

# Georgia's Pine Mountain Ridge: Lessons for Regional Planning

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## Introduction

Planning for growth management in Georgia is structured by the Georgia Planning Act of 1989. Nationally recognized as a model for growth management and coordinated planning, the act defines an integrated, bottom-up process for comprehensive planning. The process begins at the local level, with subsequent activity at the regional and then state levels. Local comprehensive plans were developed during 1990–1995. Regional plans, drawing on the results of local planning, are currently under development by regional councils (regional development centers [RDCs]) in the state. Regional plans, then, will provide the basis for a state-level planning effort.

In contrast to this emphasis on bottom-up comprehensive planning, the planning act incorporates a different process for natural or historic resources that have regional significance and span multiple local jurisdictions (known as regionally important resources [RIRs]). The act authorizes the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), working with regional councils, to identify and designate RIRs. Designation requires development of a management strategy specific to that resource. Once the strategy is adopted and final designation is granted by DCA, local governments' proposed actions affecting the RIR are subject to regional review for consistency with the management strategy.

Although partially congruent with the principle of bottom-up planning, this structure places state government and regional councils at the front end of the planning process along with local governments. The lead roles of the state (primarily) and regional councils (secondarily), embedded in a context that emphasizes local primacy, pose substantial challenges in implementation of this portion of Georgia's growth management program. This article describes planning for one resource of regional importance in Georgia, the Pine Mountain Ridge.

In June 1993, the Pine Mountain Ridge was one of four resources selected from more than 150 statewide nominations to receive preliminary RIR designation. Development of a resource management strategy for the Ridge began in March 1994 and was completed in September 1995 (see Figure 1). In December 1995, however, planning participants were notified by the DCA board of its decision to suspend RIR designation for the Pine Mountain Ridge for an indefinite period of time. This outcome was particularly unexpected because, throughout the process, the value and vulnerability of the Pine Mountain Ridge was acknowledged by everyone involved. Yet, resistance to the RIR was so significant that final designation was suspended. This experience with the first RIR initiative in Georgia provides some clear lessons for future attempts at regional planning.

## Preliminary Designation of the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR

The Pine Mountain Ridge, spanning four counties in west-central Georgia, is approximately 100 miles south of Atlanta in the southernmost mountainous area in Georgia. Rising dramatically from adjacent Piedmont lowlands, the Pine Mountain Ridge is visible for miles, and its slopes offer commanding views of the neighboring countryside. The mountainous character of the Ridge makes it host to plant and animal life contrasting with that of surrounding areas.

Much of the Ridge is in a natural state that provides area visitors a wilderness-like experience. In addition, the substantial influence of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Pine Mountain area is apparent in the historically important sites of Pine Mountain Valley and the Little White House. The unique

natural features, important cultural resources, and considerable development pressure from Columbus to the south and Atlanta to the north led to the nomination of Pine Mountain Ridge as one of the state's first RIRs.

The cities and counties with jurisdiction over portions of the Pine Mountain Ridge are members of three regional councils. In 1992, one of these, the Lower Chattahoochee RDC, prepared the initial RIR nomination for a segment of the Pine Mountain Ridge. The boundary specified in the nomination encompassed portions of three counties—Harris, Talbot, and Meriwether. Although the nomination alluded to the historic resources in Warm Springs associated with Franklin Roosevelt, the clear focus of the nomination was the vulnerability of the Ridge's natural resource base. In fact, the primary threat to the Ridge

<b>1992</b>	The Pine Mountain Ridge is nominated for RIR designation
<b>1993</b> <i>June</i>	The Pine Mountain Ridge is granted preliminary RIR designation
<b>1994</b> <i>February</i>	Public meetings held in the region introduce the RIR planning process
<i>March</i>	RMS Committee begins work on the resource management strategy
<i>August</i>	RMS Committee delineates an expanded RIR boundary
<i>November</i>	Local elections result in changes in RMS Committee membership
<b>1995</b> <i>March</i>	Meriwether County Commission petitions to withdraw from the RIR
<i>May</i>	DCA board strongly requests committee return to initial RIR boundary RMS Committee completes the draft resource management strategy
<i>July</i>	Public meetings explain the resource management strategy and gather citizen input
<i>September</i>	RMS Committee submits resource management strategy to DCA board
<i>December</i>	DCA board suspends final RIR designation indefinitely

**Figure 1. Milestones in the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR Planning Process**

was said to be its susceptibility to piecemeal loss of character (e.g., from commercial buildings and second home developments).

