

Regional Councils and Regional Action in North Carolina: Past, Present, and Prospects

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The vitality of North Carolina depends on strong and vibrant regions. Regions are the interconnected places where people live, work, and recreate. They are also the places where local government problems like environmental protection, traffic, and solid waste spill across municipal boundaries and become shared concerns. More and more one hears the opinion that independent but interrelated places must develop the capacity to work together if these problems are to be addressed and a desired future is to be secured. To paraphrase an old saying about the United Nations, if regions didn't exist, we would have to create them. Numerous sources have affirmed the importance of regions. For example:

- *Measure by Measure*, a 1992 report by the Southern Growth Policies Board recommends: "think, plan, and act as metropolitan regions." It advocates the use of regional districts for planning infrastructure improvements.
- The Commission for a Competitive North Carolina called for the state to enlarge its vision and protect the state's lifestyle by considering regional solutions defined by a "community of interest," rather than geographic boundaries.

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- Florida, Georgia, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington have all assigned regional councils a review role in state managed growth initiatives.

In North Carolina, regional councils are the vehicle for focusing attention on interjurisdictional concerns and fostering a higher level of cooperation. They also provide direct and indirect support to local government activities. Yet despite the importance of regions as a plane for action, regional councils in practice have lost some of their regional orientation. While the councils continue to provide a regional forum and assist in multi-jurisdictional efforts, their focus has shifted to administering federal and state programs and providing services and assistance to individual governments. Their substantial base of information, experience with cooperative ventures, and record of involvement with local planning would be tremendously helpful in regional planning efforts.

Rediscovering planning as part of a new commitment to regional goal setting is a prospect for the future, but it will not happen without a stronger overall state recognition of the importance of regionalism. The rest of this article examines the history of regional councils in North Carolina, outlines their present activities, and makes recommendations for the future of regionalism.

History of Regional Councils

Origin of Regional Councils

In North Carolina as elsewhere, regional councils have a number of purposes: planning, intergovernmental coordination, and services to member governments. The councils' functions and their relationships with the state and local governments have been

defined over the years by a series of executive orders.

- **1970** Governor Scott issued the first executive order to create Planning Regions to facilitate the delivery of better public services. In the following year the state announced its Lead Regional Organization (LRO) policy.
- **1974** Governor Holshouser sought to strengthen the role of LROs by giving them responsibility for consolidating special and multi-purpose planning activities, for promoting intergovernmental program coordination, and when appropriate, for administering governmental services. In addition, state agencies were to use LROs to help construct state-level plans. While direct subsidies to LROs were ruled out, they could receive state and federal funds available for specific planning tasks. The LROs were to be the creation of local government and were not to be viewed as substate administrative units or a new level of government.
- **1978** Governor Hunt reaffirmed the LRO concept and encouraged state agencies to make their administrative subdivisions coterminous with the LRO boundary lines or combinations of LROs. State financial support was to be limited to grants to carry out specific tasks imposed by state government which necessitate coordination and planning for local governments. The LROs' powers and duties were enumerated in Section 160A-475 of the General Statutes.
- **1986** Governor Martin reaffirmed the principles of earlier orders and allowed funding for tasks which involve a coordinated state-wide activity and are beneficial to both State and local governments.

The Changing Face of Regionalism

Beyond the multiplicity and ambiguity in the purpose of regional councils, the state has not clearly set forth a regional policy—a set of goals and expectations for what is to be accomplished in the regions of the state. The executive orders regarding regionalism have focused on the functions, structure, and boundaries of the regional councils but have not addressed these matters within the context of a policy on regionalism. As a result, some regional councils have moved away from traditional regional activi-

ties and into such roles as government service provision. In addition, the planning function of regional councils has been eclipsed by the “Lead Regional Organization” emphasis on intergovernmental coordination and cooperation.

Balancing the need to confront regional issues with the need for local government support and state and federal funding can create difficulties for regional councils. Jim Youngquist of the Southeast Regional Directors Institute recently concluded that the regional organizations “have perhaps gotten away from the overall regional agenda,” and that “there appears to be a void that can, and should, again be filled by regional councils.”¹¹ A policy on regionalism could reorient the focus and purpose of regional councils, and set performance standards for regional councils and other regional organizations in the future.

