

The Brief Life and Hard Times of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission

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Dusenbury's history of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission highlights the contributions made by this federally-funded economic development agency as well as traces the steps to its federally-ordered abolition. Her thorough description of the agency's demise dismisses the possibility of drawing the most obvious, but inaccurate, conclusion — that regional economic development planning is ineffective. Rather, this agency's loss of commitment to planning and preoccupation with survival account for its deserved end.

Introduction

The Coastal Plains Regional Commission (CPRC) was one of five regional commissions established in July of 1967 under Title V of the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965. Its territory encompassed the coastal area of several southern states inland to the beginning of the Piedmont. The Commission's purpose was to accelerate economic development in the Coastal Plains Region, to reduce the extensive poverty and to raise the income levels of the people living there. Governors of the member states plus a federal co-chairman appointed by the President made up the Commission. Within a year, the CPRC was staffed and functioning.

Just fourteen years later, in July 1981, the bell tolled for CPRC as President Reagan's proposed abolition of the Title V Regional Commissions became law. This was not the first attempt to do away with the Title V Commissions. Eight years earlier, President Nixon had made a similar but unsuccessful proposal. The outcome was different in 1981.

Once the end of the Title V Commissions was mandated, the CPRC acted quickly. All but a skeleton staff retained to close down the Commission were given notice. Most on-going CPRC projects were terminated, and the Commerce Department took over those few projects that were not at a point where they could be closed out. Some of the remaining Fiscal Year 1981 funds were allocated for an eval-

uation of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission. As part of the Southern Growth Policies Board staff at that time, I participated in the study. This article describes the Commission's history in terms of its effect on coastal policy, and attempts to assess its work relative to future coastal regional planning efforts.

Coastal Plains Regional Commission Goals

The Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965 includes the following statement of purpose:

to provide grants for public works and development facilities, other financial assistance and the planning and coordination needed to alleviate conditions of substantial and persistent unemployment and underemployment in economically distressed areas and regions.

Passed as part of the War on Poverty, the Act embodied the political belief that the federal government should work with states to encourage development in areas with economic problems. Title V of the Act was an expression of faith in the value of a regional approach to problems that crossed state lines — both for action and planning. Inspired by the success of the Appalachian Regional Commission, it authorized the Secretary of Commerce to designate interstate areas of lagging economic development as economic development regions, and with

accelerate economic development

faith in regional approaches



North Carolina beach development

the states, to establish regional action planning commissions in those areas. The Title V Commissions were to (1) provide an interstate mechanism for planning, technical assistance, and demonstration projects; and (2) channel federal economic development funds into their regions.

The Coastal Plains Regional Commission expressed the same goal throughout its fourteen years. The first annual report noted that residents of the Coastal Plains area had a per capita income more than \$1,000 below the national average. "To reduce and eventually eliminate this gap is the fundamental goal of the commission partnership." Encouraging economic development was seen as the means for achieving that goal. While the Commission goal came to be expressed in more detail, the intent remained the same. The last annual report stated:

These then are the goals of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission:

1. *To give the people of the region greater opportunities to find employment at the highest level of their capabilities.*
2. *To help individuals bring their skills to higher levels of competence.*
3. *To provide increased opportunities for individuals to earn higher incomes.*

4. *To help communities provide those services that enhance their economic potential.*

Coastal Plains Regional Commission Programs

Within its geographic boundaries, the CPRC provided funds for technical assistance and supplemental grants as defined by Sections 505 and 509 of the enabling legislation. Section 505 funds financed technical assistance for economic development programs. Eligible activities included planning, research, studies, and demonstration projects, including the construction of public facilities. Section 509 authorized supplemental grants to help state and local governments leverage federal grants from other sources. The premise behind the supplemental grants was that insufficient local resources prevented the neediest places from participating in the numerous federal grant programs that required some local matching funds. Originally, the Coastal Plains region encompassed 159 counties in Georgia and the Carolinas. It was expanded in 1975 to include eastern Virginia and northern Florida, again in 1976 when 50 more counties in Georgia and South Carolina were added, and again in 1980 to take in the rest of Florida.

interstate mechanisms

supplementing the
neediest

a sense of direction

encouraging job
development

designing appropriate
responses

During the early years of the CPRC, regional development planning commanded a large share of the Commission's resources and produced sophisticated economic plans for the leading sectors of the region's economy. Those plans, which were formally endorsed by the member states, supplied a clear sense of direction for CPRC activities even though the program areas addressed by CPRC, like the regional boundaries, evolved over time.

Initial CPRC priority areas were industrial development, supportive facilities and services and policy development. A variety of programs were subsumed under those headings. For example, industrial development projects included general industry, agriculture and forestry, marine industries, travel and tourism. Program areas were incrementally modified and expanded during the early years of the Commission; and then in Fiscal Year 1974, in response to the presidential attempt on the Commission's life, there was a major reorganization. Transportation, health, housing, and human resources programs were discontinued. The more job-related programs were retained and divided among five major program categories—industrial development, marine resources, agriculture and forestry, environmental affairs, and travel industry development—a structure that persisted until the Commission was dismantled in 1981.

Post-Reorganization Regionalism

The CPRC regional planning function was weakened by the 1974 reorganization but survived in the work of its advisory committees, which were appointed by the Governors in each program area, and of the CPRC staff. Because the advisory committees included people from the public sector, academia, and the business community in all the member states, they provided the CPRC a forum for both interstate and public-private cooperation. The advisory committees concentrated on regional programs, developing projects and acting as advocates for them in the review process.

