

# Regional Excellence: Governing Together to Compete Globally and Flourish Locally

**William R. Dodge**

*In the opening scene of Winnie-the-Pooh, Christopher Robin drags Winnie down the stairs behind him, “bump, bump, bump on the back of his head...” It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think about it.*

—Bruce Adams

Community leaders and citizens in all regions are already laying the groundwork for a regional governance renaissance. The actions they are taking now will determine the degree of regional governance excellence each will achieve.

At the heart of this renaissance, we find community leaders and involved citizens dispelling old myths, adopting new truths, and pursuing regional governance excellence.

## **Old Regional Governance Myths**

The old myths about regional governance that are being dispelled by the experiences of community leaders and citizens include:

- we can divide up crosscutting challenges and deal with them community by community;

- we can continue to afford endless flight to the hinterlands;
- we are too rich to have to worry about economic distress, too much of a melting pot to have to worry about ethnic and racial segregation;
- the answer to governing regions is structural; if desperate, we can always create an all-powerful metropolitan government;
- we can address regional governance challenges successfully with ad hoc approaches; and, worst of all
- regional governance is not that important—it is more of an intermittent nuisance than an ongoing necessity.

There is another myth, suggested 30 years ago, by Jane Jacobs in her classic work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, that community leaders and citizens were not ready to govern regions, that they should practice “metropolitan administration” first in our central cities:

Workable metropolitan administration has to be learned and used, first, within big cities, where no fixed political boundaries prevent its use. This is where we must experiment with methods for solving big common problems without, as a corollary, wreaking gratuitous mayhem on localities and on the processes of self-government... If great cities can learn to administer, coordinate, and plan in terms of administrative districts at

understandable scale, we may become competent, as a society, to deal too with those crazy quilts of government and administration in the greater metropolitan areas. Today we are not competent to do so. (Jacobs, 427)

That final old myth—that community leaders and citizens are not up to the task of regional governance excellence—has haunted us for decades and might be the most critical to dispel as our regions hurtle into the 21st century.

## **Emerging Regional Governance Truths**

As the myths are being dispelled, community leaders and citizens are beginning to perceive some important truths about regional governance.

**We are beginning to ask the right questions.** We are at a stage in the evolution of regional governance at which we can begin to ask the right questions. We need to engage in a great deal more experimentation before we get the right answers.

One question, for example, is the one raised by George Latimer, the former mayor of St. Paul, Minnesota, at a National Civic League Conference: “How can we make government and economic forces support people where they live and derive values, how can we bring love of community back into the life of the region?” Another is one that I raised with the Annie E. Casey Foundation in the design of a new jobs initiative: “Is this to be another central city attempt to deal with a distressed community concern, with some regional involvement, or a new type of regional initiative to address a disparity challenge that cuts across poor and rich communities regionwide?”

**We are beginning to develop a regional governance capability and capacity.** Ongoing experimentation in regional problem solving and service delivery is

strengthening community leaders’ and citizens’ capabilities to recognize workable and unworkable approaches. On bad days, this experimentation looks like the most confused polyglot of processes and mechanisms; on good days, one can begin to see a glimmer of governance in the 21st century. The essence of this experimentation is presented in the following chapters of this book.

This experimentation is also developing a cadre of regional governance “pioneers,” individuals and organizations who are willing to assist in designing strategies and supporting initiatives to address regional challenges. These include the “regional entrepreneurs,” who take the lead in addressing regional challenges; the “regional wizards,” who guide regional problem solving and manage regional service delivery; and the “regional champions,” who provide financial, political, moral, and other support for improving regional governance.

**We are beginning to explore some working guidelines and new models for improving regional governance.** John Kirlin, a University of Southern California professor and dedicated regionalist, has suggested “10 emerging ideas that are likely to evolve, and perhaps be combined, into a framework for guiding creation of regional institutions.”

- Responses must be developed within regions, not imposed from a state capital or Washington, D.C.
- Functional fragmentation must be overcome.
- Political accountability must be to the region.
- Regional and neighborhood governance both must be strengthened.
- Plans and ordinances are limited tools.
- Greater use should be made of decision rules and private market mechanisms in governance.
- The public and private sectors must be harnessed together.

