

# Keynote Address at the 39th Annual North Carolina Planning Conference and Robert and Helen Siler Lecture

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Remarks by Neal R. Peirce, March 29, 1996

Of course I was immensely pleased when my old friend and colleague Bob Siler asked if I would be willing to give this address, the first in a series of what are to be regular Siler Lectures. My family and I lived across the street from Bob and Helen Siler in Washington for many years, enjoying many good times together. Bob and I even accompanied each other on the first big trip of American city planners to China in 1979. He always knew something of value about every city in America, and I am pleased that our relationship continues.

When Bob called, my first reaction was that I would talk about the two recent so-called "Peirce Reports," which my colleague Curtis Johnson and I have done in North Carolina. The first, entitled "Triangle Needs a New Vision for the '90s," was published by the *Raleigh News & Observer* in September 1993. The second, "Shaping A Shared Future," appeared in the *Charlotte Observer* early last autumn.

But then it struck me how odd it is to talk about urban regions in North Carolina. Back in the early 1970s, when I was preparing the North Carolina chapter of my book, *The Border South States*, the story was quite different. The narrative was not of sparkling cities on hills, or even great historic seaports, but of waves of hardy yeomen struggling to farm tobacco or being drawn into one-industry towns to make textiles or furniture.

While it was true that the cumulative population of North Carolina had grown so that it was almost a megastate (one of America's ten largest), it was also true that North Carolina had no really major metropolitan area. The urbanized area around Charlotte, the state's largest city, was smaller than the Nash-

ville, Tennessee, or Richmond, Virginia areas. There were scattered urban pockets such as Charlotte, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Raleigh, and Durham, and a long roster of smaller textile mill and furniture factory towns. The bottom line, I wrote, was that "North Carolina has industrialized without completely urbanizing."

Two decades have made a significant difference, most of all in the emergence of the state's two truly significant metropolitan regions: the Triangle region of Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill (and I suppose we need to include Cary), and Charlotte and its environs.

But has North Carolina adjusted mentally to being urban? I have my doubts. North Carolina policymakers, fearing rural poverty, have worked hard to promote education and economic activity in the small towns and rural counties, in a way assuming that the cities could be largely left alone. Instead of bolstering cities, North Carolina concerns itself with projects in rural areas (which I'm tempted to call boondoggles) such as the Global Transpark. The state has allowed the inner city of its capital, Raleigh, to deteriorate badly. If a manufacturer shows interest in the state, no one tries to steer him close to an urban center.

In a sense it has been a grandly successful policy. The general economy of the state's cities has remained healthy despite this benign neglect. The Triangle region experienced a sensational 34 percent growth rate in the last decade, with Wake County leading the state at 40.5 percent. From roughly 7 million people today, the state is projected to grow another half million in the next 20 years. The multi-county Charlotte region, already about 1.4 million people, should reach 1.8 million by 2010.

One could also say both regions have been very intelligent in transforming themselves into big-time

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urban form. The idea of the Research Triangle Park, the region's economic engine, was original and demonstrably brilliant, offering corporations and research laboratories a parklike, prestigious place to settle and cul-de-sacked corporate homes on wooded sites, while getting rich through their tie-in to the facilities of world-renowned universities. At last count the park was responsible for 35,000 direct jobs, and probably several times as many spinoff jobs. As for Charlotte, the secret was written in the dollar signs of big finance. Its corporate chieftains ranged America in search of banks, capturing one big financial house after another and dragging their prizes back to Charlotte's Uptown, much like the hunters of old returning home with a bounty.

Physically, there's been a difference. The Triangle region was willing enough to grow low and close to the earth, but not Charlotte, which hired famed architects and created a signature skyline. Yet most of the population in the Charlotte region, as in the Triangle, has spread outward and outward. Like the Triangle, un-urban office development prospers around Charlotte. First Union, for example, has now added a massive back-office building close to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC), that reminds you from the air of the Pentagon. In population per square mile, both the Triangle and Charlotte are among the more lightly settled metropolitan centers of America.

So what's wrong with this? Hasn't the Triangle has been rated, by many an outsider, as one of the best places to live and do business in the country? Isn't Charlotte practically the symbol of rapid and successful development? Let me answer that by asking a question: what will make for successful regions in the new world economy? Curtis Johnson and I tried to answer that question when we put together our 1993 book, *Citistates*.