Present: The Functions of Regional Councils

Regional councils perform eight major functions: serving as a regional forum, planning and goal setting, service and assistance, data and geographic information system (GIS) support, promoting environmental protection, promoting economic development, and administering intergovernmental programs. The following evaluation of regional councils in meeting each of these functions is based on information gathered from meetings with state officials, local elected officials and administrators, interest group representatives, and officials in regional organizations. The information from regional organizations includes the results of a 1994 survey of organization directors in state designated planning regions.

Each region is designated by a letter of the alphabet, A through R, extending from west to east across the state. Five of the regional organizations in North Carolina are organized as Economic Development Commissions (A, B, C, Q, and R), and the remaining are Councils of Government. For convenience, these initials are used when referring to specific regions in lists and tables. Figure 1 is a map of the regional councils. For simplicity, the term regional council is used in this report to refer to all these organizations.

Serving as a Regional Forum

The most commonly mentioned and praised activity of regional councils is that they are the only place where officials and citizens from different jurisdictions formally come together to discover and



Figure 1: Regional Councils of North Carolina.

discuss a wide range of common regional issues. Increased understanding of interrelationships grows out of these meetings, as well as the identification of problems to address and programs to undertake within the region.

There are, however, three sources of dissatisfaction regarding this role. First, regional councils are sometimes faulted for being all talk and no action. A related concern is that councils are reluctant to confront controversial issues. The third complaint is that the boundaries of state designated planning regions do not correspond with people's varying perceptions of the "real" boundaries of the region. The value of the council as a regional forum depends on the participation of all interdependent and interacting areas of the region.

Planning, Goal Setting, and a Regional Agenda

Regional councils have substantial involvement in land use, infrastructure, and water related planning, in addition to planning done in connection with state and federal programs. This planning is generally carried out for portions of the region or specific jurisdictions. There is little planning that is regional in scope and comprehensive in nature.²

Some examples of planning and goal setting efforts by regional councils include the following. Regional Vision 1995 organized by Region B was a strategic planning program which focused on priority areas established by a 30-member public/private steering committee. Our Region Tomorrow initiated by Centralina Council of Governments (F) and jointly sponsored by the Western Piedmont COG (E) and the Catawba Regional Planning Council in South Carolina is conducting a strategic planning process

for an 18 county area in the two states. The Triangle J Council of Governments held a World Class Region Conference in 1993 and organized the Greater Triangle Regional Council as a follow-up to the conference.

Service and Assistance

Providing service and assistance to member governments and other organizations has become a major activity of regional councils and one of the most important sources of local government support in many regions. In 1993-94, regional councils served over 630 governments and other organizations with more than 7,000 person hours. Of the 630 projects, 381 were conducted without charge and approximately 255 were conducted for a fee with revenues exceeding \$1.7 million. All regional councils provide at least some assistance without charge, particularly in helping governments seek grants. The service and assistance projects included:

- 140 management and general government projects,
- 114 community/economic development and housing projects,
- 60 water projects,
- 50 planning projects, and
- 41 criminal justice projects.

In addition to the service and assistance activities of regional councils, technical assistance is the

primary purpose of the field offices in the Division of Community Assistance (DCA). DCA seeks to improve the economic and community development status of local governments and other organizations. Specific types of assistance include strategic planning, growth management, appearance and image improvement, downtown revitalization, and natural resource conservation. DCA has a staff of 31 professional and support personnel in seven regional offices with a state-funded annual budget of \$1.8 million. DCA regional offices typically work with over 300 local governments each year with no charge to the government.

Data Centers and GIS Support

Regional councils have active data centers through which information about the region is made available to governments, non-profit and business organizations, and citizens. Most regional councils also have geographic information system (GIS) capacity (B, C, D, E, F, G, I, J, K, M, N, O, and Q), which they may share with local governments or use to offer assistance. The other five regional councils do not have GIS capacity, although Region H has a working arrangement with the city of Rockingham for GIS services. In addition, Region L conducted a survey of members in 1995 to determine possible GIS applications and Region P is investigating GIS software and hardware.

The range of GIS applications varies greatly. The most common applications are land use, population characteristics, environmental monitoring, and transportation. The regions most actively involved in GIS are E, F, and J. Seven regional councils (B, E, F, J, K, O, and Q) provide GIS services on a fee basis.

Sponsoring and Facilitating Cooperative Ventures Within and Between Regions

Regional councils have a substantial track record of fostering cooperative activity. In many instances, regional councils work on projects with counties outside their region or with other regional councils. Fourteen such cross-regional projects were in progress in 1994. Examples of these projects include: the Western North Carolina Housing Partnership; the Yadkin

River monitoring project; the Triad Partnership Data Center; the Cape Fear River Assembly; and the Roanoke-Chowan Narcotics Task Force.

