

# Metropolitan Government and Governance: A Suggested Research Agenda

by Nelson Wikstrom

More than half a century ago, Charles Merriam wrote in his preface to Victor Jones' classic work *Metropolitan Government* that the adequate organization of modern metropolitan areas is one of the great unsolved problems of modern politics (Jones 1942, ix). Jones, echoing the perspective advanced earlier by Paul Studenski in his equally legendary contribution *The Government of Metropolitan Areas* (Studenski 1930), asserted that the answer to the metropolitan political problem was the establishment of a regional government that would encompass the entire metropolitan area and prove to be more efficient, effective, and resourceful than the usual bewildering maze of local government units.

The metropolitan governmental perspective early on gained the allegiance of practically all scholars of urban politics and held a virtual intellectual monopoly well into the 1960s, as is evident in the widely read statement of Luther H. Gulick, *The Metropolitan Problem and American Ideas* (Gulick 1962), although Jones and most of his colleagues disassociated themselves with the complete merger position over the next half century (Jones 1979).

During the middle portion of this century, the consolidationist perspective not only dominated academic thought, but also provided the impetus for the cause of met-

ropolitan political reorganization. Prestigious groups issued monographs designed to spur campaigns for metropolitan government (Committee for Economic Development 1966 and 1970). Vigorous efforts, often well financed, were mounted on behalf of regional government in many metropolitan areas during this time period, largely utilizing the strategy of city-county consolidation. There was a general failure of metro reformers to realize the potential they envisioned for metropolitan governments. Of the 63 major attempts of metropolitan governmental reorganization between 1947 and 1978, only 18 proved to be successful, largely in smaller areas (Zimmerman 1979). Discouraged by the repeated failure, metropolitan reform advocates lost their zeal and devoted their energies and financial resources to other good government reform causes.

Not only did the ordinary voters in mid-century more often than not frustrate the goals of metropolitan reform advocates, but, in addition, a number of prominent scholars developed a respectable intellectual defense of the "balkanized" nature of local government in the metropolis (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren, 1961; Warren, 1966; Bish, 1971; Bish and Ostrom, 1973). In their opening seminal contribution, three scholars drew upon the concept of a free market

and public choice theory to roundly criticize the consolidationist argument (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961). They argued that it was preferable to have a large variety of local governments in a metropolitan area because it ensured competition between local governments functioning as service providers and the ability of citizens, by "voting with their feet" as they phrased it, to reside in that locality of the region which best met their private and public needs.

Adequate metropolitan organization remains a problem in the United States, but new approaches have appeared during the past several decades that provide progress toward various solutions. A difficulty is that scholarly interest in metropolitan governmental structure and governance has not kept pace. It has been of a reclusive nature, missing from the research agendas of most political scientists and other scholars of urban affairs. Borrowing from the poetic phraseology of David Walker's insightful contribution on metropolitan reform (Walker 1987), the topic of metropolitan governance was the recipient a long Rip Van Winkle-like sleep. However, similar to the proverbial town crier on his repeated rounds, the concern of what should be the nature of governmental structure in our metropolitan areas once again has drawn the attention of a significant segment of academicians and the "relevant publics." This development, undoubtedly is at least partially due to the continued socio-economic decline of our core cities and the persistence of difficult urban problems.

The concern about the need for reshuffling metropolitan governmental structure significantly triggered David Rusk's work, *Cities Without Suburbs* (Rusk 1993), *Citistates*, by Neal R. Peirce (Peirce 1993), Anthony Downs' contribution *New Visions for Metropolitan America* (Downs 1994), and an anthology edited by Henry G. Cisneros

entitled *Interwoven Destinies: Cities and the Nation* (Cisneros 1993).