Our thesis was fairly straightforward. We argued that great metropolitan regions have become the closely interrelated geographic, economic, and environmental entities that chiefly define late 20th-century civilization. Population is flowing toward them. They trade and compete directly with each other, with messages, data, and money transfers generated in citistate financial centers leaping national boundaries in real time, without pausing to ask permission. Measured electronically, the globe is approximately one

half second wide. Trade barriers are crumbling and opening distant markets, making it much more difficult to subsidize and sustain politically favored regions. Immigration flows across borders with increasing ease. Finally, the end of the Cold War has dramatically reduced the importance of the one activity nation states were perhaps best at—amassing huge armies and preparing for war.

Curtis and I have developed a definition we would like Random House or Webster's to accept:

**Citi•state** -- n. -- A region consisting of one or more historic central cities surrounded by cities and towns which have a shared identification, function as a single zone for trade, commerce and communication, and are characterized by social, economic and environmental interdependence.

Note that our definition does not mention borders, and for good reason. Citistates are not political inventions, they are *organic*. A citistate is what the

economy does: how widely the city's newspapers circulate and television signals reach, a commute-shed, and a labor, health services, and educational market. The citistate is the pattern of lights you'd see flying in on a spaceship at night. Politicians may tell us these regions are

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separated, divided, differentiated political jurisdictions, but those lines are invisible from the air.

The Europeans freely describe their continent as a collection of increasingly powerful citistates, ranging from Milan to Hamburg, Manchester to Stuttgart, Lyon to Marseilles—all metropolitan regions making deals and establishing direct economic and cultural ties to each other with minimal regard for the nation states in which they happen to be located. Hong Kong, throwing its net of investment activity across Guangzhou Province and deep into the People's Republic of China, is the ultimate example of a citistate making even ferociously guarded national boundaries less and less relevant.

So, one could ask, are the Triangle and Charlotte regions ready to play in the international big leagues? Here is where my doubts and questions set in. The regions have the skills, with scientific capacity of the highest order in the Triangle, and in Charlotte such heavyweight financial capacity that one could imagine the bank executives, in their sky-scraping pyra-

mids some Monday morning, trying to decide if this is the week to buy Japan.

I have doubts which fall into three general areas: decision-making, social equity, and the environment and physical form. While most Northern and Midwestern cities have long since rejected the paradigm of a small group of white men meeting over starchy tablecloths to make decisions for everyone else, the legend holds on in North Carolina. The state appears to believe in strong man leaders; note it's almost invariably "man," not "woman." In the Triangle Region there is the history of Luther Hodges and other strong man allies giving birth to the Research Triangle Park. There is a yearning for that leadership power of yesteryear. For example, the new Regional Council even started out with the word "Leadership" in its title. Many in Charlotte believe the big bank presidents, such as Hugh McColl and Ed Crutchfield, can still decide virtually any civic or economic question. (I should note that McColl told me last year that the baton was being passed and that "the so-called group that people think controls everything downtown cratered about four or five years ago.") Crutchfield explains that the holdover belief of control by the few stems from the fact that many Charlotteans were born, like McColl and himself, in small towns which were "sort of one-horse towns where some rich guy controls the land and the buildings."

In matter of fact, power in modern American citistates is much too splintered for any group to exercise it very efficiently. Big corporations are often too preoccupied with the national or global scene to focus on localities, and their local branch managers keep changing anyway. Another factor is the rise of multiple new social, ethnic, and political groups. In Charlotte, for example, populist conservatives who were particularly suspicious of "Uptown power" sent yellow dog Democrats cowering in confusion by sweeping into victory in the 1994 elections. The city also recently rejected a large school bond. The Carolinas Partnership for Economic Growth, which crosses into South Carolina, and the Queen City Congress, which brings together affluent and poor neighborhoods to fight for their common interests, are other examples of newly formed organizations splintering the political landscape.

The challenge for both the Triangle and Charlotte regions today is to broaden decision-making so that enough people are involved to achieve consensus and action. To focus on that challenge, I'll pick an area that's controversial, consequential, and highly

relevant to the interests of planners. That issue, of course, is physical form and growth.

