

# Developing the Power of Regional Strategic Planning

*Robert E. Shepherd*

Many executive directors, staff members, and board members of regional development organizations (RDOs)<sup>1</sup> can identify with the thought that their RDOs focus much of their attention on programs and issues that are not *regional* and perhaps not *strategic*, i.e., viewed from an overall regional perspective of future opportunities and threats. They would agree that it is desirable, and could even be wonderful and invigorating, to spend more time and resources on matters that are both regional and strategic.

## Evolution of Regional Development Organizations

Admittedly, RDOs were formed for many reasons. The variety of our programs, resources, capabilities, and organizational characteristics is viewed as both a major weakness and a major strength. Across our country we attempt to be many different things to many different people, and our successes are small and scattered. Roles that are common, but not by any means universal, include

- grantsmanship,
- human service program planning and administration (aging, employment and training, emergency medical services, etc.),
- planning assistance to localities,
- management assistance to localities (e.g., personnel studies, circuit managers, meetings/process facilitation, etc.),

- assistance to localities in administering grants they have received (Community Development Block Grants, HOME Affordable Housing programs, economic development or planning grants, etc.), and
- assistance in preparing communities for economic development (by planning, organizing, targeting new or expanding enterprises, developing strategies, and enhancing community infrastructure).

Most of the above services are provided directly to a given community or county in a demand-response fashion, often under contract. The RDO and its members benefit from certain economics of scale due to the ability of one or more RDO staff persons to provide such services in an effective and cost-efficient manner. Those in RDO work in the '60s and '70s saw agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and others provide a major portion of the RDO budget.

These agencies encouraged the use of these funds to develop and implement plans on a regional basis that would meet priority regional needs. For example, HUD would determine one year that regional housing plans were to be favored, and RDOs would dutifully oblige—if they wanted to continue to receive HUD 701 Comprehensive Planning Assistance funds. EPA began to fund

Areawide Water Quality Management (Section 208) Plans to address areawide water quality problems. So in the '60s and '70s, many RDOs focused a lot of attention and resources on regional issues, but the priorities were somewhat determined by federal and/or state programs.

The '80s and '90s—so far—have brought federal retrenchment, sometimes described as “fend-for-yourself federalism.” In this era, to continue to receive resources from federal, state, and (especially) local levels, RDO executives have become entrepreneurial. They have found work that is suited to the skills of staff, that needs to be done, and that can be done effectively and efficiently by a regional staff—the types of activities listed above. Finally, local and sometimes state and federal programs will pay for such work as they see a direct, concrete benefit.

## Regional Vision

As the 1980s ended, the Land-of-Sky Regional Council was seeing the need for increased focus on regional issues. No one regional issue jumped out and demanded attention; instead, acceptance of the need to focus more on regional issues evolved step by step, as follows:

1. The executive director began discussions with his management team about the need to do so. This discussion coincided with the council's twenty-fifth anniversary, and the management team concurred that this would be a good twenty-fifth anniversary project to honor the past by better positioning the council and the region to meet the needs of the future.

2. Executive committee members soon were engaged in this discussion. They agreed that a regional strategic plan was desirable, subject to finding sufficient funds to underwrite the cost. (They did not believe that member governments would agree

to additional dues to cover that cost.) Their buy-in seemed based on their seeing potential for increased cooperation across county lines in a variety of areas.

Also, as they reviewed the history of the regional council itself, they saw that the council had been responsible for several important regional initiatives, including a River Improvement Program started in the '70s that had continued for about fifteen years. The program was improving water quality and providing parks for river access where there had been no designated public access when the program started. Another effort it helped to initiate, involving four member counties and thirteen other western North Carolina counties, developed a new interstate highway through the region. The clout from regional public-private sector cooperation resulted in this project's inclusion in the state Transportation Improvement Plan less than a year after the I-26 Corridor Association was formed.

3. Funding was not an easy issue and took months, but it was resolved by convincing ARC and Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) officials of the merits of funding a demonstration regional strategic plan.

4. After discussion with some supportive key persons outside the council's mostly public membership, it was agreed that a public/private steering committee of area leaders should be formed to guide the effort. This committee later would be supplemented by task forces of similar composition that would address issues identified by the steering committee as strategic regional issues.

