

Shenzen and the Art of Regional Consensus Building

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The challenge of building a cohesive regional community capable of metropolitan-wide decision making is the governance Rubik's Cube. Bringing together multiple local governments, special districts, business organizations, and other interests over a complex metropolitan region only happens when there is a vital common threat or opportunity. It also happens when required by the federal or state governments.

Currently, the public favors less government, and when they feel government is necessary, they want it close to them. Citizens prefer decision making that takes place in their living rooms, their neighborhoods, or possibly on their talk radio shows. City hall or the county courthouse become reluctant alternatives. The state capitol or the Washington beltway are perceived as remote as Tadjikistan's capital city of Dushanbe.

Of course, a region is not in your living room. So support for appropriate regional decision-making processes is difficult to muster. Creating a new level of government or regional governance mechanism is a challenge. When it happened recently in the Puget Sound region—through a public vote we created an entity to organize, build, and run an expanded public transit system—the notion only received popular support because it became difficult to return to your living room from your place of work. The problem touched people and the solution was understood to be regional. It took a

threat—fear of gridlock—to galvanize support for a regional solution.

Business Acumen

The major local constituency for metropolitan decision making is often the business community. In Greater Seattle, companies like Boeing have plants and offices throughout the three counties encompassing the region. This requires the movement of people and goods and gives Boeing's corporate leadership a regional perspective. Such a viewpoint is further enhanced when the company is international and its executives view the region from overseas. Because of this, internationally-oriented businesses such as banks, large retailers, and transportation and distribution companies understand the reality of a regional economy.

For everyone else, it is hard to imagine a march on the nation's capital demanding requirements. No groundswell from the general public is likely to emerge for regional decision making. It is my presumption that the current political complexion of Congress and the legislatures will not lead to a fountain of new regional planning requirements even if they might force fiscal prudence.

If metropolitan decision making will not be ordained from above, then the only way to pursue regional cooperation is by finding common interests within our own region. As the outgoing mayor of Seattle, Norm Rice,

says: "...these alliances will (not) form from some spontaneous flash of regional civic inspiration. These alliances will only be born of mutual concern and commitment and the political will to search together for answers to our common challenges." The need or nudge to do this may come from the globalization of our economy.

The Greater Seattle area has developed a wide variety of mechanisms and organizations that assist in building civic leadership and implementing a metropolitan agenda. The focus of this article is the Intercity Study Mission Program organized by the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce in cooperation with the Trade Development Alliance of Greater Seattle.

The Trade Alliance—a partnership of the Chamber, the City of Seattle, Port of Seattle, King and Snohomish County governments, and organized labor—promotes the Greater Seattle area internationally for trade and business. The premises for the Intercity Study Missions are that:

- our region can learn from what other regions throughout the world are doing;
- regional leadership keeps changing and requires an ongoing process of education; and
- sending civic leaders out of town together is a good tool for fostering regional civic cooperation.

The chamber currently organizes two study missions each year, with both attracting over 70 delegates. One trip is domestic and the other, planned by the Trade Alliance, is international. The domestic missions in recent years have focused on how various communities have built technology-based economies. This has led to visits to Boston, the Silicon Valley, Austin, and the Research Triangle in North Carolina with prominent mission leaders, including Bill Gates Sr., chair of the Chamber's Technology Alliance, and Richard McCormick, president of the University of Washington.

The international Intercity Study Missions—which began in 1992—have all been built around the same theme, "A Competitive Region in a Global Economy." From the trips, our civic leaders have learned that we need better metropolitan decision making and that the success of regional economies depends on the sophistication of the local business and government in understanding the global economy and how it impacts their business sectors. Our leaders take back an understanding that regional decisions must be made on investments in people and infrastructure to order to enhance competitiveness. In addition, the international study mission program strives to raise the sophistication of Greater Seattle's leadership in the strategies of our customers and competitors.

Early Missions

The international study missions were the brainchild of former Chamber President George Duff, who used them as a vehicle to build improved relations with the City of Seattle's government. The first trip was to Baltimore in 1982 and was followed by nine domestic trips. The first visit changed the mayor's position on the siting of our convention center.