- Equitable access and mobility must be provided for those currently disadvantaged.
- Vision is critical.
- Effective governance requires sustained effort. (Kirlin, 124)

Examples of new models for regional governance include David Rusk's elastic cities, Allan Wallis' cross-sectoral alliances or my Strategic Intercommunity Governance Network (SIGNET), all of which are explored in Chapter 4.

***We appear to be ready to modify existing traditions of local governance and make new investments in rebuilding community, locally and regionally.***

Stanford University's John Gardner, former foundation and government official and the founder of Common Cause and the Independent Sector, leads the Alliance for National Renewal movement, designed by the National Civic League, to deal with the "social disintegration" of community. He stresses that community is a regional concern: "It must not be thought, however, that rebuilding of community is necessary only in economically distressed areas. The sense of community may be wholly absent in the privileged family, in the affluent congregation, in the well-heeled suburb, clear consequences in terms of white-collar crime, substance abuse, child neglect and so on." (Gardner, 1994, 377-9)

Gardner is concerned with turning around the mood of the country and creating a "lend a hand attitude" that results in communities that have wholeness incorporating diversity. He also has one of the potentially right questions: "How can the American people be awakened to a sense of purpose, a new vision and a new resolve?" (Gardner, 1994, 377-9)

***We might even be conceding that regional governance needs a legitimacy of its own.*** Regional stewardship is being seen as an expression of our collective self-inter-

est, reflected in the comments of many experts. "Today, national goals are being undercut because the fragmented form of government in metropolitan regions is inherently incapable of approving development patterns which meet the needs of the entire region," according to Henry Richmond of the National Growth Management Leadership Project. (Richmond, 7) Community leaders and citizens "must balance threatening excessive centralization on one pole and ineffective decentralization or narrow specialization on the other," according to Allan Wallis, research director for the National Civic League. (Wallis, 1994, 34) They need to forge "strong bonds of community and social solidarity" that "link the residents of metropolitan areas," according to Anthony Downs. (Wallis, 1994, 44)

The challenge is to "reinvent regionalism;" to nurture, amplify and institutionalize efforts to improve regional governance. (Wallis, 1994, 44) A new constitutional convention, such as was triggered by regional issues in the 1780s, might not be needed, but it might be timely to convene "regional confabs," possibly modeled after a proposal of a few years ago by the National Association of Counties to conduct a county governance congress for all levels of government.

***We might finally have the confidence to pursue excellence in regional governance.*** Alexis de Tocqueville confirmed Americans' "can do" attitude on matters of governance in 1831. While traveling by steamboat down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, he wrote:

There is one thing that America demonstrates invincibly of which I was hitherto doubtful. This is that the middle classes are capable of governing a state. I don't know if they would come off honorably from really difficult political situations, but they are adequate for the ordinary conduct of society, despite their petty passions, their incomplete education, their vulgar manners. Clearly

they can supply practical intelligence, and that is sufficient. (de Tocqueville)

Perhaps community leaders and citizens finally believe they have the “practical intelligence,” the “covenant of strength,” to pursue regional governance excellence, according to Howard Grossman of the Economic Development Council of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Substate regionalism needs the same fervor, trust, and recognition that the Ark of the Covenant has received over time... From a 21st century perspective, the most ambitious and audacious program may be the considerable expansion of substate regionalism, causing public and private sector investments to be truly homogenized. (Grossman, 29)

Even earlier, in one of the first city-states, the citizens of ancient Athens took an oath that stated “I will transmit my city not diminished but greater and better than before.” Today, many community leaders and citizens are developing the confidence to take a similar oath for their regions.

The final, emerging truth is that we need a regional renaissance to achieve regional governance excellence.

## A Regional Renaissance

To transcend the current regional “merry-go-sorry” experience, I believe we need a regional renaissance, region by region, nationally. The original Renaissance, between the middle ages and the industrial revolution, energized a revival of arts and literature, the beginnings of modern science, and the emergence of the nation-state. A regional renaissance, between now and the dawn of the third millennium, would energize community leaders and citizens in each region, inspire the best thinking of academic and other experts, and attract priority national and state as well as local resources.