The nomination was actively supported by the Pine Mountain Trail Association, a non-profit organization based in Columbus, Georgia. The association has a significant presence in the area and supported the nomination as a way to ensure that the natural character of the Ridge be maintained and enhanced by excluding commercial development, unnecessary signs, and roadside landscape treatments that interrupt the hardwood canopy along the Ridge highway.

Following preliminary designation of the RIR by DCA, the adjacent regional councils, Macintosh Trail and Chattahoochee-Flint RDCs, reviewed the original nomination. Staff from the three RDCs decided that the extent of the RIR should not be limited by the boundary of a single regional council; rather, natural features and historic characteristics should be the determining factors. Their recommendation that the scope of the RIR be expanded beyond the Ridge's natural resource base and that the boundary be changed to include important historic resources associated with the Ridge was subsequently accepted by the Board as part of the preliminary designation. This change in boundary substantially increased the RIR area in the three counties and added a portion of a fourth, Upson County.

### **Resource Management Planning Process**

Following preliminary designation, DCA staff was charged with developing the resource management strategy (RMS) required prior to final designation as an RIR. DCA contracted with the Institute of Community and Area Development (ICAD), a public service unit of The University of Georgia, for assistance. DCA and ICAD worked as partners in developing and implementing a

planning process conforming to the RIR program at the state level, yet tailored to the Pine Mountain region.

The planning process for the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR corresponds to the transactive approach to planning conceptualized by John Friedmann (1973). In this stakeholder-centered approach, significant responsibility for development of the plan is placed with those who will be involved in subsequent action steps and those who will be affected by the plan. Planners and other staff support and assist this process but are not the primary decision makers. Transactive planning emphasizes exchange between participants and planners, dialogue, and mutual learning. Ownership of the plan, laying the groundwork for successful implementation, is the goal.

### **Resource Management Strategy Committee**

A transactive approach to developing the resource management strategy is consistent with the intent that the RMS be locally driven. (The locally driven process also is evident in local resource nomination vs. state resource assessment and nomination.) To accomplish this, a Resource Management Strategy Committee was formed. RMS Committee members were identified by the RDCs through interviews with the initial members and at two regional public meetings held to announce preliminary RIR designation and introduce the resource management planning process.

RMS committee members included local elected officials from the four counties; staff from the three RDCs, business and industry (including forestry and agriculture), relevant state and federal agencies, and environmental organizations; planning commissioners and staff; educators; private landowners; local leaders; and interested citizens. Although the majority of members were from the Pine Mountain region or adjacent

areas, the group had a diversity of expertise, interests, and opinions from federal, state, regional, and local perspectives. The original committee had forty members; a core group of nineteen participated throughout the planning process.

The RMS Committee was formally charged with developing the content of the resource management strategy. Members also were asked to serve as a conduit for information exchange with the general public and their local governments. That is, members were expected to provide information about the RIR and resource management planning, as well as communicate the concerns or ideas of others to the committee for its consideration. It also was expected that a group of local advocates for the RIR would emerge from the committee.

### **Anticipated Planning Process**

The anticipated RIR planning process had two specific tasks. The first was to develop the substance of the resource management strategy. Consistent with a transactive planning approach, the committee was asked to generate the content of the management strategy, with DCA and ICAD providing technical and decision making support. In a series of monthly meetings, the committee addressed the following substantive elements of the RMS:

- identification of important natural and cultural resources,
- development of resource goals and objectives,
- delineation of the final RIR boundary based on the resources, and
- generation and selection of preferred management strategies for the region.

These elements are intricately linked with one another; therefore, it was expected that individual elements would be re-examined at key points throughout the process in the context of the committee's ongoing work. For example, the initial RIR working

boundary might be adjusted in response to identification of specific resources or management strategies.

Early in the process, modifying the planning sequence became necessary. Some group members were very uncomfortable dealing with the more abstract concepts of resource goals and objectives. They preferred to delineate a definite boundary for the RIR before considering goals, objectives, and strategies. As described below, this decision became a focus of strategic maneuvering as external events began to affect the planning process.

The second aspect of the planning process concerned public involvement. To assist with distribution of information, staff sent out monthly meeting summaries to "interested parties" and to the elected officials in the affected counties. Staff also distributed press releases summarizing monthly meetings to local newspapers. Interested citizens were invited to attend the monthly committee meetings. Early meetings attracted a few observers; some meetings near the end of the planning process attracted more than thirty citizens who actively participated in discussions.