Regional councils are not the only sponsor of cooperative activities among jurisdictions. Seven economic development partnerships and commissions covering the entire state have been created and now receive state support to foster marketing and recruitment efforts. DCA has initiated several projects in areas sharing common interests or facing a special challenge in inter-governmental cooperation. These projects include the following:

- Yadkin-PecDee Lakes Project: a six county citizen-based strategic planning effort which has developed goals for tourism, economic development, and environmental protection.
- Fort Bragg/Pope Air Force Base Joint Compatible Land Use Study: a land use policy plan to protect mission capabilities of Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base.
- Cherry Point Project: fostered planning regarding the Marine Air Station and related growth in Craven, Pamlico, Carteret, and Jones Counties.
- I-40 Economic Impact Study: joint planning for development around the I-40 corridor from Raleigh to Wilmington. This also involved regional councils.
- The Partnership for the Sounds: a four-county education and development organization based in Columbia which seeks to promote a sustainable economy in the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds area.

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These are just a small sample of the numerous regional partnerships in North Carolina.

Promoting Environmental Protection and Coordinated Use of Natural Resources

Regional councils take on a wide variety of projects that deal with environmental protection and coordinated use of natural resources, some of which overlap with planning activities and the cooperative

projects previously discussed. Water quality and solid waste are common concerns of regional efforts across the state. The role of regional councils in promoting quality growth is to focus on data collection, planning assistance, and local plan and project review. Regional council directors do not favor giving their agency the power to approve local plans and projects.

Promoting Economic Development

Five of the councils are specifically organized as economic development commissions, although all of the regional councils carry out a variety of economic development related activities. These include technical assistance and grant preparation for infrastructure and community development, data centers with mapping, data analysis and statistical information, and the activities shown in Table 1 below.

There are varying levels of cooperation and direct interaction between the economic development partnerships/commissions and regional councils. The Western Economic Development Commission, for example, has the closest interaction by using the four western regional councils to access local governments.

Other special projects for entire regions or larger areas include industrial site planning (Region A), tourism promotion (B), child care (D), regional marketing (E), a regional atlas (F), foreign trade zone (J), expanding regional telephone service (J), the South-

eastern Entrepreneurial Roundtable (M), the Cape Fear River Research Program (O), and revolving loans (A, K, and Q) or microenterprise loan funds (M and R).

Administering Federal and State Programs

Regional councils administer a number of state and federal programs which are shown in Table 1.

Prospects: Recommendations for Regions

The North Carolina state government needs to create a "Policy on Regionalism" which would:

- Establish goals for the regions in the state.
- Identify the roles of regional councils, economic development partnerships/commissions, and DCA.
- Specify how state government agencies will interact with regional councils.

Region	Aging	Emergency Management	Job Training Partnership Act	Senior Employment	Small Business Administration 504	Economic Development Administration	Farmers Home Administration	HUD Section 8	Land and Water Conservation Fund	Appalachian Regional Commission
A	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X
B	X	X		X		X			X	X
C	X	X	X	X	X	X*	X	X	X	X
D	X	X	X		X	X			X	X
E	X	X	X**		X		X	X		X
F	X	X	X**	X	X					
G	X	X								
H	X	X	X	X						
I	X	X	X***		X			X		X
J	X	X		X						
K	X	X	X		X	X				
L	X	X	X	X						
M	X	X	X***		X					
N	X	X	X	X			X		X	
O	X	X	X							
P	X	X	X	X	X	X				
Q	X	X	X	X		X	X			
R	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Total	18	18	15	10	8	8	6	3	5	6

* Eligible to receive EDA funds, but not a designated Economic Development District.
 ** Does not include all counties in the regional council.
 *** Does not include all counties in the regional council, but includes counties outside council boundaries.

Table 1: State and Federal Programs Administered by Regional Councils in North Carolina.

- Offer guidelines for state funding of regional activities.

The potential value of regional councils to state government lies in the fact that they are locally controlled and accountable. They are able to carry out certain state-determined functions with an orientation that is sensitive to local concerns. It is appropriate for the state to identify goals for regional councils and to provide support for those activities, and it can do so without undermining local control. These bodies were originally designated by state government and they serve clear state interests. It is also important for the other "owners" of regional councils, member governments and regional governing boards to examine what actions they should take to strengthen regional councils.