Rusk argues that for our central cities to prosper, especially in view of their continuing socio-economic deterioration, cities must be able to expand their territorial limits by annexing adjacent suburban areas. Peirce's central argument is that our metropolitan areas must be governed on a regional "citistate" basis in order to compete effectively in the global economy. He notes: "A citistate divided against itself will prove weak and inefficient" (Peirce 1993, 292). Downs proffers that only through a regional governance structure and process can we effectively deal with the various socio-economic problems, such as crime and poverty, inordinately associated with our central cities. In the papers edited by Cisneros, emphasis is placed upon the belief that metropolitanwide strategies of urban revitalization must be implemented if we are to successfully rebuild the economy of our core cities. In addition to these works, a three-part series by Allan D. Wallis published in the *National Civic Review* (Wallis, 1994a, 1994b, and 1994c) helped draw renewed attention by scholars and the "relevant publics" to the topic of metropolitan governance.

### **Metropolitan Government and Governance: A Research Agenda for the Mid-1990s**

I would like to suggest, given its renewed theoretical and practical significance, that metropolitan government and governance in the mid-1990s be given a research agenda. It is important to underscore that such research should not be limited to formal governmental structures, but also include informal and private structures established in the metropolis for facilitating public-private ventures, debating policy, mobilizing political action and coalition building, and delivering services.

On this point, it serves us well to heed the well-honed advice of Vincent Ostrom, Robert Bish, and Elinor Ostrom:

We need to recognize, then, that local government in a democratic society cannot be confined only to what transpires in particular corporate entities or agencies identified as units of government. This is why it may be more useful to refer to governance structures than governments. We can then appreciate that something viewed as a process of government (governance) requires a much larger universe of discourse than do units of governments as such. (Ostrom, Bish, and Ostrom 1988, 212)

As a component of its wide-sweeping regionalism study in the early 1970s, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) undertook a review of the experience of some of the metropolitan governments established by that date (ACIR 1973, 1974). Since the ACIR investigation, with the singular exception of several essays devoted to the experiences of the general-purpose metropolitan governments of Miami (Stowers 1996) and Jacksonville (Swanson 1996) contained in the anthology *Regional Politics*, edited by H.V. Savitch and Ronald K. Vogel (Savitch and Vogel 1996), no in-depth comparative study has been undertaken on the experience of the limited number of metropolitan governments in the United States. Some American experiences have been compared as part of international collections (Barlow 1991; Rothblatt and Sancton 1993).

### **An Appraisal of Metropolitan Government: The First Agenda Item**

As a matter of first priority, our research agenda should encompass a comparative assessment of the relative status of the major metropolitan governments brought about through county modernization and city-county consolidation in the late-1950s

and in the 1960s, most prominently Indianapolis/Marion County, Indiana; Jacksonville/Duval County, Florida; Nashville/Davidson County, Tennessee; and Miami/Dade County, Florida. Questions of research concern include:

- Have metropolitan governments, by taking advantage of economies of scale, provided services more effectively and efficiently? Which services?
- Have they or have they not reduced overall local governmental expenditures and taxes (Grant, 1966; Benton and Gamble, 1984)?
- Have metropolitan governmental structures generally provided adequate political representation, access, and responsiveness to the disadvantaged and minorities, as appears to be the instance in several regions (De Grove 1972; Wilbern 1972)?
- To what degree have metropolitan governments proved to be effective in dealing with economic and social problems?
- Have they been successful in promoting regional economic development in the global economy?

In sum, to what degree have the various metropolitan governments realized the expectations of their advocates, or in a contrary vein, confirmed the initial suspicions of their opponents?

### **Functional Regionalism and Incremental Change: A Second Agenda Item**

A second focus should be on the current extent of functional regionalism in metropolitan areas, instituted through three techniques: intergovernmental contracts; the transfer of a function from one government to another; and the establishment of special districts and authorities. By the term functional regionalism I am simply making reference to the delivery of a service, such as

mass transportation, sewers, trash disposal, or water, by a public or private organization on a regional or semi-regional basis. In a closely related fashion, it would be of profit for us to acquire a much better understanding of the extent to which governmental "privatization" (i.e., government contracting with a private firm) and the use of nonprofit organizations for the provision of services has stimulated functional regionalism.

