Minimum Performance Standards in six key resource areas to evaluate the impact of all new large-scale development. The RPP is subject to an extensive public review process.
- *Delineate specific areas as Districts of Critical Planning Concern.* An important aspect of the Regional Policy Plan is to determine the region's key environmental, cultural and historical resources. The Commission can recommend the designation of these sensitive areas as Districts of Critical Planning Concern that warrant additional protective use regulations and a more stringent review process.
- *Assess and regulate Developments of Regional Impact.* Development proposals in excess of 10,000 square feet fall under the authority of the Commission. Each project is reviewed to determine its



environmental, economic and social costs and benefits. They are approved only if they meet all of the Minimum Performance Standards defined by the Commission. While local governments cannot approve rejected projects, they can reject an approved project as part of their local autonomy.<sup>2</sup>

The Cape Cod Regional Planning Commission is unique in a state known for the historical strength of its local governments. While other areas in Massachusetts have all but eliminated the role of county governments in development issues, residents of Barnstable County support this form of regional planning as a complement to robust local governance. In 2000 the Commission's success in averting undesirable large-scale development led Cape Cod residents to vote to rename their county government the "Regional Government of Cape Cod, Massachusetts".

### **Voluntary Associations**

The sprawl of development driven by market forces since the end of World War II has created blatant spatial economic inequalities. Older areas have seen their property tax base eroded by the demise of their traditional industries, the location of many new economic activities in suburban locations and the flight of their more affluent residents to new housing in the suburbs. Concurrently with the erosion of their

tax base, inner cities had to bear rising social welfare costs. Inequalities also developed in the suburbs as they competed with each other for such high revenue producing uses as commercial malls and industrial and office parks to pay for the public costs of lower-density residential development. The lack of a formal structure for regional planning in the US has led to the creation of *ad hoc* solutions to achieve greater efficiency in the provision of public services and, in some cases, the coordinated management of growth. Their creation has been encouraged by some state governments and, since 1960, the Federal Government through the provision of funding to regional Councils of Governments that undertake planning studies and collaborative projects. While these projects have been largely focused on infrastructure – water and sewers, public transportation – two cases stand out for their comprehensive approach.

Created in 1955 as an Inter-County Regional Planning Association, the **Denver (Colorado) Regional Council of Governments** (DRCOG) was incorporated in 1968 as a voluntary non-profit association of county and local governments designed to promote cooperation among the 43 municipalities and nine counties of the Greater Denver Metropolitan Area. Funded primarily from membership dues and state and federal grants, DRCOG represents a metropolitan population of 2,600,000 and includes one local elected official from each of the 52 participating governments.

Now in its sixth decade, DRCOG's primary contribution has been the development of *Metro Vision 2020* (recently updated to *Metro Vision 2030*), a regional strategy prepared by a task force of elected officials, private sector participants, and representatives from environmental organizations. The strategy proposes to shape regional development by:

- Creating urban growth boundaries;
- Constructing a multimodal transportation system;
- Preserving open space;
- Developing urban centers;
- Improving and monitoring water and air quality.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to regional planning, DRCOG also works with the Colorado Department of Local Affairs to support the local planning efforts of its member communities and provides them the support of its team of planners, economists, ecologists and GIS specialists.

The success of this voluntary regionalism led to the adoption of *The Mile-High Compact*,<sup>5</sup> a unique contract between county and municipal governments representing 85 percent of the Denver region's population. It is a legally binding agreement that commits local governments to prepare comprehensive plans and adopt zoning regulations that will contribute to the implementation of the *Metro Vision 2020* plan. While signing the Compact is strictly voluntary, all local governments in the Denver region are encouraged to join and can

do so at any time. Initially signed in August 2002 by 30 local government representatives, the number of participating governments had risen to 39 by June 2005.

As a result, DRCOG has made considerable progress in managing the growth of a rapidly expanding metropolitan region. Some of its key contributions include:

- Developing and championing alternative transportation programmes to reduce car dependency;
- Assessing all major rapid transit proposals before construction;
- Conducting studies to determine the best placement of large-scale developments; and
- Coordinating the implementation of the region's Clean Water Plan.<sup>6</sup>

A more prescriptive approach was taken by the Minnesota legislature when, in 1967, it created the ***Minneapolis/St. Paul Metropolitan Council***, first state-established regional planning entity in the U.S. The Council currently manages wastewater collection and treatment for the 2.7 million residents of the metro area, operates bus and rail services, coordinates the regional park system, and provides affordable housing opportunities. Its *2030 Regional Development Framework* provides a framework for regional investments in transportation (including airports), open space and wastewater treatment. It also encourages collaborative projects among the region's 188 municipalities that



enhance livability while promoting environmental protection, economic competitiveness and the efficient use of resources.<sup>7</sup> The Metro Council is funded by revenue from wastewater treatment and transit user fees, state and federal funds, and a seven-county property tax surcharge.

