

Regionalism: The Key to Avoiding the Tragedy of the Commons

Joseph Gartlan Jr., Virginia state senator

The following article by Senator Joseph V. Gartlan Jr. of the 36th Senate District of Virginia was presented at the conference "Developing a Vision Plan: Options for the Region's Transportation Future," sponsored by the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board, October 27-28, 1994, in Washington, DC. Senator Gartlan addressed the need to develop more effective and interactive processes for making transportation and land-use decisions that protect the region's environment.

I couldn't help but be somewhat bemused by the historic references of my two historically well-trained predecessors to this microphone. I was bemused by the thought that among those people who gathered at Mount Vernon in 1785 and moved to Annapolis a couple of years later, and then on to Philadelphia, at one point in those processes someone must have thought that they had captured the essence of the moment, that they had pierced to the heart of the problem, that they had reached the ultimate solution with the plans that they evolved. And, in that sense, we would have to say they jumped to conclusions.

That made me think of one of my favorite Irish stories about the man who went to mass in Dublin one Sunday morning, slipped into the rear pew of the church, and within a few minutes after the mass started, fell asleep. He woke up during the homily, which, that Sunday by the choice of the pastor, was the thundering fire-and-brimstone variety. Murphy was brought back to his senses

when the pastor hollered out from the pulpit, "Who in this parish wants to go to hell?"

Murphy sat up with a start. "I say," said the pastor, "who wants to go to hell? If you want to go to hell, stand up."

Murphy looked around; nobody else stood up, but he did. And the pastor looked down and said, "Murphy, do you want to go to hell?"

Murphy said, "Well, not particularly, Father, but I didn't want to see you go alone."

It is necessary, I think, before thinking we have come to conclusions, to make sure that we have heard all that is to be heard, read all that is to be read, and listened to everything that has to be said about a problem. I'll tell one more Irish story and then leave it alone. This one illustrates just exactly that point.

Clancy called the Dublin office of Irish National Airlines and said, "Tell me, how long does it take the jumbo jet to fly from Shannon Airport to New York?" The operator said, "Just a minute."

Clancy slammed down the phone and said, "My God, that's fantastic!"

So we come back to basics once again, listening to things that have been said before that constantly need to be repeated. If it is the purpose of this conference to get back to principles and process, then these three speeches and this plenary discussion, hopefully, will move us in that direction. But before we discuss environmental concerns and transportation issues in our area, please let me transport you to another place—up.

Let's consider a view from above the Earth—a view from space, looking down on the whole Chesapeake Bay watershed. In order to understand the environmental concerns of our area, we need to see it from this kind of a regional perspective. By regional perspective, I mean not simply across a large geographic area, but across a landscape of issues. Addressing growth and environmental concerns is about much more than just traffic and schools and jobs. It's about water and air quality and crabs and fish and oysters. It's about wetlands and forests, farmland, and endangered species. It's about preserving our natural and cultural heritage. That's what I mean by a view from space.

Let's take a look, for a minute, to see how our Bay is doing. If I were a teacher giving out a report card, I would say that overall the Chesapeake Bay is getting perhaps a C-plus or a B-minus, depending on mood and degree of objectivity at any particular point in time. It's getting by—it is showing some signs of improvement, but it needs to improve much more. And, within the academic alphabet, a C is as close to an F as it is to an A. That is indeed a precarious position.

So let's take a look at how our student is doing in some of the individual subjects. Our prime objective, the reduction of nutrients, shows mixed progress. On reducing phosphorous, the Bay gets a B-plus. On reducing nitrogen, a B-minus. We have only held the line on nitrogen, but we deserve some credit for doing so in the face of rapidly increasing growth.

For striped bass, I think the final grade will be an A.

Submerged aquatic vegetation—B-minus, but improving due to our efforts to reduce nitrogen and phosphorous levels.

Oysters—unfortunately, D-minus. And, make no mistake, our student is in danger of failing.

Crabs, an Incomplete. We know that there are some natural fluctuations in crab populations, but we don't know how or if fishing pressures are contributing to recent bad years for crabs.

Last, let me grade partnership and outreach. Here, the Bay program gets an A, obviously balancing some of the lower scores. There are few models that can equal the Chesapeake Bay program as a multijurisdictional cooperative effort. It now involves three states, the District of Columbia, EPA along with twenty-four other federal agencies, three regional agencies, and more than 700 citizen groups from around the watershed. There are literally hundreds of local governments, over forty Congressmen, and more than 500 state legislators that have been pulled into the program in one way or another.