For all the apparent success of the Carolina regions, they have done a less than stunning job in this area. The Triangle region, for example, is now stuck with the model set in the 1950s by the Research Triangle Park: a campus-like, wooded, low-density setting. Instead of funneling the growth, with higher densities, into the region's established city centers and neighborhoods, growth of the built environment was allowed to scatter outward. The region now suffers from severe suburban sprawl, threats to its lakes and water supply, longer commute times, pockets of ugly and mounting traffic congestion, and serious air quality problems. The counties are at each others' throats, fighting for industry to sustain their tax bases because new residential development doesn't pay for itself. Area leaders discuss mass transit, but as we noted in our 1993 report, "The soul of the Triangle Region is lying on the drafting tables of the state highway department, a.k.a. the North Carolina Department of Transportation," an organization known for its ultimate disdain for anything but laid concrete and asphalt.

Our wonderment in writing about the Triangle was that its highly educated people are not up in arms. They can see Interstate 40 and the Outer Loop creating a kind of Los Angeles on the Piedmont, with 10 or 12 one-way traffic lanes ultimately necessary as auto miles driven escalate far ahead of population increase. With their own eyes they can witness the dire results of inner city disinvestment. With their educations and backgrounds they understand what these changes mean, ecologically, socially, and physically. Among Triangle residents the planners and urbanists know the most, and earliest, about superior forms being developed elsewhere. That information, pushed vigorously into public debate, is critical for the region. Yet my impression is that the area's vast academic community does not often speak out on these critical issues. To me, it seems like a great lost opportunity and forgone responsibility.

I will be even more specific. Right now, across America, there is a dramatic increase in interest about regional issues, and an even stronger concern over the effect of sprawl. Consider a timely warning from Middle America. A recent *Kansas City Star* series alleges that sprawl "has spawned a virus eating us from the inside out . . . hollowed out the urban cores of America, feeding on racism and government hand-outs . . . incited a civil war among neighboring towns

fighting for business development . . . scattered us (as a civilization) like ashes to the wind.”

Last year the Bank of America joined environmentalists to warn that “unchecked sprawl has shifted from an engine of California’s growth to a force that threatens to inhibit growth and degrade [California’s] quality of life.” Anthony Pilla, Roman Catholic bishop of Cleveland and Northeast Ohio, preaches that sprawl to far suburbs divides people physically and spiritually, isolating the poor most egregiously. *The Chicago Tribune*, in its recent “Nation of Strangers” series, warns that the “hypermobility” of the suburban era—working, sleeping, playing, schooling at locations reached only by long auto rides—has broken down community, created sterile environments, and impoverished our national spirit.

As the *Tribune* notes, “[w]hat once were the country lanes of the outer reaches of Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Tampa, Los Angeles, and so many other American cities have become four-lane highways through a mercilessly franchised landscape,”

ranging from Arby’s to Midas Muffler to Taco Bell.

As urbanists and planners you know that these are not the first warnings. As far back as 1928 and 1929 the New York Regional Plan Association called uncontrolled growth the greatest threat to the three-state New York-New Jersey-Connecticut metropolitan region. Officials failed to listen. Land was devoured 12 times faster than population growth. Suburbia became the region’s growth engine.

In its 1996 report the association states the region’s suburbs suffered as much as the cities through the 1989-92 recession. The myth of suburban economies’ invincibility was shattered. Some of you may have noted that the federal Office of Technology, in a swan-song report just before going out of existence last autumn, announced that continued advances in technology will permit more and more development to spread, almost infinitely, across our landscapes. There is a great deal of conventional thinking to that effect. However, the New York Regional Plan Association finds the threat is not merely uncontrolled growth, but rather the resulting region-wide decline. Failing to use its land intelligently, to protect its watersheds, and to modernize its mass transit and other infrastructure, the fractured New York

citistate is in peril of losing its global economic leadership to smart, investment-minded European and Asian regions. Here in the Southland, where people are always anxious to avoid New York’s errors, the experience can be a very big warning for the future of this area.