Most important, a regional renaissance would raise our sights from treating regional governance as an ad hoc *expediency*, challenge-by-challenge, to pursuing regional governance *excellence*, holistically. Instead of responding to each new challenge with still another decision-making mechanism, community leaders and citizens could create a network of mechanisms to address emerging challenges consistent with a vision for making their region work.

Achieving regional governance excellence, I further believe, requires pursuing initiatives to strengthen regional governance in five ways.

Collectively, efforts to improve regional governance need to make it:

- **Prominent—Visible and Important:** How can we make regional governance as important, and visible, as the challenges that it is addressing?
- **Strategic—Future Regional Governance Vision and Action Plan:** How can we develop a consensus future vision for regional governance excellence and collectively pursue strategies of priority initiatives for achieving it?
- **Equitable—Economically, Racially, and Fiscally:** How can we overcome economic disparities and ethnic segregation and the resulting widening gap between rich and poor communities and develop an “equal opportunity playing field” for all citizens and communities regionwide?
- **Empowering—Regional Citizenship and Community:** How can we develop our individual regional citizenship and create an overall sense of regional community that enables us to govern together regionwide?
- **Institutionalized—Regional Problem Solving and Service Delivery:** How can we foster experimentation that results in institutionalizing a regional decision-making capacity to address emerging

challenges? How can we experiment with existing and probably many new regional problem-solving mechanisms, until known and unforeseen crosscutting challenges are addressed in a timely manner? How can we redistribute responsibilities among existing and probably few new regional service delivery mechanisms, until strategies for addressing crosscutting issues are implemented flexibly?

These five components of regional governance excellence can be thought of as the five points of a regional governance star.

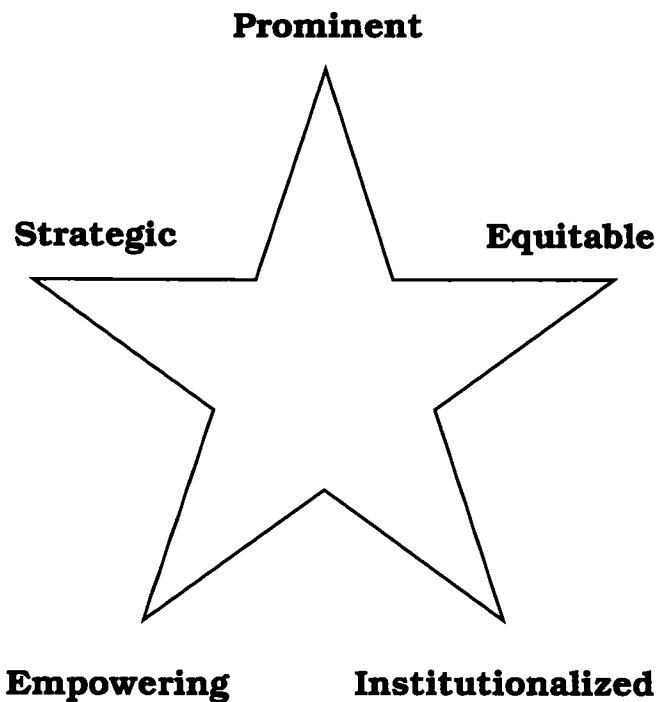
Finally, I suggest two hypotheses concerning launching a regional renaissance.

The first is that the five components need to be considered in approximately the order presented, reversing the all too frequently used process of jumping to institutionalizing some new regional governance mechanism and then picking up the pieces, or even finessing, making it prominent, strategic, equitable, and empowering.

- First, we need to raise the stature of regional governance—its visibility and importance—to attract the attention and resources of community leaders and citizens. We cannot achieve regional governance excellence if it has “second class” status.
- Second, we need to understand emerging regional challenges and our ability to address them and develop a future vision and strategies to guide our efforts

**Exhibit 1**

**The Five Points of Regional Governance Excellence**



to strengthen regional governance. Moreover, we need to assess our performance to determine whether regional decision making improves with each new challenge. Otherwise, we do not know whether our individual efforts contribute to, or detract from, achieving regional governance excellence. We cannot ad hoc our way to regional governance excellence.