Past in-depth investigations centering on public service delivery in metropolitan areas have substantiated the extensive utilization by governments of intergovernmental contracts. One of the earliest, a study conducted a quarter of a century ago, found that Los Angeles County, through the "Lakewood Plan," provides a wide array of services, involving approximately 1,500 contracts, to more than 80 municipalities in the county (Coin 1971). Other studies of its widespread use were in the Quad-City metropolitan area of Illinois and Iowa (Friesema 1971), in the Detroit metropolitan area (Marando 1968), and in the Philadelphia region (Williams, Herman, Liebman, and Dye 1965).

An exhaustive inquiry conducted in the mid-70s found that about 75 percent of the core cities and 72 percent of the suburbs were a party to one or more intergovernmental contracts, most involving the provision of water, sewerage disposal and treatment, road maintenance, and public safety (fire and police) mutual aid pacts. Localities entered into intergovernmental contracts in order to achieve economies of scale; and, reflective of their satisfactory experience, only 12 percent of the core cities reported terminating a contract (Zimmerman 1974, 35, 41). More recent evidence indicates that local governments are making increasing use of intergovernmental contracts to meet their public service responsibilities (Shanahan 1991). We need to know how this increased usage influences intergovernmen-

tal cooperation and functional regionalism. Further, we need to better understand which system-maintenance services, such as roads and mass transportation, and lifestyle services, such as public education, seem to be most politically susceptible to the intergovernmental contract approach, and the manner in which the innovative use of this approach might be utilized to deal with the problems of the core city.

Another functional regionalism reform technique, the transfer of responsibility for the delivery of a service from one government to another, has taken place in our metropolitan areas much more so than is commonly acknowledged by scholars of urban politics. This usually results in the service being delivered on a larger areawide basis. In some instances, functional transfers have been mandated by state action, as in Florida where the state shifted the responsibility of tax assessment from the municipal to the county level, and in the case of Minnesota which transferred the administration of welfare services from the cities and towns to the county. The transfer can be voluntary, as a two decades-old study reported that 51 percent of the central cities and 30 percent of the suburbs had *voluntarily* transferred the responsibility of at least one service function to another governmental unit (Zimmerman, 1976).

All of this strongly suggests, of course, that scholars of metropolitan governmental organization need to inventory the pace and degree to which functional transfers have recently taken place in the metropolis, and its significance for functional regionalism. Pertinent research questions include: Which particular services have been most often transferred, and on the basis of what rationale, from a municipal to a semi-regional or regional government? To what degree has the transfer of service responsibilities triggered economies of scale and eliminated duplication of service efforts? And, impor-

tantly, has the transfer of functional responsibilities significantly eased the fiscal condition of core cities and older inner suburbs?

The third functional regionalism tool involves regional special districts. Special districts, inclusive of authorities, are the most numerous and rapidly increasing governmental units in the United States: between 1987 and 1992 the number of special districts spiralled from 29,532 to 33,131, an increase of 12 percent (Bureau of the Census 1992, 2).

Metropolitan special districts, encompassing the entire region or a significant portion thereof, are usually entrusted with a single or several service responsibilities. Metropolitan special districts have been established in about one-half of our metropolitan areas, most prominently in California, Ohio, and Texas. Their functional responsibilities most often include: mass transportation, sewerage disposal, water supply, public housing, hospitals, libraries, swimming pools, pollution control, and airports.

Some scholars of urban governmental organization and politics have been highly critical of the establishment of special districts in metropolitan areas. They have argued that special districts are inherently undemocratic, their creation serves to further fragment the governmental structure of the metropolis and undermine general purpose local governments, and the multiple establishment of special districts in a metropolitan area simply forestalls the organization of a more comprehensive metropolitan government (Martin 1965, 178-179).