The goals of civic relationship building and civic education were broadened in 1992 when the first international trip brought a delegation of over 70 people to Europe (Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Stuttgart). The purpose of this visit was to better understand what was happening in the global economy and how trade-dependent communities positioned themselves. The model for the Trade Alliance came from organizations in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. The trip provided an opportunity for delegates to examine that model at first hand.

The overseas Intercity Study Missions have allowed the addition of a fourth dimension, side business meetings. In the 1995

trip to London and Bristol, a lunch was arranged between the respective leaderships of the two regions' biomedical industries. Mayor Norm Rice of Seattle arranged another special meeting with key leaders of Britain's effort to privatize the electrical utility industry.

Perhaps the primary benefit of these study missions is the opportunity for our local leadership to view our region from thousands of miles away and through the eyes of other cultures. What we find is that our local parochial views are lost when we discover people think our city is a few miles from San Francisco or that our real name is Boeing. Our leadership finds that nobody in Hanoi or Bristol knows or cares that Seattle's north boundary is at 145th street or that the county line is 205th street. We quickly recognized that success or failure internationally occurs for the entire economic region, not for some artificial subset. We will sink or swim together. We discovered that, whether we like it or not, the brand name for the region is the central city. A mission can be a humbling experience for a parochial local booster.

All of the overseas Intercity Study Missions (Europe, 1992; Kansai region of Japan, 1994; Hong Kong, 1996; Bristol and London, 1997; and this year, Singapore, 1998) examined why each of these cities and regions is successful. We asked: what can we learn about their strategies and organizations, programs and planning, successes and failures? We found the role of government varies widely from country to country. We have been impressed by how the economic health of the community is the number one priority and drives resource decisions in most of the regions. These societies develop an economic strategy and it has been instrumental to how they do business. In other words, our leaders learned from what other international regions are doing.

Seattle area civic leaders examined the Amsterdam public transit system, its intermodal terminal, and its excellent airport connections. The Port of Rotterdam provided the delegation the opportunity to see the world's largest port complex and learn how the port strategically plans for the future based upon maritime trends. In Germany, the delegation traced a child through the German apprentice system. Hong Kong presented to our delegation its strategic planning for tourism, while in Osaka we saw the development of a huge science city.

The mission to London and Bristol focused upon regional economic strategic planning. Both the Greater London and Bristol regions have developed cooperative partnerships that developed strategic plans. The delegation had the opportunity to examine the value of the effort, the types of partnerships formed, and the content of the plans. Although the social systems are different, the analysis during our visit furthered a similar effort in strategic planning in our region.

Greater Cooperation

All of these international Intercity Study Missions led to greater cooperation within our region on a variety of projects and initiatives. By finding the common interest of competing in the global economy, our region built a mechanism for regional cooperation and planning. On the missions are businesses drawn from throughout the three counties encompassing Greater Seattle. Government leaders on the trips come from various city and county governments as well as from the Port of Seattle.

Participants all learn by seeing first hand what other regions around the world are doing to remain competitive. They get to know each other better and bring back projects and ideas that they work on together. The Intercity Study Missions are one

of the subtle underpinnings of our region's success.

These missions also bring our leadership together in unexpected ways. During the Hong Kong mission, we made a side trip across the border to the Chinese city of Shenzhen. We were required to pass through two checkpoints: the first to clear our passports and the second, a quarter mile further down the road, to hand in a separate form. After a discussion with the guard at the second checkpoint, our driver steered the bus to the side of the road and walked back toward the first building a quarter mile away. As time passed, our civic leadership began to believe they would spend their final days in this no-man's land between Hong Kong and China.

This is civic relationship building at its finest, built around a common urge to

strangle the organizer. They failed to see the value of learning about the urban sprawl of Hong Kong. Luckily the driver returned with the proper "chops" on the forms, and we, fortified by the camaraderie born of common distress, were off to Shenzhen. ■

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Visit the Trade Alliance web site at: <http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/business/tda/tda.htm>