- Third, we need to address overcoming intercommunity disparities; otherwise the widening economic, racial, and fiscal gap between rich and poor commu-

nities will be an Achilles heel undermining our collaborative initiatives to strengthen regional governance. We need to create an “equal opportunity playing field” for communities within a region.

- Fourth, we need to build regional citizenship and a sense of regional community; otherwise community leaders and citizens will not support, or breathe life into, initiatives to strengthen regional governance. We need the support of regional citizens to pursue priority initiatives for achieving regional governance excellence.
- Fifth and finally, we need to redirect existing problem-solving and service-delivery mechanisms, create new ones, and tie them together in a network that can address any regional challenge in a timely, flexible, effective manner. We need to institutionalize our capacity to achieve regional governance excellence.

In sum, we need to raise the *status*, design a *strategy*, balance the *scales* and find the *soul* of regional governance, before we tinker with its *structure*.

I am cautioned by John Gardner’s advice that no matter how sound a strategy is for strengthening regional governance, implementation of priority initiatives will depend on taking advantage of the convergence of conditions beyond one’s control. This sage prophet suggests in a letter:

In a lifetime of watching a wide range of social problem solving, I’ve concluded that such problems rarely get solved by an orderly attack at the most logical point. I think one sees a lot of actions on a long ragged front with breakthroughs at often unsuspected spots. There are partial victories, and, with luck, enough to result in an overall victory. But it’s untidy.

The second hypothesis is that any region that designs a consensus vision for the future of regional governance and aggres-

sively pursues initiatives for addressing all five components can improve its regional governance performance and begin to achieve excellence by the turn of the millennium.

Many of the regional governance initiatives selected will probably build upon existing activities. Some of the initiatives will probably address two or more of the components simultaneously. All of the initiatives need proactively to pursue the unique future visions for regional governance excellence developed by community leaders and citizens in each region.

### **Initiatives for Pursuing Regional Governance Excellence**

The next five chapters present regional governance initiative options to consider in a regional renaissance, one set for each component. Collectively, the three dozen initiatives, and hundreds of examples of their application, provide a “cafeteria of ideas” for community leaders and citizens to consider in strategies for achieving regional governance excellence. Each chapter presents:

- background information on each component; and
- detailed explanations of initiative options, including a general description, specific examples of its application, accomplishments, strengths and shortcomings, future potential and contacts for additional information...

Although any of the three dozen types of regional governance initiatives can be considered for implementation as part of a SARGE (strategy for achieving regional governance excellence), some will probably emerge as givens and others will offer debatable choices for achieving regional governance excellence.

More important, community leaders and citizens should select some regional gover-

nance initiatives that break new ground and offer the opportunity for preeminence in regional decision making, to become known as one of a handful of regions, nationally or even internationally, for pursuing particular types of experimentation in regional decision making. The regions that have established this reputation, such as the Minneapolis/St. Paul and Portland regions, are already reaping the returns in economic development and a high quality of life.

On the following exhibit is a regional excellence dozen, any combination of which, I believe, can make a region preeminent for its regional governance. ■

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This article includes excerpts from Chapter 2, "A Future for Regional Governance: A Regional Renaissance" and Chapter 9, "Putting It All Together: Achieving Regional Governance Excellence," from *Regional Excellence: Governing Together to Compete Globally and Flourish Locally* (1996. DC: National League of Cities). The book is available from the National League of Cities Publications Center (301/725-4200).

## Exhibit 2

# Regional Excellence Dozen: Regional Governance Initiatives to Make Regions Preeminent

### Prominent

Create the critical mass of activities needed to capture the attention of community leaders and citizens and make regional governance important to them.

1. Sponsor an annual Regional Excellence Day (Prominent #5): Keep building community leader and citizen interest in regional governance with an annual celebration, including activities such as presenting regional governance awards for outstanding performance (Prominent #4), reporting on progress in implementing regional governance initiatives (Strategic #4), holding open houses at regional gov-

ernance mechanisms, sponsoring dialogues on emerging regional challenges, and recruiting community leaders and citizens to work on regional projects.

### Strategic

Maintain momentum in improving regional governance, systematically.

2. Institutionalize the SARGE process (Strategic #2): Create an ongoing capacity to develop, implement, monitor, and update the Strategy for Achieving Regional Governance Excellence (SARGE), including securing the pledges of community leaders and

citizens to pursue priority regional governance initiatives (Strategic #3), providing regular reports on the state of regional governance (Strategic #4), and creating regional governance funds/foundations (Strategic #5).