With support for Regional Vision '95, a plan to involve other organizations and individuals, and funding in place, work on Regional Vision '95 began. Other key steps included selecting a process consultant, Public Technology, Inc. (PTI), of Washington, DC, and developing a charge to the steering committee. This charge was stated very

simply—to help evaluate regional issues, identify strategic ones, and develop a strategic plan for how to deal with them. The council did not wish to predetermine the areas to be explored and chose not to limit the plan to areas in which only the council could appropriately be the implementor or even a key implementor.

The willingness of ARC and TVA to fund a “strategic planning model for a development district” was due to the lack of any known “classic strategic plan for the entire region” by any RDO serving either the thirteen-state Appalachian region or the seven-state TVA region. The council agreed to develop a how-to manual at the conclusion of its planning effort and to conduct one or more workshops in the Appalachian region to share lessons learned with other RDOs.

## **Implementing the Vision**

Now as the council looks back, almost four years after the plan was adopted, twelve of the thirteen strategies have been, at least partially, addressed. A thirteenth has not yet found a willing implementor and did not fit the council mission. Council adoption of the plan included establishing a sixteen-member Action Task Force and asking the staff to begin work on these regional strategies. The result is that Regional Vision '95 made the council more regional in focus and more focused on critical and emerging issues. The vision encouraged the council to collaborate with other partners to implement many of the thirteen strategies.

## **Three Examples of Regional Strategies**

Three examples of the thirteen strategies follow. One strategy was to “revitalize the Land-of-Sky Regional Council’s Regional Solid Waste Alternatives Committee to examine pilot-scale experimental programs,

equipment and facility sharing, coordination of fees and payments, public and private partnerships, markets for recyclable materials, and regional landfilling.” Since plan publication, a revitalized committee of chairmen of the four county boards of commissioners, county managers, solid waste directors, and recycling coordinators has met regularly. Currently, they are exploring a regional household hazardous waste collection and disposal program, composting and landfilling alternatives, and the need for a regional solid waste authority.

The council has developed programs in which counties share a wood waste tub grinder and a windrow compost turner. Thus, Regional Vision '95 helped the council to revitalize its effort in solid waste. As a result, grants have been received from EPA and the USDA Rural Utilities Service, which have underwritten much of the staff work needed to revitalize the council’s solid waste program.

Another strategy for which implementation is underway proposed that the council “generate a baseline map illustrating the physical relationship between growth areas and natural and sensitive environmentally unique areas in the region.” In mid-1995, arrangements were developed with the Conservation Trust of North Carolina to collaborate on a project funded by North Carolina foundations to develop a map and a regional conservation strategy for natural and sensitive environmentally unique areas in the region.

A third strategy for which partial success is anticipated soon provided that the council should “establish, publish, and maintain baseline measurements for regional air quality to be used for measuring future progress or degradation and for increasing awareness.” This will be accomplished through a combination of federal transportation planning funds and funds from two local foundations and a statewide foundation.

## Sharing the Experience

As mentioned earlier, the council had agreed to prepare a manual for other multijurisdictional agencies and to assist with one or more workshops for RDO personnel. Both efforts have been very successful. Both serve to illustrate the growing interest in strategic planning as a way to refocus the efforts of RDOs and to make them more relevant during an era in which regionalism has become more "bottom-up."

In early 1992, the council completed a draft manual using a manual for strategic planning in single communities or counties developed by the council's consultant, PTI.<sup>2</sup> The council's modifications included step-by-step guidance for RDOs and the council's knowledge of how a single jurisdictional process could be adapted to multicounty plans.

To share results of its demonstration plan, the council collaborated with the Development District Association of Appalachia and the Appalachian Regional Commission. They decided that more than one workshop should be held to make it more convenient for RDO directors and staff to attend. Workshop planners believed that limiting attendance at each workshop to twenty-five to thirty persons would be best. It was decided that two-day workshops would be held in the fall of 1992 in Johnson City, Tennessee, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and Birmingham, Alabama.