The criticisms of special district government are certainly not lacking in merit; however, viewed in a more positive vein, special districts have proved to be especially useful in providing services, like mass transportation, on a regional or semi-regional basis. Jones advanced: "...city and county officials look upon special districts as useful devices by means of which city and county officials

may avoid the creation of a general purpose regional government, shift the cost of a service or regulation to taxpayers outside the county or municipality, and lay the burden of supporting a particular matter 'out of politics' by encapsulating it in an independent single-purpose organization." He concluded: "It is an easy and painless way of eating one's regional cake and having one's local cake too (Jones 1981, 11)."

The positive commentaries in regard to special districts require us to gain a much better sense of their organizational and political nature, service effectiveness, and responsiveness to the community. Some thought should also be given to the manner in which special district government could be utilized to spur metropolitan economic development and innovatively confront social problems.

An influence on these techniques has been the trend of privatization, that is, the contracting of public services to private firms. It has been the object of considerable amount of praise. A study conducted in the mid-1990s found that a significant number of cities utilize the privatization approach for the delivery of a variety of services. Most commonly, these services involve trash collection, streetlight operation, vehicle towing, hospital management, solid waste disposal, street repair, and traffic signal maintenance; indeed, 25 percent of all the cities included in the survey contracted out to private firms all of these services (*New York Times*, May 28, 1995, 9). This may suggest that functional regionalism in the metropolis has become more widespread due to the increasing number of local governments contracting with the same private firm for the provision of a service.

In a similar vein, we know relatively little about the complex relationship between government and nonprofit organizations, especially in regard to the delivery of social services. This void in our knowledge is especially serious because, as well documented by Lester M. Saloman, governments

in the metropolis have historically relied upon, to a significant degree, an assortment of nonprofit organizations for the delivery of social services. Saloman reported that this relationship between local governments and nonprofit organizations is so extensive that local government may be fairly described as the major philanthropist in a wide range of social service areas (Saloman 1987). We may proffer, and it certainly merits our research attention, that nonprofit service organizations with their usual metropolitanwide funding and delivery focus, and privatization with its potential for multiple local contracts with one firm, stimulate a considerable degree of functional regionalism.

In summary, then, I would like to suggest that we need to acquire a much greater understanding of the web of rich governmental and private relationships in the metropolis, especially in regard to the delivery of services, and the extent to which functional regionalism is implemented through intergovernmental contracts, functional transfers, special districts and authorities, privatization, and nonprofit organizations. Too often in our past writing we have described the political life of the metropolis largely through a simple governmental structural focus, rather than through the vantage point of a web of complex structure and process, involving both the private and public sectors. The collection of evidence may well support the belief that in many of our metropolitan areas functional regionalism has become so extensive that it has given rise to a sort of *de facto* metropolitan governmental structure, rendering the quest for traditional metropolitan governmental reform somewhat obsolete and irrelevant.

### **Regional Councils: A Third Agenda Item**

A third topic warranting our scholarly attention centers on the degree to which

regional councils—here defined to include councils of governments, economic development agencies, planning district commissions, and an assortment of other regional agencies—have been successful in promoting intergovernmental cooperation and nurturing a regionwide political perspective, policy process, and political culture in our metropolitan areas. Although the rise of regional councils may be traced back to the 1930s, the great surge in these bodies commenced in the late 1960s because of local and state support, and, most critically, federal monetary and policy initiatives (Wikstrom 1977, 25-49).

Although the impact of regional councils on the politics of the metropolis has been the subject of considerable debate, tangential evidence suggests that regional councils have stimulated and brought into being in many metropolitan areas a semblance of regional political perspective, policy process, and political culture. Indeed, in the Portland, Oregon and Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan areas, the accomplishments of the regional council have been credited with helping to establish a regional organization with significant policymaking approval powers (Abbott 1983; Harrigan and Johnson 1978). Through the employment of in-depth interviews with local political actors we can gain a better insight into the role of regional council in promoting metropolitan governance and a regional political culture.