The 1971 Minnesota's Fiscal Disparities Act extended inter-municipal cooperation in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. Its purpose is to equalize inter-municipal revenues between older urban areas and rapidly growing suburbs and is the only programme of its kind across the United States. The Act requires all municipalities in the metropolitan region to annually compare their current commercial and industrial property assessment with their 1971 values and contribute 40% of the value increase into a regional pool. The proceeds are redistributed to local jurisdictions using an index based on each municipality's "relative fiscal capacity", or the ratio of aggregate property value per capita to the region's average property value. Each city or town's population is multiplied by this ratio to determine the amount of money it will receive from or contribute to the pool. Perhaps most dramatically, this tax-sharing system has allowed smaller municipalities to share in the tax revenue of the world's second largest mall, the Mall of America. This 4.2 million square foot mega-development, located in the small city of Bloomington, has an annual economic impact of \$1.8 billion and brought in \$18.5 million in tax revenues in 2004. The proposal to

double its size in the next two years promises to substantially increase that amount.

Proponents of the Fiscal Disparities Act hold that the tax-sharing programme is an essential part of any comprehensive strategy to eliminate sprawl, shore up struggling municipalities and reduce the gap between lower- and higher-income groups. While this characterization may be ambitious, it is clear that the programme has been effective in limiting competition among municipalities, in restructuring regional land-use patterns and in encouraging investment in centre cities.<sup>8</sup> Initially Minneapolis and St. Paul received the majority of benefits from the tax redistribution formula but, by 2004, 137 municipalities were net receivers while 49 were net contributors. Sharing the fiscal benefits of development allowed municipalities to reject development proposals that might have long-run detrimental effects. Government officials estimate that the programme has narrowed the economic gap between its richest and poorest communities from 50-to-1 to 12-to-1.<sup>9</sup>

### Special purpose agencies

Information relevant to spatial planning and management is collected at the local level and rarely shared. Even though demographic and economic information provided by the Federal Government in the United States is available in both aggregated and disaggregated forms, its utilization by local governments to prepare their

individual development strategies is often unclear, as are the strategies themselves. This has always been an obstacle to intergovernmental co-operation, particularly when development trends cross state or national borders. The **Metropolitan Area Planning Council** (MAPC) was created in 1963 by the Massachusetts State Legislature to provide a common information base in the Greater Boston region, a 3,680 square kilometre area with a population of over 3,000,000 people living in 101 municipalities. As an independent advisory agency with an annual budget of \$2.8 million, funded by a combination of federal, state, local and private grants, MAPC initially focused its activities on the documentation of regional development trends but has gained an increasing influence in the formulation of regional policy.

It prepares periodic comprehensive sectoral reports to guide development within the region. It provides excellent GIS and data resources on regional development trends, support for the local planning initiatives of smaller municipalities, and assistance in implementing "smart growth." As a member of the Boston Area Planning Organization, it has become a major participant in the allocation of regional transportation planning funded by the federal and state governments. In conjunction with the City of Boston and the Boston Foundation (the city's primary philanthropic institution), MAPC is responsible for the Boston Indicators Project, an initiative to provide high-

quality data to the general public. Begun in 1997, the project will continue to publish a biennial report until 2030.<sup>10</sup>

Its most comprehensive study, *MetroFuture*, is a comprehensive series of regional scenarios for the area's future growth based on extensive consultation with public, private and civic stakeholders. A draft report will be presented for public comments. In its final version, *MetroFuture* will include a regional vision and plan, public policy recommendations, a framework for local planning, and short-term implementation plans slated for immediate action.<sup>11</sup>

A similar if older institution, the **New York Regional Plan Association**, is the oldest metropolitan planning organization in the United States. It was created in 1922 by business, civic, and community leaders as an independent non-profit membership organization. Since that time, the RPA has been an active advocate of regional planning in the 31-county urbanized region centering on Manhattan and including Long Island and parts of northeastern New Jersey and southern Connecticut. The organization undertakes studies of evolving trends in the region, develops strategic partnerships with regional stakeholders, makes recommendations to improve the quality of life and the economic competitiveness of the region, and provides technical support to local governments and state agencies to implement growth management policies. The RPA has published only three comprehensive plans in its 84



*The Metropolitan Area Planning Council in the Greater Boston region has prepared a comprehensive series of regional studies for the area's future growth based on extensive consultation with public, private and civic stakeholders.*

years, most recently in 1996. They are long-range, regional strategies that have influenced the three state legislatures and helped shape the region's transportation and open space systems.

