

Can 'Volunteerism' Solve Problems?

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the seventh in a monthly series called the "Regionalist Papers" presented by Metropolitan Fund, Inc., a research-education group in southeast Michigan. The author is professor of urban affairs and political science at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and was first chairman of the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

By HENRY J. SCHMANDT

The quest for more effective ways of governing metropolitan or regional areas has now gone on for more than half a century. The principal method of adaptation in this process has been intergovernmental volunteerism, one of the most influential concepts in the political history of the nation's metropolitan communities since the early decades of this century.

The present paper is an examination of the voluntary or inter-governmental cooperation approach to regional governance.

It is the underlying assumption of intergovernmental volunteerism that COGs will play a significant role in the governance of urban regions if: (a) the strengths and limitations of this approach are properly recognized; (b) full advantage is taken of the opportunities it affords; (c) it is accompanied by national and state assumption of certain responsibilities relevant to regional problems and regional development; and (d) incentives and penalties are utilized by higher levels of public authority to induce cooperative activity among the local units.

MANY FORMS and types of intergovernmental cooperation exist in urban areas. They range from service agreements and mutual aid pacts among local units to jointly operated utilities and councils of governments.

Taken collectively, these voluntary devices have in varying degrees affected the behavior of local governments and resulted in some procedural and institutional changes. Four categories of intergovernmental cooperation can be distinguished on the basis of existing practices: information exchange, service

contracts, regional planning and areawide policymaking. The principal cooperative mechanism employed in multi-jurisdictional urban areas today is the council of government. Largely a creature of the last decade and of federal planning requirements, COGs represent the major national effort at the present time to strengthen the governmental system of urban regions.

Several questions about the regional council approach to the governance of urban areas are commonly raised. Does this device represent only a stage through which regionalism is moving? Have the existing COGs assumed a service delivery, as distinguished from a planning and coordinating, role? Are these bodies contributing to a development and recruitment of a regional political leadership? How effective have they been in promoting areawide goals and solving areawide problems?

LITTLE REASON exists to believe that volunteerism is a forerunner of regional intergovernmental volunteerism can be converted into ruling agencies by virtue of any internal evolution. It is often said that intergovernmental cooperative activity is paving the way for such development by opening up channels of communication among local jurisdictions, demonstrating the value and benefits to be derived from coordinated action in certain areas of concern. This "spill-over" theory has found little substantiation in the case of local governments.

Only a few regional councils, such as the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), have attempted to assume operational responsibility for any services or facilities. As the recently adopted goals of the national association stress, the principal thrust of COGs is not to provide direct public

services but to plan and make policy. COGs are definitely political instrumentalities despite the professional and neutral stance they tend to assume. However, one of the major drawbacks to their development and effectiveness is the lack of regional political leadership. Although the public officials who constitute the membership of these bodies wear two hats, one local and one areawide, their primary allegiance is to their home base.

LITTLE RESEARCH has been done to evaluate COGs performance or determine the consequences of their adoption, making their effectiveness difficult to assess. Lacking research findings, our efforts here are confined to a few general observations organized around three categories of performance: evaluation, process, output, and impact.

The planning output of the better staffed councils in these fields has generally been regarded as of satisfactory quality from a strictly professional or technical point of view. However, critics question whether the plans are sensitive to the need for social change and designed to promote the interests of all segments of the urban community.

There is no way, on the basis of available knowledge, to assess the impact that these various activities or outputs are having on the developmental patterns of urban areas or on the amelioration of regional problems. While it is apparent that no significant

change in urban government has occurred as a result of the creation of regional councils, what is not so evident is the impact of lesser nature that these agencies may be having on the operation and policies of urban complexes.

IT MAY WELL BE, as some observers contend, that the political system now common to metropolitan areas is functioning more rationally and effectively than many critics care to acknowledge. Yet even if the correctness of this view is granted, the existence of serious problems and deficiencies in these areas remains an undeniable fact. If one advocates volunteerism as the basis on which to rest the governance of

urban areas, he must also be prepared to recognize the parameters of this approach. Regional councils on their part, mindful of the voluntary and tenuous basis on which they rest, have been inclined to avoid these matters and problems - zoning, education, housing, and law enforcement in particular - which carry with them a high potential for conflict among the member jurisdictions. Issues with social or life-style implications have been the inevitable victims of this reluctance.

The second major weakness of the voluntary approach is its inability to act as a resource redistribution mechanism. The political feasibility of proceeding along those four

lines is not without promise. In fact, the incipient activity manifested in all four of the above categories in recent years suggests the potential receptivity of local officials and the public generally to an approach to regional governance based on a recognition of local prerogatives and relying heavily on inter-unit volunteerism stimulated by external pressures.

Combining volunteerism with the adoption of integrative mechanisms and processes may well offer greater opportunity for establishing a viable system of regional governance than the unilateral reliance on either approach. It is a possibility that merits serious consideration.

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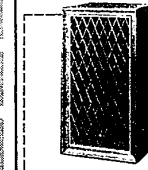
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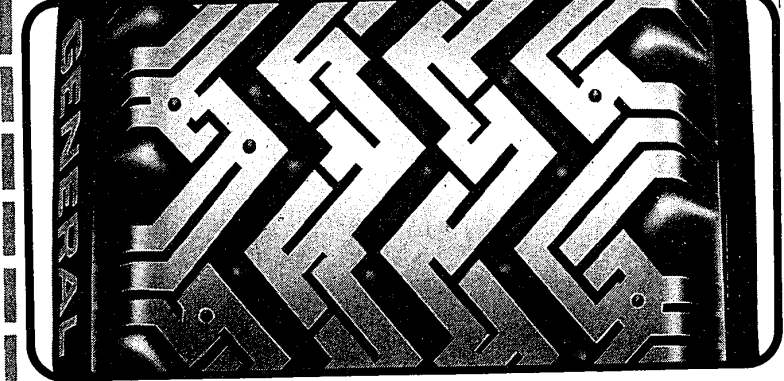
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