On several occasions, the RMS Committee discussed the need to have greater public input. There was, however, considerable tension within the group about additional public involvement. Committee members expressed a strong desire for greater awareness of the RIR among local elected officials and residents, and they wanted more local citizens involved in the planning process. At the same time, they were reluctant to hold public meetings until they had a product to present. Consequently, they decided to postpone formal public involvement efforts until late in the planning process.

After the committee completed a full draft of the RMS, four public meetings were held (one in each affected county). The meetings were established as informal drop-in

sessions designed to provide information to interested citizens, as well as to gather public input regarding the RIR and the RMS. Committee members and DCA staff were present at each of the meetings to explain and discuss RIR planning and the RMS. Copies of the RMS and descriptions of the RIR planning process and the proposed Pine Mountain Ridge RIR were available as handouts.

A questionnaire soliciting public response was distributed and a recorder made available to take citizens' comments. All comments received at each meeting were posted in a central location readily accessible to everyone attending that session. Public meeting participants, RMS committee members, DCA board members, and "interested parties" were subsequently provided verbatim comments from the four meetings. The most significant result of the public meetings was that responses primarily addressed the concept or existence of the RIR rather than the substance of the Pine Mountain Ridge resource management strategy.

## **External Developments**

While the RMS Committee was considering the substantive elements of the management strategy, external developments began to affect their work. Ultimately, these developments had a profound impact on the development of the RMS for Pine Mountain Ridge. In November 1994, local elections resulted in significant changes in the county commission representatives in the four counties, which affected the RIR in two major ways.

First, the newly elected officials were uninformed regarding the RIR. As liaisons to local governments, staff from the participating regional councils attempted to inform the new officials about the RIR. DCA staff provided copies of meeting notes and

press releases to all elected officials in the four counties. ICAD staff contacted many newly elected officials, attempting to recruit participants for the RMS Committee. These efforts had limited success in obtaining the active participation of local elected officials in the RIR process.

Second, official elected representatives on the RMS Committee changed. At this time, the committee had met for ten months, delineated a working RIR boundary, and generated resource management goals and objectives. The group was beginning to identify management strategies, and the change in committee composition was difficult. Some members felt that they were starting over because issues that had been addressed earlier were resurfacing and disrupting the work flow.

Furthermore, one of the new committee members who represented Meriwether County was fundamentally opposed to the RIR. This change was particularly influential in creating a platform for local opposition to the RIR. During initial public meetings and early committee meetings, some local opposition to the RIR was apparent. This opposition, however, was low level and loosely organized. As the planning process progressed, local opponents began to organize. With an ally formally designated as a member of the RMS Committee, local opponents gained a platform and became more vocal.

Corresponding to the national mood, local opposition was expressed as a desire for decreased state involvement in local affairs or decreased governmental intrusion on property rights. Local opposition characterized the RIR as "state control," "other counties telling us what to do," and "the biggest land grab in the history of this state government." These efforts culminated in a petition to withdraw from the RIR submitted by the Meriwether County Commission to the board of the Department of Community

Affairs. Meriwether County commission members also actively lobbied other jurisdictions to withdraw as well.

### Strategic Maneuvering and Boundary Changes

As indicated above, the RMS Committee began its work with a proposed RIR boundary delineated by the staffs of the three regional councils. Early in their work, the committee decided to delineate a boundary that encompassed significant natural and cultural resources and was readily discernible to local residents. During the boundary deliberations, a committee member who opposed the RIR saw an opportunity to make the affected region so large that completion of the management plan would be difficult and, more importantly, opposition would be heightened.

Committee members who supported the RIR, however, felt there were strong resource justifications for increasing the boundary. Working with surface features that would be clearly identifiable on the ground (e.g., roads and streams), they agreed to expand the boundary substantially to include an upstream portion of the Flint River, western portions of the Pine Mountain Ridge to Lake Harding on the Alabama border, and the viewshed from Pine Mountain to Oak Mountain (see Figure 2). Rationales for inclusion of these areas were river corridor and water quality protection, viewshed protection, recreation benefits, and tourism.

During consideration of management strategies, the committee identified some areas within this expanded boundary as critical to maintaining significant resources and other areas as important or influential.