For example, the park system proposed in its 1929 plan led to the creation of 500,000 hectares of permanently protected open space throughout the region and served as an example for other metropolitan areas. Its well-researched documentation on the damaging effects of sprawl published in the 1968 plan was the first broad condemnation of the growth patterns that many regions are currently attempting to address. The 1996 plan, *A Region at Risk*, developed after a six-year process involving collaboration among hundreds of civic groups in the

region, identified the threats of a globalizing economy on the region and contains recommendations regarding open space, community design, public transit, workforce development, and regional governance.<sup>12</sup>

With a \$4.2 million annual budget from membership dues, grants and foundations, the RPA is renowned for the quality of its technical studies. Its work has provided models of effective planning for other cities and regions across the US. As an independent non-profit organization, RPA has been surprisingly effective in drawing municipalities together across state boundaries. Its emphasis on public-private partnerships and civic leadership has given it a strong voice in the formulation of public policy in three

states and allowed it to promote concepts that government planning agencies alone would not have advocated. Other successes include initiating and advocating the permanent protection of water supply watersheds for 14 million residents; bringing one million jobs into regional urban centers by promoting infrastructure projects and workforce policies, and successfully advocating capital investments and governance reforms that led to extensive subway and commuter rail services improvements.

### Conclusions

Creating regional authorities with defined powers and responsibilities is the prerogative of higher levels of government. Their ability to assemble needed information, manage growth and preserve natural resources is undeniable. They are the only authorities that can marshal the resources to finance, and often manage, such large-scale regional investments as public transportation and regional water, sewer and solid waste systems. However

# Our focus is you...



## because size doesn't matter



It doesn't matter if your business is a corporate giant or one person start-up. FPM Chartered Accountants is a client focused practice with specialist cross-border skills in accounts preparation, audit, tax planning, financial incentives, business consultancy, strategic planning, corporate finance, financial management, project management and forensic accounting.

Check our website for the latest details on cross-border financial incentives to help your business.

**FPM**  
CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS

**Newry:** Dromantine Mill, The Quays, Newry, Co. Down • Tel: 028 302 61010  
**Dundalk:** FPM Suite, 17A Francis Street, Dundalk, Co. Louth • Tel: 042 9388898  
**Dungannon:** 25 Georges Street, Dungannon, Co. Tyrone • Tel: 028 8775 0400  
[www.fpmca.com](http://www.fpmca.com)





since they often over-ride the traditional powers of local governments, it is indispensable that the procedures they follow must not only be transparent but must also include extensive consultation with the local authorities in their jurisdiction, whose economic and spatial development will be affected by their decisions. Yet even when following an extensive consultative process, they are often seen as a threat to the "home rule" philosophy that is deeply rooted in the United States political system. Hence their rarity in a political climate where interference in local affairs, whether by the Federal Government or the states, is viewed with suspicion.

The interest of the examples described lies mainly in the willingness of local governments to voluntarily cede some of their rights in exchange for the more effective management of growth, the more efficient delivery of public services and clear fiscal benefits. Achieving a political climate where local governments will willingly co-operate requires building a consensus that "a regional approach is needed": the protection of natural assets in the case of the Cape Cod Regional Planning Commission; controlling sprawl and improving the delivery of public services in Denver's Mile High Compact; achieving greater fiscal equity in the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metropolitan Area. In all three instances, collaboration among the local governments concerned started in a relatively modest way and became more pervasive as the success of the original initiative became evident.

Similarly, the quality of the regional information provided and technical assistance provided by Boston's Metropolitan Area Planning Council led to a gradual extension of its prerogatives as both local governments and state and federal agencies came to recognize its contributions. This is also the case for the New York Regional Plan Association which, in spite of its status as a private institution, has managed to gain significant influence. As Robert Yaro, its current director, is fond of saying: "We do not have any teeth but have very strong gums!" Politicians in the tri-state area may not always follow its advice but always listen carefully to its views.

Successful examples from abroad cannot always be replicated in another country. Yet they offer lessons that are worth pondering and their institutional structure can often be adapted to fit local conditions, especially when a consensus can be achieved on the benefits of inter-municipal cooperation. For example, staff of the Institute for International Urban Development successfully organized a voluntary collaboration, on the American model, among eight municipalities in a small region of northern Romania.

Located on a significant crossroad of the new European highway system, Oradea faced the necessity to ensure its economic development in the new political system. A series of workshops for public officials helped this micro-region define a development strategy and agree on the need to co-operate to

improve its opportunities for economic development, transportation, education, quality of life and the delivery of public services. The municipalities created a joint administrative framework to guide their co-operative effort that respected the autonomy of each local government. A regional information system has been prepared as the first step for a metropolitan plan that all eight municipalities will have to approve. Co-operation is also occurring on specific projects of common benefit, including an industrial zone, a gas distribution company and an ecological landfill for the region. The success of the Oradea experience has captured the interest of other Romanian municipalities who are exploring ways of applying the principle of metropolitan co-operation.