So, where does my C-plus or B-minus leave you? Well, let us look at the root cause of the grade, and here I must turn to the impact of human population—

the management of growth in our region and transportation and land-use decisions. This obviously is a very difficult area. Sandy Hillyer, the director of the Growth Management Leadership Project here in the District of Columbia, was quoted by Tom Horton as saying, "Land use is the black hole of public policy. We worry about traffic congestion, air quality, water quality, and loss of natural habitat and attack each as a separate problem. But they are all a symptom of failure to deal with land use."

I would add it is also a failure to coordinate regionally. You know that as a region, we continue to fail to meet the Clean Air Act standards for ozone and carbon monoxide. Cars are the largest contributors to our problem in this region. But, when 90 percent of our work force commutes alone to work, and in the past decade the average number of miles driven has increased by 55 percent, it is difficult to know where to address the problem.

It is plain that the region has begun to address the problem. Indeed, there have been many beginnings. I point to one because its scope was the Chesapeake Bay watershed, making it truly regional, and because it describes our problems succinctly and clearly. I refer to the December 1988 report of the Year 2020 Panel to the Chesapeake Executive Council. Consider, please, with me some of these expert opinions from the panel report.

Scattered development is a fact, and new development continues to follow this trend. Outside urban centers, this pattern is characteristically low density. Effective mass transportation systems to serve scattered development are extraordinarily expensive to develop.

Scattered development is a wasteful use of land. The wise use of land is not an ideal daydream. It has important consequences. With scattered development, large areas effectively become vaccinated against any use except low-density residential development. Highway accessibility fosters the scattered pattern. Lack of central water supplies and sewage systems in many areas opened by highways result in on-site utilities, septic systems, and private or local wealth. These reinforce the trend toward low-density development and land consumption.

The potential for local communities to foster specific patterns of development, enhance the quality of life, and increase the efficiency of public services often goes unrealized. It has become the habit to let the market drive the planning and land management process.

Development is initiated in response to real or expected demand for housing, offices, or retail shops. It fits into the community's zoning requirements, which are often broadly drawn. If it fits with those, the community has little choice but to accept what is proposed. The developer responds to the demand and initiates the physical development process.

The problems we see around us today have come about because decisions that are sensible from an individual point of view can lead to an overall bad result. Individual decisions, one by one, become a torrent of decisions throughout the region. The results of these eventually wash to the Bay.

Regionally, we are acting out the tragedy of the commons. In pre-industrial England, each villager had a right to graze livestock on a common area of the village. Initially, the commons was large

enough to support the livestock of everyone in the village. Population growth and increased wealth resulted in more cattle being grazed. Overgrazing followed, with the commons suffering from erosion and the loss of vegetation. From the individual's perspective, it made sense to add one more cow, since the benefit in milk, hides, and meat from the added cow accrued to the individual, while the damage was spread to everyone equally. Reduced use of the commons by everyone would have sustained it in good condition, but this would have required self-restraint from everyone.

Although the more thoughtful villagers could foresee the end—a commons useless to all—the day-to-day decisions regarding whether to add a cow overrode the need to protect everyone's collective long-term interest in having a sound and productive commons. Collective action was required to achieve a level of mutually agreed restraint, with its long-term benefits.

It is our misfortune today that, as I see it, this tragedy of the commons is playing in empty theaters. No one is watching; no one is reacting to the lessons of history. At the same time, however, we aren't stupid—we know what's happening. And, yet, we seem powerless to address these problems.

It doesn't have to be this way. There are many steps we need to take as a region, but the first step is a move toward more regional acknowledgment of the impacts of growth and more equitable planning.

I'd like to spend the rest of my time talking with you about what we are considering in Virginia regarding regionalism and how this might be applied to the

Washington area to our mutual benefit. The controversy about Disney's America in Prince William County—about which I had some grave reservations as you may be aware—was a wake-up call for all of us. No matter how you felt about the merits or demerits of the project, I hope we can all agree that a regional mechanism for addressing the positive and negative impacts of the proposal was sorely needed. In a recent *Richmond Times-Dispatch* article entitled "Disney Shows Old Tactics Won't Do," Mr. Mike Hoover, president of the Prince Williams County/Greater Manassas Chamber of Commerce, noted, "I think what has to be realized is that the day when a major corporation can assemble land quietly and announce we are going to come in—those days are over. There are too many concerns, environmental and otherwise. You have to build regional support. When you back people in a corner, they come out fighting."

I could say a lot more about Disney, but I couldn't improve on Mr. Hoover's point—that regional support is the key. You don't get regional support in a vacuum. We need our regional leaders to work together, building on our region's strengths and making wise and timeless choices about emerging and future opportunities.

