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Challenges ahead for US regional planning governance

Challenges of governance complicate regional planning in the United States. With a backdrop of the emergence of new regional planning realms of climate change, homeland security, and shrinking regions, this paper outlines the nature of US regional planning governance challenges and its potential governance solutions. Numerous general and specific institutions shape US regional planning practice and set it apart from regional planning elsewhere. Regardless of the organisational structure and rules of regional planning, regional planners must address three governance questions for each planning situation: by what authority, exercised by whom, and in what territory? In the end, the quality of regional planning rests in the quality of regional planning governance.

Challenges of governance complicate regional planning in the United States. Unlike planning for a single jurisdiction – whether a small town, large state, or nation – regional planning entails multiple independent units, each with power to plan and act for part of the whole. Although autonomous entities may have a common interest in a territory, they often have different preferences, capacities and perspectives on the nature and means of addressing planning challenges. The challenge of regional planning is to devise unified goals and standards, manage resources, make and enforce collective decisions, determine fair and efficient processes for getting along and resolving disputes, and steward the shared space sufficiently well to keep it viable and intact for generations to come. In short, regional planning is governance.

In this essay, I take stock of regional planning governance in the US. Regional planning governance has long waxed and waned between centralised and decentralised power. Three emerging planning realms – climate change, homeland security, shrinking regions – demand region-scale attention, yet their management confronts obstacles of regional planning governance, making obvious solutions hard to achieve. One influence is US governance institutions, the norms, rules, and regular practices shaping regional planning practice and setting it apart from regional planning elsewhere. From these societal conventions come varied approaches to US regional planning governance. Regardless of the 'structural how' of regional planning, however, regional planners must address three governance questions for each planning situation: by what authority, exercised by whom, and in what territory?

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The long arc and wide reach of regional planning governance

Over time, the pendulum of regional planning governance in the US has swung between local entities holding the strongest legal cards to voluntarily address – or not – a regional problem, and state or federal governments asserting their power to mandate or use incentives to tackle region-scale issues.

In a most general overview (see Foster, 2001 for elaboration), centralised power was the norm in colonial times with governors, constables and justices of the peace managing the large-scale economic, legal, fiscal, diplomatic and service realms of the largely unsettled colonial territory. As settlements proliferated and dispersed geographically, governors retained powers over major infrastructure – canals, bridges, ports – but readily ceded governing power over daily tasks to colonial sub-units – counties, towns, villages – the imminent nation's founding local governments.

The pendulum swing to local control over governance accelerated through the 1800s as the former colonial – now state – governments enthusiastically incorporated local governments, then granted them considerable powers to annex, tax, plan, spend, borrow, and operate largely without direct state interference. In the denser metropolitan regions, regional planning via intergovernmental cooperation – and consolidation and annexation in celebrated cases in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago, and New York City – was a necessity for managing cross-border issues such as crime, public health, 'poor relief' and utilities. None the less, local governments retained much confidence and control over local futures.

Amid intensive urban expansion in the latter part of the 1800s and the first three decades of the 1900s, local governments solidified their powers of self-determination in part by tolerating the relatively non-threatening regional release valves of single-function services districts – the Metropolitan (Boston) Water District founded in 1895 is one such example – newly empowered urban counties, and the morphing of elite-led city planning associations into regional planning associations.

Starting with the Great Depression of the 1930s and continuing to the 1990s, the courts, states and federal government chipped away at the powers of local governments. This half-century 'quiet revolution' in planning (Bosselman and Callies, 1971) and public affairs (Derthick, 1999), kindled by rapid and extensive post-war suburbanisation, saw the re-assertion of federal and state authority and centralised regulations over virtually every service realm, including housing, transportation, education, utilities, the environment, land use, infrastructure and social services.

Since 1990, the pendulum has hovered between local interests organising as property rights, wise use, and taxpayer watchdog activists, and regional coalitions advocating 'common ground' priorities from regional equity to growth management. Recognition of the nation's – and of many regions' – sharply divided voter bases

coupled with record low trust in government have spawned a pragmatic 'quieter revolution' in planning (Mason, 2008). Characterizing quieter revolution planning are cross-sector, cross-function, cross-border partnerships, collaborative decision-making and recourse to citizen-initiated ballot measures and referenda.