Next we need to add the issue of character. Traditionally, we built our cities on grid systems, essentially “open” plans that invited social and income mixing. No longer. Now we let suburban cul-de-sac developers have their way, building “exclusive” developments with single roads connecting to a major highway. The town center, in walkable distance, gets lost. In place of homey collections of roses or vine-ripe tomatoes, cul-de-sacked America routinely of-

fers shrubs set by professional landscapers in beds of gravel or bark chips to keep maintenance low. The front porch is replaced by garage door openings, and the front door sometimes virtually invisible. It’s a cold, cold form.

Consider children. One of the great myths of our age is that suburbs are

good for children. They aren’t. Hal Box of the University of Texas School of Architecture notes that the child’s world shrunk into the size of a few backyards, there being nothing to walk to other than more houses.

Who is to doubt we need a new humanism in town planning, attacking rigid zoning separation, reconnecting people with walkable communities? We need to remember Churchill’s words, “[w]e shape our cities and then they shape us.” Design does affect behavior. I was in Austin a couple of weeks ago for a day-long conference on New Urbanism with 650 local developers and planners. At the conference Professor Box suggested the test of new communities, or rebuilding old, should be the Five Minute Popsicle Rule: a child ought to be able to walk safely from home to buy a popsicle within five minutes.

Which brings us to the emerging and encouraging school of architectural and land use planning called “New Urbanism.” The idea, in some respects, is quite sentimental. New Urbanism goes “back to the future” and builds neighborhoods the way they were before World War II: more compact, with houses and walk-up apartments on smaller, less sterile streets, places with real town centers and pedestrian-acces-

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sible parks and gathering places. Southern Village in Chapel Hill is an actual experiment in New Urbanism, begun a year and a half ago by developer D.R. Bryan. Southern Village has small streets, alleys, neighborhood parks, detached housing with some townhouses, and a commons area with offices, multi-family units, and park and ride transit facilities.

Now Durham city and county are moving ahead with their 2020 Plan vision. The plan calls for a variety of distinct neighborhoods, emphasizing choice in where people may choose to live. The plan also designates compact corridors, including one toward the airport and Raleigh, a second along 15-501 toward Chapel Hill, and a third toward North Durham job centers. The hope is that compact neighborhoods in these corridors will include a mix of higher intensity, well-designed housing and employment centers, increasing pedestrian access and reducing auto dependence.

These are refreshing ideas and actions that had not surfaced when we did our study of the Triangle three years ago. One wishes Wake, Orange, and other counties in the area would do the same. Indeed, what the area really needs is a strong Triangle-wide commitment to a new land use and transportation future. Chuck Twardy, columnist for the *News & Observer*, spelled it out: "[a] regional planning agency with some muscle" would insure a better balance of areawide growth "so that Durham is not draining dollars at Raleigh's expense, so that Cary cannot build in Raleigh and Garner's next drinking water source, so that areas in the midst of the Triangle are carefully developed with mixed-use, mixed-income communities." To that I would add combining the area's metropolitan planning organizations in order to look at highways, mass transit, and intermodal potentials on a rational, region-wide basis. Today Wake and Durham Counties are in different Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), which is sheer insanity when one thinks of true citistate form.

But how does one force the official system to act? Only, it seems to me, with strong citizen organization pushing incessantly. In the last years the Triangle region has had several broad-gauged assemblies and World Class Region convocations; almost 1,000 attended one conference in 1992. In a poll of the attendees, 85 percent said regional growth and land use management required priority attention. The following year a Greater Triangle Regional Council was formed. Today it has a major project, "Examining Regional Development Choices" which is based on the expectation that the region will grow from 1

million people today to 1.5 million in 20 years. Smedes York, who is sparking the regional effort, supplied me with recent surveys of what members of the Council value most in the region. Predictably, pride in research and higher education and the reputation for "knowledge workers" rated very high. But so too did open spaces and natural areas like the Neuse River and Duke Forest, along with the distinctive identities and physical forms of the region's varied communities.

What members of the Regional Council felt most in need of change was also interesting. First was the lack of adequate public transportation. Second, less "political balkanization" and finding a greater "regional attitude." Then came equality in education, deterioration of center city areas, and addressing sprawl and racial divisiveness. So far so good. What seems of concern is that citizen activity to force change on reluctant local governments and legislators is not happening. People in the Triangle area continue to believe that leaders, now assembled in the Regional Council, can make change. The politics of the 1990s does not work that way. You need shock troops who are armed with the best data and state-of-the-art knowledge and techniques, all of which should be supplied by the universities.