### **Special Concerns of Special Interests: A Fourth Agenda Item**

Another matter of interest warranting our concern is that of gaining a better understanding of the attitude of the electorate and various interest groups toward the concept of metropolitan government. In the past, proposals to establish a regional government have usually confronted the deter-

mined political resistance of white suburban elected office holders. In a more recent vein, African-American political leaders have registered their strong opposition to metropolitan governmental reform initiatives. In the main, white suburbanites have harbored the perspective that their community government is a "republic-in-miniature" (Wood 1959), eminently capable of meeting their public needs, and have been strongly adverse to reforms designed to politically consolidate their community with the core city. This attitude of political self-sufficiency widely held among suburbanites has been further reinforced by the recent growth of suburban governmental bureaucracy and capacity, documented by G. Ross Stephens (Stephens 1995).

However, recent scattered evidence suggests that the political opposition of white suburbanites and African-American core city political leaders toward metropolitan governance and reform may be moderating. Survey research conducted in the Richmond, Virginia metropolitan area found substantial support among white suburban dwellers for greater cooperation among governments and for the establishment of a limited-purpose metropolitan government, responsible for water, sewer, waste disposal, and mass transportation services (Virginia Commonwealth University 1994). However, legislation facilitating this structural reform was defeated in the state senate. In a similar vein, scholars have observed that many African-American core city political leaders have become more supportive of governmental cooperation in the metropolis and view with favor the establishment of limited purpose metropolitan governmental structures, especially those entrusted with the responsibility of constructing and operating airport and port facilities (Judd and Parkinson 1990). Some political leaders in the African-American community, recognizing the continual economic distress of many core cit-

ies, have reached out into the larger metropolitan region, rather than to preside over, what H. Paul Friesema described some years ago, a "hollow prize" (Friesema 1969). As one political leader volunteered prior to the city-county merger of Jacksonville and Duval County: "I might have been the black mayor, but I would have been only a referee in bankruptcy" (De Grove 1973, 24). More recently, in 1993, the African-American mayor of Memphis, a predominantly African-American city, advocated, because of the declining tax base of his city, the merger of Memphis with predominantly white Shelby County (State 1993). Further, an increasing number of African-American core city political leaders appeared swayed by the argument that a metropolitan government, fairly structured in terms of minority representation, would not be inimical to their political interests, an idea advanced 25 years ago (Hawley 1972). We need to determine the extent to which the above findings are of an isolated nature, or reflect a wider trend throughout the nation among white suburbanites and African-American political leadership of decreasing political opposition to regional governance.

In contrast to this historical resistance toward metropolitan government, business leaders more typically have been in the forefront of promoting metropolitan governance reform proposals. Today many business leaders support the metropolitan governance position, being convinced that only a politically-coordinated metropolis has the sufficient resources to compete effectively in the global economy. Many believe that metropolitan governmental reform proposals have a fair chance of success only where local governmental, business, civic, and media leaders are united on behalf of the cause of political reform (Henderson and Rosenbaum 1973). Business leaders have supported metropolitan governance reform efforts out of their sense of *noblesse oblige*,

their belief that such reforms would result in more economical, efficient, and responsive government, their concern about the erosion of the economy of core cities, and their conviction that viable urban economic development requires that core cities must be more politically integrated into the larger region.

Reflective of the above line of thought, the Chambers of Commerce of Seattle, Detroit, Hartford, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh have adopted a regional membership structure and promoted the upgrading of airport and port facilities on the premise that an improved infrastructure will facilitate the ability of their region to be a more effective competitor in the global economy. In a parallel fashion, the Virginia Chamber of Commerce played a key role in establishing the "Urban Partnership," composed of a coalition of local governments and business interests. The Urban Partnership is dedicated to suggesting innovative policies for confronting urban problems, advancing the cause of metropolitan governance, and promoting a good business climate in metropolitan areas. Similarly, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development (Pittsburgh), Cleveland Tomorrow, and Greater Philadelphia First have pursued educational, economic development, and job training goals designed to marshal human resources, and economic and political assets on a regional basis.