Another easier way to say this is, "We need planning." Recently, our Virginia Joint Legislative and Audit Review Commission, sort of a legislative watchdog agency, undertook a review of the Regional Planning District Commissions (PDCs) in Virginia. For those of you not from the state, we have had the Area Development Act on the books since 1968, which established Regional Planning Districts for all areas of the state.

While there have been some minor changes over the years, currently there are twenty-one District Planning Commissions in the Commonwealth. The purpose of these districts was to promote orderly and efficient development of physical, social, and economic elements of the district by planning and by encouraging and assisting government subdivisions to plan for the future.

The purpose of Jay Lark's study was to find out whether the PDCs were fulfilling this charge. We found that over time they have placed less and less emphasis on regional planning and a comprehensive review of regional needs. Whether this is a positive or negative trend largely depends on one's perspective. From the standpoint of promoting regionalism, it is a concern and a disappointment. The focus of the PDCs has changed with increased local funding and less state and federal funding. More local services are provided. Typically, most local officials are generally satisfied with the type of services provided and with PDC performance. However, the state's objectives have steadily faded. Of concern to me and others is the point raised by Jay Lark that PDC priorities are not, for the most part, focused on regional planning. I believe we are not meeting the intent of the Area Development Act, and we are missing many opportunities. Regional efforts are still missing for critical issues—environmental, economic, social, and infrastructure, to name only a few.

Currently, neither localities nor the state provides much guidance to PDCs regarding regional priorities and planning. Jay Lark's report makes a series of recommendations about redirecting the priorities of the commissions in order to

focus on regional work. I believe that our state needs to develop a coherent policy toward these commissions. I also believe we could benefit tremendously as a state if we had a review process for projects that have a multijurisdictional impact. We have a twenty-year history of some regional planning, and I believe that now is the time to build on that groundwork.

This is, of course, a Virginia-specific issue, but, in its essentials, it is replicated elsewhere. Other places have taken greater steps toward regionalism. Portland, Oregon, which has been mentioned, and Atlanta, Georgia, are proving how regions can work with local constituents to plan their futures cooperatively. Both the Portland Metropolitan Service District and the Atlanta Regional Commission are engaged in long-range strategic planning, and they are doing this planning in the context of state growth legislation. The kind of intelligent conversation that has taken place in these regions would have served us well regarding some of the large-scale projects that have come our way in the last twenty years.

The Atlanta Regional Commission began its Vision 2020 process in 1991 by surveying both experts and the public on critical regional trends and issues. The result of the first phase was a shared vision for the Atlanta region, and it sounds as though the topic of this conference is beginning to move us in this direction. They are now following through on that vision, both at the local and regional levels, and also through their state's Growth Management Act.


As vice chairman for Virginia's Commission on Population Growth and Development, I've heard a lot from citizens around the state. Many of them have

expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of new development that has occurred and the loss of historic and natural resources in their areas. They seem to ask, "Is this all there is? Can't we do better as a state? Can't we be sure that our communities work together? Can't we make our regions more livable, keep our distinctive qualities, be more thoughtful toward our history and our landscape?"

Virginia's in-state experiences with Planning District Commissions and the models in Oregon, Georgia, and elsewhere should be instructive for us here. While growth is inevitable in this region, the destruction of our region's character is not. Progress does not demand that we degrade our surroundings. Our citizens do demand that we work cooperatively, both for the preservation of our total environment and because, fiscally, we cannot afford to do otherwise.

In this region we take great pride in attracting tourists. But we must remember that in order to be a great place to visit, we must first be a nice place to live. These citizens' demands are heard throughout the Washington metropolitan region. They produce a lot of finger pointing but also a boatload of ideas and suggestions. Ron Kirby recently described this situation in a comment to Dr.

Gridlock, who everybody knows is the real arbiter of success and failure in this region. Ron said, "It's a lot of little things glued together that will make our transportation system work. Everybody's got a little of the answer, but each person thinks his proposal is the whole answer, and that's why we don't get anywhere. We need a consensus that we need a little bit of everything here, and, if we do, we might develop a plan that will help a lot."

Some key words there are *consensus* and *plan*. We need consensus that resource preservation is essential to the quality of our lives; that business-as-usual will not do the job; that acting together, collectively, regionally, we can develop a plan and achieve, as the Year 2020 panel said, a "level of mutually agreed restraint" with its long-term benefits; thus, we can avoid the tragedy of the commons. 

Senator Joseph Gartlan Jr. has served the 36th District in Fairfax County in the Commonwealth of Virginia State Senate since 1972. He serves on the Senate Finance Committee and its subcommittees on economic development and natural resources and on transportation and special grants. In addition to his environmental leadership, Senator Gartlan is active in issues related to education, social services, and justice. He is a graduate of the Georgetown University Law Center.