A strong indication of RDOs' growing interest in strategic planning was that forty persons registered for the Johnson City workshop and a total of almost 120 was admitted to the three workshops. By workshop time, several RDOs that had recently completed strategic plans or had them underway had been identified. Much of the workshops' success is attributed to RDO-to-RDO sharing of strategic planning experiences—the lessons learned and the different

options for approaching each part of the strategic planning process.

In addition to panelists from RDOs, Bill Dodge of Strategic Partnerships Consulting (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) was used as consultant/facilitator for the three training events. The unpublished how-to manual was distributed to any RDO staff in attendance to help them prepare a strategic plan, but much of the workshops' focus was on practical options from everyone's field experiences.

The council itself had learned that the somewhat linear, step-by-step process of the PTI model was not always realistic. The process was often more iterative than linear; therefore, it was more desirable to encourage workshop participants, or any novice, to think through the various options and their advantages and disadvantages in a unique application in his/her region.

## The Manual: A Guide to Strategic Decision Making for Regions

The council's work on Regional Vision '95 and several local strategic plans with which it had assisted, the experience of other RDOs with their strategic plans, and the evidence of strong interest by other RDOs in learning to do their own plans—all led to the desire for a more complete manual. Such a manual would help an RDO tailor a plan to its specific needs and resources. Its guidance could apply to a multifaceted regional strategic plan (such as Regional Vision '95), to an organizational plan for the RDO itself, to a single issue within a region (e.g., economic development), or to a variety of other situations in a multijurisdictional setting.

In late 1993, Acting Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development Wilbur Hawkins approved the funding for development of such a manual. He was

convinced that strategic planning could become a model process for preparing EDA's Overall Economic Development Program (OEDP), which each EDA-designated RDO is required to develop. Consultant Bill Dodge again was retained to assist the council in developing the desired manual. The resulting manual, *Shaping a Region's Future: A Guide to Strategic Decision Making for Regions*, was published in mid-1995 and is a one-of-a-kind document. It contains chapters on designing processes, analyzing change, developing visions and regional niches, developing initiatives/strategies, and implementing plans. Additional chapters include strategic planning case studies; notes to development districts designated by ARC and EDA on how to integrate strategic planning into their required planning processes; references; and a glossary.

As this manual was developed and refined, there was growing evidence of RDO interest and belief in the need for multicounty strategic planning. The manual was pretested at a workshop in Asheville, North Carolina, during Halloween weekend 1994. Members of an advisory committee for the manual—jointly named by the National Association of Regional Councils, the National Association of Development Organizations, and the Development District Association of Appalachia—were joined by approximately twenty-five additional RDO directors or staff, representing thirteen states. They were enthusiastic about manual contents and soon having it available for use in their districts. They offered many suggestions that have been incorporated into the final version. They also urged that the manual's publication be followed by a commitment of the parties involved in its funding and preparation to provide training in settings convenient to RDOs throughout the United States.

The authors have helped lead workshops and training sessions since the manual

was published, including an extensive workshop for economic development districts in the northeastern United States hosted by the EDA Mid-Atlantic Regional Office in Philadelphia. The authors and funders are exploring other ways to "take the training on the road." Also, since a limited number of copies were printed and these are rapidly being exhausted by requests from inside and outside the United States, arrangements are being finalized for the National League of Cities to republish the manual. The authors have received many compliments about the manual's quality and usefulness. Recently the National Academy for Public Administration (NAPA) did a thorough evaluation of the Appalachian Regional Commission and its programs at ARC's request. NAPA commended the Appalachian Regional Commission for its key role in developing such a relevant tool for use at the multicounty level.

Also, *Economic Development Monthly*, a newsletter of the Public Works and Economic Development Association (PWEDA), in the lead article of its December 1995 issue said,

The manual is an excellent resource for anyone who is interested in regional planning and would like to know more about how to implement such planning in their area to promote economic development. It explains what strategic planning is and why it has become increasingly applied by organizations and communities facing uncertain futures. It helps you to consider these and other questions and provides practical guidance for conducting strategic planning processes that address regional challenges.