We need to gain a much greater insight into the role and of business leaders and groups in the politics of metropolitan governance and reform. Research concerns include: Which types of business leaders and groups are most attracted to the reform cause? What factors, beside economic self-interest and political ideology, motivate their involvement? What various strategies do they pursue for realizing their goals, especially in terms of coalition building with academic, governmental, and media lead-

ers? And, why have business leaders and groups, especially given their usual well-documented, dominant position in American politics (Lindblom 1977), compiled a poor success record to date in realizing their metropolitan governmental reform goals? In a contrary vein, which business leaders and groups are most apt to oppose metropolitan reform, and for what assortment of reasons? And how do these opponents mobilize opposition to reform efforts?

### **Other Levels of Government: A Fifth Agenda Item**

Our research agenda should include an assessment of the present (and future) degree to which state and federal policies promote metropolitan government and governance. State managerial requirements and public policies have impacted upon governments in the metropolis and promoted (or failed to promote!) metropolitan governance (Florestano and Marando 1981). Since the 1960s, practically all states have provided some kind of funding for regional councils, and, in most instances, have entrusted these bodies with policy review functions (Graham 1985). Eight states—including Florida, New Jersey, and Washington—have established growth management policies which require local intergovernmental cooperation and policymaking in metropolitan areas. In Minnesota and Oregon, the state legislatures significantly enhanced the political stature and policy role of the regional councils established in Minneapolis-St. Paul and Portland metropolitan areas. The most extreme example, of course, of a state restructuring local government in the metropolis, without the direct involvement and approval of the populace, took place in 1969 when the Indiana state legislature established the Indianapolis-Marion County (UNIGOV) metropolitan government.

Given the resurgence of the states and their pivotal role in the federal system, it is important for us to assess whether the states are on the verge of adopting a more aggressive posture in promoting metropolitan governance because of the socio-economic decline of core cities, the spread of socio-economic problems—most notably poverty and crime—throughout the metropolis, and the ever-expanding physical growth of metropolitan regions (Garreau 1991). These developments may serve to convince state legislators of their perceived need to singlehandedly reorganize the governmental structure and political process of the metropolis, casting aside whatever may be citizen democratic preference. At least over the long haul, it is not unreasonable to surmise that the usual primacy of business interests in the state legislatures bodes well for the cause of metropolitan reform and governance.

Commencing in the mid-1960s, federal governmental policies constituted a major force in stimulating metropolitan regionalism (ACIR, 1973, 1974). The Reagan administration viewed with far less favor the role of the federal government in promoting regionalism in metropolitan areas, and most federal support was dismantled during the 1980s.

However, federal governmental policies have once again begun to promote intergovernmental cooperation and metropolitan governance. Examples of these policy initiatives include the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (1991), providing some powers to metropolitan transportation planning organizations (MPOs) for regional transportation planning. In addition, recent amendments to the Clean Air Act (1990) require cooperation between governments in the metropolis in order to comply with federally-mandated clean air standards. Finally, the federal government provides funding to regional councils to de-

sign metropolitanwide prevention and other service programs for individuals afflicted with the AIDS virus. We need to acquire a better understanding of the degree to which present federal managerial requirements, mandates, and public policies promote intergovernmental cooperation and metropolitan governance.

## Conclusion

Given the fact that the vast majority of Americans reside in the metropolis, it is obvious that the political order and stability of the nation is closely intertwined with the overall economic, political, and social well being of our metropolitan areas (Cisneros 1993). We need to get on with the business of gaining a much more sophisticated understanding of the web of governance in the metropolis, the degree to which governmental structure and process needs to be altered, and the manner in which it should be altered, to promote the good life of all of our metropolitan citizens. I believe that by pursuing the research agenda which I have outlined, involving the collection of base economic, political, and social data and the completion of in-depth elite and mass opinion surveys, we would achieve the requisite level of insight about metropolitan governmental affairs; this would allow us to be in a far better position to respond confidently to "the governmental problem of the metropolis," as Merriam phrased it so long ago, and advance some well-developed policy proposals for reinventing metropolitan governance for the dawn of the forthcoming century. ■

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