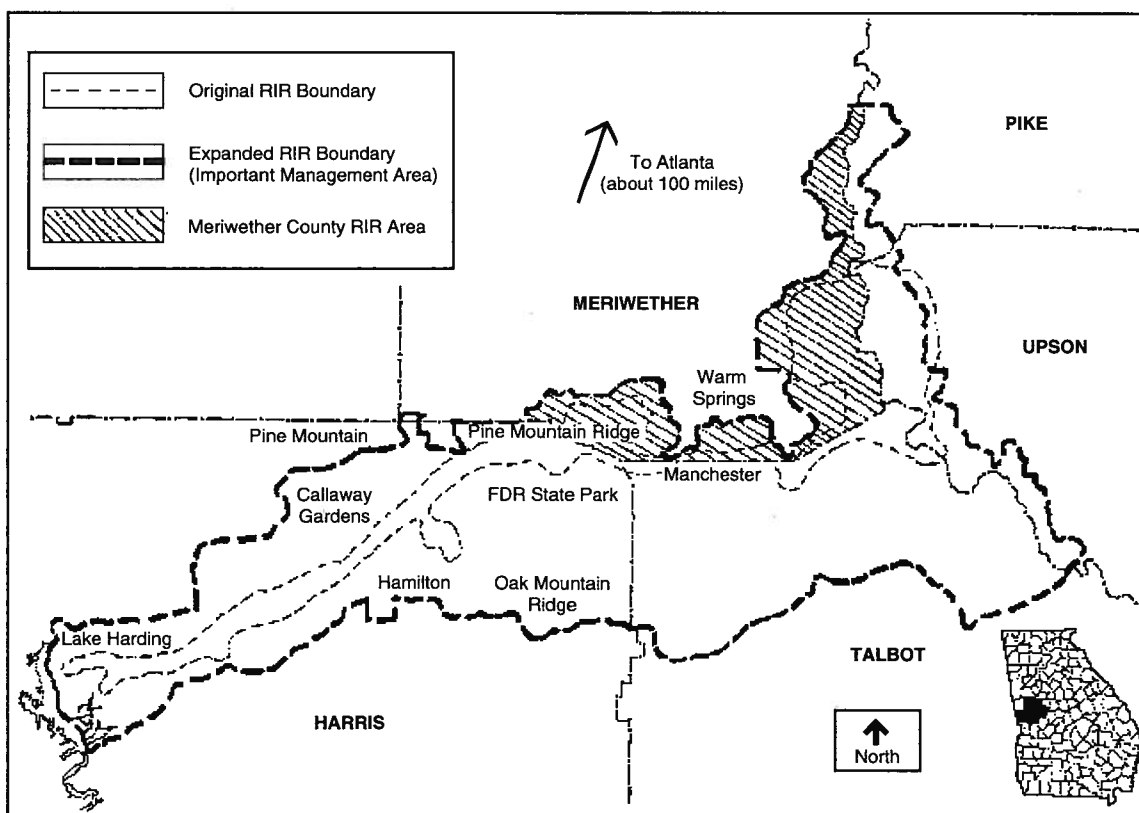


Figure 2. Pine Mountain RIR Boundary Changes

The two designations were important in that more stringent management approaches were indicated for the critical area, while voluntary and educational approaches were seen as sufficient for the surrounding area deemed important to the resource base. This change seemed to make development and implementation of an RMS for the larger area more feasible.

Meriwether County's petition to withdraw from the RIR subsequently led to reconsideration of the boundary as a whole. After difficult discussion, the committee decided to continue to work with the expanded RIR boundary because it reflected the original intent of the RIR program in general and the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR in particular—that is, to develop management strategies for significant regional resources beyond limitations imposed by individual jurisdictional interests. Recognizing the political reality, however, the committee highlighted the portion of the RIR in Meriwether County as an area where implementation of the management plan was likely to be difficult.

The final action regarding the boundary came from the DCA board. Responding to the view that it would be politically impossible to deal with the expanded RIR area, the board issued its first and only interim guidance to the RMS Committee. Despite repeated assurances that the boundary changes were within the committee's purview, the board strongly urged that the committee go back to the original boundary. With great reluctance, resistance to political manipulation, and some sense of anger at the wasted work, the committee acquiesced.