Unfortunately, State expectations for, and local government input to regional councils has been hampered by confusion over "ownership." The State views regional councils as primarily local government entities. Local governments view regional councils as organizations established by the state or serving state purposes in administering intergovernmental programs. Therefore, local governments feel limited in how they can shape the organizations and determine their purpose. Regional councils themselves have been constrained by lack of clear definition of purpose. A constructive approach to regionalism requires actions by state government, local governments, and regional councils.

State Goals for Regions

The state seeks to promote certain goals to ensure the vitality and livability of regions through its own actions and the activities of regional organizations and local governments. These goals could include the following:

- Promote orderly growth and development which preserves important resources of the region.
- Expand opportunity for all jurisdictions in the region.
- Promote orderly movement within and through the region and reasonable accessibility.
- Enhance and help to equalize the governmental capacity of all jurisdictions in the region.
- Identify significant natural resources and develop strategies to protect them.
- Share benefits and costs among jurisdictions in the region.
- Overcome the jurisdictional barriers that make it difficult to carry out coordinated activities in a region.
- Share facilities among jurisdictions to increase efficiency.
- Coordinate action among jurisdictions to address common problems.
- Resolve conflicts between jurisdictions.
- Balance interests of the region with those of individual jurisdictions by promoting a regional perspective.

A state regionalism policy would articulate such goals and affirm the State's intention to act in ways that promote the realization of these goals for regions.

Recommendations for Local Government Action

Regional councils serve important state purposes of assisting local governments and fostering cooperative regional action. Consistent with their purposes, regional councils will be what local governments determine. Local governments should clarify their objectives for regional councils and ensure that strong linkages are maintained between the local government and the regional council. The commitment of the city council or county commission member who serves on the regional council governing board is critical to ensure that local concerns are actively represented and that regional approaches are actively communicated to the member government. Support for the regional council should be realistically matched to the expectations for regional council performance.

Recommendations for Regional Council Action

Regional councils should critically assess themselves in terms of general purposes of all regional councils and the special needs of their regions. Regional councils should include the following in their review:

- Review regional council mission, goals, and scope of activities in light of the record and accomplishments of other regional councils in the state.
- Examine board membership, meeting agenda, and procedures to increase focus on critical regional issues.
- Strengthen the communications between the regional council and the member governments.
- Establish new linking mechanisms across regional boundaries to better match natural service areas and areas with shared needs.
- Examine feasibility of joint operation of activities. For example, give one council the lead responsibility for conducting joint activities, and establish "branch" offices in "sub-regions" of an area that encompass more than one regional council.
- Examine new ways to share accomplishments and disseminate information about innovations among regional councils.
- Develop means for collective monitoring of performance, recognizing that each regional council is part of a statewide network and should provide mutual support to maintain generally high levels of performance.

It is appropriate to affirm/reaffirm the purpose of regional councils as sources of technical assistance, regional planning, cooperative ventures, and grant administration. Their distinct value comes in their integration of these purposes with each other and with other locally determined activities. Their distinct advantage is their moderate size and fiscal accountability. Instead of "lead regional organizations" a more apt title for regional councils might be linchpin regional organizations. Regional councils are not in charge, but they are unique in their capacity to tie together the activities of a variety of groups within the region and across regional boundaries.

Conclusion

Regional councils continue to be important vehicles for regional action. Their importance is derived from three factors. First, unlike other regional organizations, they are continuous with a long record of accomplishment. Second, they are comprehensive in scope with a broad range of concerns and a commitment to finding linkages among their functions. Third, they have a unique storehouse of knowledge with extensive data and experience regarding the region and its conditions, problems, resources, and governments.

It is time to rediscover regional councils and recognize their accomplishments and their potential. Regional councils provide service and assistance, promote a wide variety of cooperative ventures within the region and across regional lines, and administer federal and state programs. They have the potential to coordinate or undertake a wide range of other activities that would:

- Promote orderly growth and development while preserving important resources of the region.
- Share benefits and costs among jurisdictions in the region.
- Overcome jurisdictional barriers and coordinate action to address common problems.
- Identify and accomplish regional goals.

Having an organization which pursues such ends is clearly an asset for the citizens and governments of a region. **CP**

Endnotes

- ¹ *SouthEast Directions*, January, 1995.
- ² The Virginia Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission came to a similar conclusion. Although the Planning District Commissions (PDCs) were created to identify and address cross-jurisdictional problems through planning, they often do not place much emphasis on regional planning and a comprehensive view of regional needs. No PDCs have up-to-date regional comprehensive plans, and many do not typically engage in strategic planning.