### **Strategic Planning: Critical to RDOs**

This author believes that any RDO preparing itself to be a player in the future of its regional community must have an in-depth knowledge of strategic planning. The related skills of meeting and process facilitation,

visioning, and developing regional civic infrastructure (the capability of a community's governmental and civic organizations to deal effectively with community issues) also are vital. The applications of such skills and knowledge to one's regional work are varied. Again, it might encompass 1) a broad plan for the region to be implemented by a variety of organizations (such as the council's own Regional Vision '95); 2) a strategic plan that defines goals for only the RDO to implement; 3) a more focused regional plan for economic development, labor force development, transportation, or other subjects; 4) a subregional plan (e.g., one for a county and/or several municipalities); or 5) selective use of strategic planning techniques in a variety of settings as the approach becomes second nature and informal.

Even in the contractual management and technical assistance role that most RDOs serve, RDO staff can add a new tool. For example, the Land-of-Sky Regional Council has now facilitated two county strategic plans. (One recommendation of Regional Vision '95 was that each county develop such a plan, and three of the four have to date). And the council has assisted in preparing a strategic plan for a county board of education. Related skills have enabled it to provide contractual retreat facilitation services to twenty local government and non-profit organizations over the past two years.

Developing a regional strategic plan can refocus an RDO's mission toward needs and opportunities that are both more regional and more strategic. That is, it can help position the RDO and the region it serves to be viable in the years to come. A regional strategic plan can indeed be a vital step away from an RDO's past dependence on federal and state funding or dependence on member government technical assistance as a *raison d'être*. While technical assistance services are important to member governments and

must be part of the toolkit of any successful RDO, a vital RDO must focus on important regional issues. A strategic plan can give the RDO broad input from the region's stakeholders in identifying strategic priorities; it can help fashion strategies to deal with them and help stakeholders and potential implementors to agree upon the visions, strategies, and steps necessary to work collaboratively toward regional solutions.

An important role for a successful RDO today and in the future is providing facilitative leadership—developing a “collaborative,” if you will—by focusing key players in a region on issue(s) important to that region's future. The RDO that fails to do this will be missing the most strategic work of which it is capable. It will probably not be a vital regional player and in time will lose relevance.


Regionalism is a growing movement in economic development, growth management, and other areas. In many cases, RDOs have been the pioneer regional entities within their jurisdictions in a variety of endeavors. If they do not continue to lead in the regional arena, someone else probably will. Strategic planning can help the RDO and the region to find their future niches.

A limited number of copies of *Shaping a Region's Future: A Guide to Strategic Decision Making for Regions* may be obtained by calling or writing the following offices:

Appalachian Regional Commission  
1666 Connecticut Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20235

Economic Development Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
14th & Constitution Ave NW  
Room 7319H  
Washington, DC 20230

Also, *Shaping a Region's Future* may be accessed by Internet on EDA's homepage at [gopher.ecix.doc.gov](http://gopher.ecix.doc.gov) or <http://www.doc.gov/>

ecix/ecixhomepage.html. Through an arrangement with the National League of Cities (NLC), paper copies will be available from NLC early this year. For information on reprint copies, contact NLC at (202)626-3150. 

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Regional development organizations (RDOs) are defined as those organizations that are concerned with planning and development on a multijurisdictional level. These include councils of government (COGs); economic development districts (EDDs) in the lexicon of the Economic Development Administration; local development districts (LDDs) in the lexicon of the Appalachian Regional Commission; metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in the lexicon of the U.S. Department of Transportation; and other public organizations variously called regional planning commissions (RPCs), regional planning and development commissions, regional development centers (RDCs) (in Georgia), area development

districts (ADDs) (in Kentucky), lead regional organizations (LROs) (in North Carolina), etc.

<sup>2</sup> Public Technology, Inc. 1984. *Strategies for Cities and Counties: A Strategies Planning Guide*. Washington, DC: Public Technology, Inc.

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Mr. Shepherd received a B.S. from North Carolina State University and an M.S. from Kansas State University in agricultural economics. He also attended the Government Executive Institute School of Business at the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill in 1980. He is a member of the National Association of Regional Councils and is active in numerous civic and church organizations.