In both Northern and Southern Ireland, the implementation of the two spatial strategies requires the creation of new collaborative contexts among county and local authorities that will have to be defined by the two governments. On an all-island basis, the recent calls for closer co-operation in infrastructure investment and spatial planning by both British and Irish government ministers suggests a need to create mechanisms that will encourage dialogue and the definition of common endeavours at the regional and sub-regional levels. Given the fact that bi-national cross-border co-operation is far more complicated than between American states, the examples given above are worth looking at as they neither replace nor threaten

existing political structures. Rather, they build a consensus among local governments that collaboration is a more effective way to solve a common problem than independent action. They offer a range of solutions:

- A private entity, such as the New York Regional Plan Association, whose role is primarily that of a think tank proposing policies to governments;
- A public institution, such as the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, whose primary role is to provide information and occasional technical assistance to the governments in its region;
- Different models of local governments in a region ceding voluntarily some of their traditional prerogatives to a "regional authority" in whose creation they were involved.

Consensus building is the essential component of *ad hoc* regionalism. Information sharing and dialogue are the first component. The documentation of trends and the sharing of information among the local authorities in the cross-border development corridors identified by the two spatial strategies could lead to a structured discussion of what the future holds and of whether there are potential benefits to joint action. These issues are currently being addressed in a research project being undertaken by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) for InterTradelreland on a framework for collaborative action between the two

spatial strategies. North and South, which is due for publication in Spring 2006.

**François Vigier is the Charles Dyer Norton Professor of Regional Planning *emeritus* at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and the President of the Institute for International Urban Development in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He has been responsible for numerous large-scale regional and urban planning projects in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Dr. Vigier is the editor of *Sprawl: Beyond the Rhetoric* (2000, with Nicolas Retsinas), and *The New Planning Agenda* (1996).**

**John Driscoll is the Vice President of the Institute for International Urban Development and the Director of the International Centre for Local and Regional Development, based at the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh. He has over 30 years experience of cross-regional planning and urban regeneration and economic development in the United States, the EU, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.**

**Christa Lee-Chuvala is a research associate at the Institute for International Urban Development where she assists in the development of projects and conducts research for the Institute's capacity building and technical assistance programmes in Latin America, Central Asia and Europe.**

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Robert W.. *Regional Land Use Planning and Regulation on Cape Cod: Reconciling Local and Regional Control*. February 2002. Department of City and Regional Planning, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>2</sup> Cape Cod Commission. *Cape Cod Regional Policy Plan*. April 29, 2002. <http://www.capecodcommission.org/RPP/>

<sup>3</sup> Denver Regional Council of Governments. *With One Voice*. <http://www.drcog.org/index.cfm?page=WhatisDRCOG?>

<sup>4</sup> Denver Regional Council of Governments. *Metro Vision 2030 Plan*. January 19, 2005. <http://www.drcog.org/index.cfm?page=MetroVision2020>

<sup>5</sup> Denver Regional Council of Governments. *Mile High Compact* (copy of agreement). August 10, 2000. <http://www.drcog.org/index.cfm?page=MileHighCompact>

<sup>6</sup> Denver Regional Council of Governments. *Regional Report*. September 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Metropolitan Council, Twin Cities, Minneapolis. *2030 Regional*

*Development Framework*. Adopted  
January 14, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Hinze, Steve and Karen Baker, House  
Research Department. *Minnesota's Fiscal  
Disparities Programs: Twin Cities  
Metropolitan Area and Iron Range*.  
February 2000.

<http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/pubs/fiscaldis.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Toland, Bill. "A Blueprint for Tax-sharing," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*,  
February 15, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The Boston Foundation, the City of  
Boston/Boston Redevelopment  
Authority, Metropolitan Area Planning  
Council. *Thinking Globally, Acting  
Locally: A Regional Wake-up Call*.  
A summary of the Boston Indicators  
Report, 2002-2004.

<sup>11</sup> Metropolitan Area Planning  
Commission. "MetroFuture: Making a  
Greater Boston Region."  
[www.metrofuture.org](http://www.metrofuture.org).

<sup>12</sup> Yaro, Robert D. and Tony Hiss. *An  
Executive Summary of a Region at Risk:  
The third Regional Plan for the New  
York-New Jersey-Connecticut  
Metropolitan Area*." 1996.

<http://www.rpa.org/pdf/exec1.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO Management of Social  
Transformations (MOST) Programme.  
Regional Plan Association Programme  
Summary.

<http://www.unesco.org/most/usa11.htm>