### **Equitable**

Educate community leaders and citizens on intercommunity disparities and reverse the widening service inequities, economic distress, and racial segregation among communities.

3. Offer regional interdependence dialogues for all community leaders and citizens regionwide (Equitable #1): Educate small groups of citizens from different communities across the region on the threats and opportunities of regional interdependence and recruit graduates as facilitators for the next round of small groups; recruit a coalition of academic, community, and religious groups to keep sponsoring new rounds of small groups until they are offered to all community leaders and citizens regionwide.
4. Combine regional tax sharing and service-delivery modifications to guarantee basic public services to citizens regionwide (Equitable #2): Generate adequate regional revenues, such as sharing some of the increased tax revenues resulting from new development, to guarantee basic public services in distressed communities; simultaneously, require service modifications, such as joint delivery by smaller distressed communities or between affluent and distressed communities, to assure effective use of the resources.

5. Combine intercommunity linkage projects, shared development of regional projects and urban growth boundaries to create economic opportunities for all communities regionwide (Equitable #3): Develop linkage projects between affluent and distressed communities, such as offering mobility to jobs in the former and redeveloping parcels in the latter; share benefits of regional employment centers and shopping malls across impacted communities; and establish urban growth boundaries to foster development, especially in distressed communities; overall, create an "equal opportunity playing field."

6. Offer affordable housing to create mixed income communities regionwide (Equitable #4): Require affordable housing in new housing developments, including subsidized units for the very poor, and convert public housing projects to mixed income projects, or tear them down.

### **Empowering**

Develop regional citizenship, foster intercommunity relationships, and empower citizens in regional decision making.

7. Broaden regional leadership programs into regional citizenship programs (Empowering #1): Broaden the curriculum of regional leadership programs to include followership and citizenship skills; open up participation to more community leaders and citizens; and channel graduates into assisting regional decision-making mechanisms and implementing SARGE regional governance initiatives.

8. Create ongoing "sister community" relationships between affluent and distressed communities regionwide (Empowering #4): Arrange sister community relationships between pairs of communities to exchange cultural and other groups, participate in regional interdependence small-group discussions, and pursue joint activities in each other's communities, with the support of corporate, academic, and other partners.

9. Establish citizen advisory boards or elect citizen representatives to regional governance mechanisms (Empowering #5): Either establish citizen advisory boards to review and comment on plans, budgets, and other actions of individual regional problem-solving and service-delivery mechanisms or directly elect citizen representatives to an empowered regional planning council (Problem-Solving #1), regional alliance (Problem-Solving #5), or regional planning and service district (Problem-Solving/Service-Delivery #3) that has authority to develop regional plans, set urban growth boundaries, and possibly deliver regional services.

### **Institutionalized**

Provide the range of regional decision-making mechanisms needed to address regional challenges in a timely and effective manner.

10. Create at least one effective public, private, academic, and civic regional problem-solving mechanism (Problem-Solving #1-4): Each sector needs

an effective regional mechanism to educate its members and develop positions on regional challenges as well as take the lead in addressing regional challenges, such as a regional planning council, regional chamber of commerce, or growth association, college or university regional affairs research institute, or public service program and regional civic organization; similar mechanisms could be created for labor, religious, and other sectors.

11. Institutionalize the capacity to launch regional alliances to address regional challenges (Problem-Solving #5): Build the capacity to turn to an existing regional problem-solving mechanism to sponsor a regional alliance representing all sectors of the region or create one or more ongoing regional alliances to address particular types of regional challenges as they emerge; expand the supply of regional "pioneers"—regional entrepreneurs to initiate regional alliances, regional wizards to guide their problem-solving processes, and regional champions to support the implementation of priority initiatives (Empowering #1).

12. Create a regional service-delivery coordinating group (Service-Delivery #5): Convene regional service-delivery mechanisms regularly to guide implementation of new regional services and develop cooperative arrangements for delivery of existing regional services; such a group could be free-standing, attached to a regional planning council or regional alliance, or be part of a regional planning and service district.