Each advisory committee submitted a written annual report setting forth (1) economic development priorities for their program area; (2) possible courses of action relating to those priorities; and (3) resources—national and regional, public and private—that could be used to address the priorities. CPRC staff supported the advisory committees by helping them monitor trends, define problems, consider alternative responses, and where appropriate,

prepare proposals for projects. Projects involving just one state were referred to that state; projects involving two or more CPRC states were considered regional projects and proposed to the Commission.

Regional projects had to submit to a vast maze of reviews and approvals. First, the advisory committee submitted a proposal to the Commission itself; that is, the Governors and the federal co-chairman. If the review was favorable, the proposal was sent back to the Advisory Committee, which, with the help of CPRC staff, developed a formal application for funding that was submitted to the CPRC. The federal co-chairman then sought approval from the parent agency, the Department of Commerce. Only projects that survived this review were eligible for funding. Final funding decisions were made through a hierarchical budgetary process. After administrative costs were covered and funds set aside for state development planning, money was allocated to regional projects, and then the remaining money was divided equally among the member states for state economic development projects in their CPRC counties.

As a regional economic development agency, the Coastal Plains Regional Commission occupied a tenuous position between the federal government and the states. The importance of planning in this position is revealed by the history of the CPRC as it allowed its plans to run out. After the Fiscal Year 1974 reorganization, the CPRC devoted few resources to planning; it was no longer an ongoing activity. The advisory committees and the staff did some planning, but mostly, they followed the plans produced in the earlier days of the Commission. Once the ideas and projects from those plans had been implemented or discarded, the advisory committees—reflecting the Commission itself—lacked a clear sense of direction and were reduced to simply passing through federal funds to the member states.

The existence of a comprehensive development plan endorsed by the states had protected the CPRC from state raids on its funds. But as the plans aged, it became harder to justify regional projects, and a growing share of CPRC funds was simply divided among the member states to become in the words of one disaffected ex-employee, "a governors' slush fund."

Budget trends describe the transition of the CPRC from a regional economic development agency to a conduit for federal funds. In the late seventies, the share of the budget going for regional projects dropped precipitously. Several regional projects were

divided up among the states to implement as they chose. Problems were most severe in the area of environmental affairs, which as a post-1974 program area had no comprehensive plan to guide its activities and was beset by conflicting opinions about its mission.

The CPRC was undermined further by the 1977 indictment of the federal co-chairman on charges of conspiracy and conflict of interest. Although he later won an appeal of the verdict, the CPRC's credibility was irreversibly damaged.

Decline and Fall

The final decline of the CPRC can be traced through the fortunes of its advisory committees, which along with the staff, were advocates for the regional aspect of the CPRC programs. When the regional approach was downplayed after the Fiscal Year 1974 reorganization, the advisory committees gradually became less productive. For a few years, they could proceed on the basis of the planning done in the early years of the Commission, but when those plans were not updated, the advisory committees floundered. Essentially, the advisory committees supported the CPRC as long as the Commission supported them.

The diminishing productivity of the advisory committees frustrated their active members, and that frustration was aggravated by the multi-layered approval process which had no provision for explanations or other feedback when a project was rejected. Moreover, the budget process itself mitigated against funding regional projects. The complexity of the approval procedures allowed a lack of accountability for decisions, which undermined the whole process further. To be effective, the advisory committees needed plans that they could not produce themselves. They needed plans to guide and then to justify project proposals. Those plans needed to bear the imprimature of the Commission itself—the governors, not just their appointees.

The Fiscal Year 1974 reorganization was a response to diminishing federal support for regional economic development, but it was also a statement of priorities for the resources that the Commission did command. The advisory committees and the CPRC staff felt the impacts of weakening the regional focus first: the staff was charged with getting the money out to the states with less emphasis on fostering regional economic development, the states set their own project priorities, while the ever-

expanding CPRC boundaries reduced the geographic limits on state spending decisions; the advisory committees, which were the structural expression of regionalism, became ineffective. After the CPRC lost its regional perspective, it lost its *raison d'être*.

When President Reagan proposed doing away with the Title V Commissions, there was little resistance in the Coastal Plains Region. The CPRC was much less than had been envisioned originally and so weakened by state intrusions that few people protested. Rather than say that the Reagan Administration killed CPRC, it is probably more accurate to say that it just removed the corpse.

Post Mortem

The Coastal Plains Regional Commission did not disappear without a trace. Several projects sponsored by the CPRC during its short lifetime endure as does the information in numerous CPRC-sponsored studies. Brick and mortar monuments to the CPRC include the marine resource centers, which attract tourists and are especially beloved by parents who encounter bad weather at the beach. There are the more prosaic monuments, water and sewer systems in the Coastal Plains Region built thanks to matching grants through the CPRC. Impossible to measure but none the less important, is the contribution of CPRC to interstate cooperation in economic development efforts. Residents of coastal states who worked together on advisory committees still share the common interest and concerns they addressed together as committee members.

The history of the CPRC, like history in general, contains lessons for the present. It is important to take a close look at what occurred to avoid what may be the most obvious but also inaccurate conclusion, that regional economic development planning does not work. A closer look reveals an economic development planning agency that lost its commitment to planning, even in its own activities. The CPRC, as it existed in 1981, had replaced planning with simply trying to stay alive; it deserved to die. It would be unfortunate and unfair if the concept of interstate planning is discredited by CPRC's brief life. The Coastal Plains Regional Commission has gone away, but the need for interstate approaches to economic development, human resources, and resource management endures along with the poverty that has characterized the region throughout this century.

weakened regional focus

monuments of their effort

lost commitments to planning