### **Status of the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR**

The activities of the Meriwether County Commission led to several responses by the DCA board. Board members met with the

commissioners to hear their concerns and initiated and participated in a public meeting in the City of Manchester specifically to address Meriwether County residents' concerns. Also, DCA staff met with elected officials in other jurisdictions within the proposed RIR boundary. The board indicated that it would respond officially to the Meriwether County request after the RMS Committee completed its work and submitted the draft resource management strategy for review.

In November 1994, after reviewing the draft RMS and public comments, the DCA board voted

“to suspend regionally important resource (RIR) designation for the Pine Mountain Ridge for an indefinite period of time.... Critical to the board's decision to defer RIR designation for Pine Mountain were assurances given by the six local governments sharing the Ridge that they would cooperate in management of Pine Mountain without state involvement. The board decided to honor this commitment to voluntary cooperation by the area local governments by suspending the RIR designation.”

However, in the board's resolution, it called upon the area local governments to use the resource management strategy as a guide for planning and decision making on matters affecting the Pine Mountain Ridge.

### **Lessons Learned**

Major criticisms during the development of the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR focused on the very concept of coordinated regional planning. Critics characterized the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR as an invasion of private property rights and another layer of governmental regulation, which was redundant with existing rules and regulations and therefore unneeded. Opponents asserted that local jurisdictions do not want to be told or to tell other jurisdictions what to do. In addition, some felt that the public was not adequately informed about the RIR

and suggested that all landowners within the proposed RIR should have been contacted personally.

These criticisms, along with strategic maneuvering by opponents of regional planning in the Pine Mountain area, ultimately served to block implementation of the RIR as it was originally envisioned. This occurred despite general acknowledgment of the region's unique natural and historic characteristics, substantial concern about the effects of uncoordinated development activities, and significant investment of time and effort by representatives of a number of constituencies. Six lessons for regional planning in contexts like that in Georgia are highlighted below.

**Provide incentives for participation in regional planning and clearly communicate anticipated benefits.**

Some of the criticisms cited above are powerful and difficult to counter. Most importantly, they suggest the need to communicate clear and tangible benefits or advantages for participation in regional planning. Four benefits are associated with the RIR program in Georgia. Most tangibly, state funding may be available for regional or local actions to implement elements of the resource management strategy. Less tangible benefits include building the capacity for regional coordination and planning, promoting public values associated with resource protection, and enhancing economic growth through appropriate resource management and development guidelines.

Such benefits should be clearly communicated from the beginning of the process. In addition, it is important to tailor benefits and messages to the various participant groups—benefits are viewed differently by particular interest groups. For example, elected officials may not view benefits in the same way as the general public.

**Obtain endorsements from local jurisdictions and maintain their commitment.**

A representative committee of stakeholders is unlikely to provide sufficient local government involvement; therefore, a parallel effort is needed to inform and involve local elected officials. Local government endorsements were obtained prior to beginning work on the Pine Mountain Ridge RIR. However, in spite of significant efforts by staff to inform and involve local officials in the RIR process, their participation in development of the resource management strategy was extremely limited. Also, as demonstrated by the successful lobbying efforts of Meriwether County, local governments may, late in the process, resolve to withdraw from the RIR altogether, undermining considerable effort and expense and fatally affecting the RIR designation.

Since the successful implementation of regional plans often lies in large part with local government, the participation of elected officials and planning agents is critical. Based on the low level of participation on the RMS Committee and the apparent consequences, additional means for involving elected officials in regional planning and ensuring their support throughout the process seem critical.

**Define participant roles as clearly as possible at the beginning of the process.**

The Pine Mountain Ridge RIR planning process included the RMS Committee, staff from three RDCs, the DCA board and staff, ICAD staff, interested parties, and local elected officials. The following examples illustrate some of the problems with uncertainty in role definition and limited development of some roles.

One aspect of the RMS Committee's role that could have been developed further was

in the area of public information exchange. Throughout the process there was tension within the committee regarding public information and input. This problem might have been relieved by developing informal drop-in sessions for local residents to stop by and speak with committee members and staff about the RIR. An informal meeting format might have alleviated some of the tension between the committee's desire for public information and input and its need to have a "product" to present for public comment.

A second example relates to the important and difficult role assumed by the staffs of the regional councils. In the Pine Mountain case, RDC staff were expected to serve multiple functions, some of which conflicted. On the RMS Committee, RDC staff were expected to provide technical expertise. As liaison with local governments, they were expected to keep local officials informed and to measure their understanding and support for the RIR/RMS. Serious professional conflicts can result when RDC staff are in the position of advocating a regional planning process and serving elected officials who do not support the effort. In addition to these concerns, the role of the RDC with regard to dissemination of public information and technical support for the RIR may require clarification.