Smedes York, incidentally, has a wonderful way of describing the contrasting cultures of the two big Carolina regions: Charlotte is organized like a corporation, the Triangle like a university. Each place needs to learn to change by exploiting its strengths.

In our Charlotte report last year, we said it was time to democratize development, to put ordinary citizens in position to review, comment on and shape development. Charlotteans, descendants of thrifty, self-sufficient pioneers, never trusted authority and rejected government planning controls. In their nearly theological brand of individualism, they thought they were in charge. They weren't. Growth was controlled, not by the people, but by the highway engineers, developers, and builders. The result now appears in several ways: strip-signed highways like Independence Boulevard, which are among America's ugliest; acres of urban devastation in and around central Charlotte; a cancer of abandonment creeping beyond the center city, and a lack of buildings, squares, and public places to which people feel any loyalty.

Yet the Charlotte region has something lacking in the Triangle: a coherent, multi-county image of where it might go. The author of this image is Michael Gallis, a private planner who tirelessly explains how Charlotte can and should focus development along

the natural corridors radiating from the center city and linking to Rock Hill, Gastonia, Monroe, Kannapolis, and other cities in a 20-mile radius around the central city. Indeed, Gallis helped Rock Hill focus on its own identity and strengths by simultaneously identifying and celebrating itself as a leading satellite city of Charlotte. Rock Hill's promotional folders even show the Charlotte skyline on the horizon. (Express buses, incidentally, now speed between Rock Hill and downtown Charlotte.)

But while Charlotte recognizes its interdependence with its ring cities, it too needs citizens to be catalysts for real change. Right now there is talk of having organizations like the Queen City Congress and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Citizens Forum be powerful voices of the regional citizenry.

One way planning can be democratized, as we said in our Charlotte report, would be to open a special center at UNCC. The center would let citizens use sophisticated computer technology to illustrate real choices on how roads might be routed, town centers constructed, and residential areas built out. Developers would first have to take their proposals to the center for public debate. Their argument, we know, is that people will only buy standard spread-out subdivisions with their huge setbacks, big garage doors, and all the rest. Our bet is that if you show computerized alternatives of a denser mix with parks, restored front porches, and cars pushed to alleys and back garages, people will accept far more density than they might tell you at first. The feared NIMBYism against any and all development will fade as people have full information and feel closer to the decision-making process.

Efforts are now underway to set up that center for computer simulation at UNCC, with the hope that all parties, including local governments, businesses, and neighborhood groups, could take advantage of it. The Triangle area should consider the same idea at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill or one of its sister Triangle institutions. I believe such a center would encapsulate the critical means for progress today. These means involve professionals making a vital contribution, not just because they know best and everybody should be heeding them, but because they work with citizens, refining their own insights through citizens' input, and ultimately their influence flows through their partnerships with citizens.

When I think about regionalism and the question of successful citistates, I see vital issues of competence, cohesiveness, economic efficiency, reinvented

government, and social equity all rolled into one. There is a new paradigm for us to focus on. It differs from the old paradigm we know so well and have worked with so long of looking to federal, state, and then local government for the lion's share of our answers.

The new paradigm is global, regional, and neighborhood:

- Global, because critical environmental impacts can be worldwide, in addition to worldwide economic restructuring as it tears apart our comfortable relationships.
- Regional, because citistates are the true cities of our time, the real environmental basins, labor markets, and functioning economic communities, and call out for regional planning.
- And neighborhood, because the local community is the arena which ultimately must deal with America's grave and growing social problems.

We must look within neighborhoods to build strength, to stop the erosion of social resilience, and to find the lost social contract. We must recognize, recultivate, and reinvigorate our civic order, our informal network of family, friends, neighborhood associations, clubs, civic groups, local businesses, and churches and turn to neighborhood people of all economic classes to take civic leadership, to be personally concerned with the issues in the streets, parks, and shared spaces they call home. Although planners and architects can think up the popsicle rule, it will take neighborhood people to make it happen. **CP**