Finally, the role of the DCA board in this process was somewhat unclear. This was particularly apparent when the RMS Committee's difficult decision regarding the RIR boundary was essentially voided by the DCA board. To some extent this board decision undermined significant committee work and fueled the fire of RIR opponents. This situation could have been managed more easily if the committee had explicitly understood that the board would provide interim review and guidance throughout RMS development.

### **Recognize the importance of local advocates.**

The process by which RIRs were nominated was designed to demonstrate local support for regional planning. However, since the genesis of such planning efforts can vary, the extent of local support should be assessed carefully. In this case, the Pine Mountain Trail Association, an apparent source of advocates for the project, is actually centered in Muscogee County outside the four-county RIR area. The association did not seek to gather support in the RIR counties and, consequently, did not serve as a core advocacy group.

In the absence of an organized advocacy group, it may be desirable to expand support for a regional planning effort by cultivating local advocates beyond local governments. The absence of organized local advocates may make opposition seem greater than it really is. Apparent opposition may serve to intimidate planning committee members and undermine political support for regional planning. Local advocates could serve the very important function of countering or balancing small but vocal opposition to the regional effort.

One of the advantages of a transactive planning process such as this is the potential emergence of strong local advocates for important area resources as well as for regional coordination and management. There is no guarantee, however, that this will occur in a timely fashion. The benefits of local advocacy for regional planning are clear, and the question of who can or will groom local advocates should be considered early in the planning process, certainly before opposition becomes entrenched.

### **Recognize regional communication as a significant outcome.**

An essential element of Georgia's RIR program is the communication required

among local jurisdictions. In the Pine Mountain area, more resistance was demonstrated to the concepts of regional communication and regional review than to any specific elements of the Pine Mountain Ridge RMS. This was true of elected officials as well as private citizens. Some elected officials asserted that they were beholden to their constituents and not people in other counties. They wanted to be responsive to their constituents (avoid needless development delays, red tape, etc.), and they did not want to be accountable to residents of other counties for their actions.

Similarly, private landowners were concerned about the loss of private property rights. Some landowners objected to the RIR as an imposition of additional governmental restrictions without compensation. They also asserted that they did not want to have their development plans reviewed, with possible delays and objections from multiple jurisdictions.

Implementation of a regional plan may require profound changes in the way local governments and private citizens do business. Thus, in a program like the RIR initiative, the substance of a resource management strategy may, in the long run, be secondary to establishing a mechanism for communication among local jurisdictions. Such a mechanism is necessary for progress toward regional coordination and planning. Therefore, maintaining regional communication as a clear and significant goal in developing an RIR is important. Given the compromise in substantive rigor that is possible in this type of planning effort, this goal may be especially important for committee members and advocates who may become discouraged as the management plan seems significantly compromised.

### **Balance competing needs to promote local ownership of the regional plan.**

The RIR process is, by definition, state-imposed. Current national and local senti-

ments do not favor big government or additional regulation. Furthermore, the political context in Georgia demands that regional plans or resource management strategies be, to the extent possible, locally developed. The significance of local participation is highlighted by the fact that implementation of many of the RIR's elements is at the discretion of local jurisdictions.

Thus, for regional plans to be meaningful and implementable, adequate time and resources must be invested up front and throughout the process to ensure appropriate local participation and to foster regional communication. Bringing together diverse interests from multiple jurisdictions, however, has inherent difficulties. The process can be facilitated if the planning committee has clear standing and authority for developing the a plan or resource management strategy. It is particularly important that the planning committee knows from the beginning what is expected of it and within what time frame and has adequate staff support to accomplish its goals.

Although it is critical to invest time and resources to ensure local participation and facilitate regional communication, these efforts must be balanced with the need to complete the planning process in a timely fashion. The Pine Mountain Ridge RIR planning process attempted to ensure local ownership by providing the RMS Committee maximum flexibility in decision making. In retrospect, RIR designation might have been better served by limiting decision choices and expediting the process. In addition, the process depended too heavily on the RMS Committee to meet all planning requirements. In future regional planning initiatives, other means of public outreach, advocacy building, and local government participation will be necessary to expedite the planning process without compromising the critical elements of local ownership and regional communication.

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