As we enter the second decade of the new century, three emerging regional planning realms – climate change, homeland security and shrinking regions – are putting new twists on longstanding challenges of regional planning governance.

Three emerging realms

Climate change

As regions anticipate a warmer environment and with it more volatile weather, sea level rise, lake level decline, greater risk of flooding, beach erosion, urban heat waves, altered distribution of animals and plants and threats to biodiversity and agribusiness, the wisdom of deliberate planning and action is clear. While the scope of climate change requires global and national response, local and regional planners cannot wait for higher-level action before formulating sub-national mitigation and adaptation efforts (Wheeler, 2008).

Climate change raises two governance dilemmas. First, mitigating climate change poses a classic free-rider problem. Provided everyone else does the heavy lifting – at the household level using fluorescent bulbs, driving fuel-efficient cars, lowering the hot water heater and carpooling, and at the national level reducing dependency on greenhouse gas-emitting energies – then we need not take such actions. A typical response to free-rider problems is for an authority to compel action, as when governments command behavioural changes (limits on water use, greenhouse gas emissions, higher fuel efficiency standards), offer incentives for behavioural changes (assistance to developing countries, higher petroleum taxes, tax credits for energy-saving devices) or undertake moral suasion ('Be a Steward of Your Planet Today and For Future Generations to Come!' as the South Florida Regional Planning Council put it in 2007).

Secondly, climate change wrestles with the ultimate boundary dilemma. Because warmer air and its effects respect no political borders, climate change is inherently global. Although transnational negotiations recognise this reality, making and implementing a comprehensive international treaty on climate change given widely varied national interests is complicated, protracted and contentious. Some wonder whether sub-international regional agreements might be preferable and more likely (Keohane and Victor, 2010).

Regional planning responses to climate change have been predictably uneven, a product in part of indecisive higher-level policy, changing perceptions of public risk, unresolved scientific debate and the uneven implications of climate change effects

(Leiserowitz, 2005; Strassel, 2009). A 2007 study of six urban regions – London, Halifax, New York, Boston, Seattle and Vancouver – revealed the significant challenges of advancing awareness and data analysis to policy reform and action (Clean Air Partnership, 2007). Among the findings was an understated conclusion that 'getting agreement and action [...] will require agreement and coordination among different departments or levels of government' – 101 cities and towns in Boston, 59 departments in New York City government, etc. – 'which is often not easy' (63).

Homeland security

Risk and vulnerability are likewise foundational concepts for public safety, a realm recreated in the post-9/11 world. Protecting residents, structures and habitats from natural, environmental and economic disasters involves regional expertise in emergency management, disasters, public safety, intelligence, utilities, infrastructure, technology and environmental science.

Cross-border coordination and communication are the ultimate governance tests. Homeland security planning is federated, with national infrastructure protection plans implemented through a network of state, regional and local protection plans. Because money for addressing risk and reducing vulnerabilities flows from federal sources according to the presence of critical infrastructure and resources – dams, power stations, airports, chemical plants and the like – homeland security competition is fierce across jurisdictions and activity levels vary (DHS, 2009).

Notably, while homeland security requires thinking at the broadest scale, the core unit of analysis and input is local. The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) aggregates information from local cells to build programmes at regional, state and national scales. As with any highly decentralised network, the challenge of aggregation encounters cross-border considerations. On the premise that the whole is only as strong as its weakest link, cooperation and partnership are essential, as are two-way information flows, cross-border coordination, inter-operable communications systems, networked transportation and utilities, and alertness that disaster events have 'cascading disruptive impacts' (DHS, 2009, i). While technical capacity is a must, cross-border governance capacity is fundamental.

Shrinking regions

Only in recent years has the challenge of shrinking regions, long on the radar of international scholars (Shrinking Cities International Research Network, 2010), moved to centre stage in the US. Decades of urban growth has conditioned most US urbanites to believe that population, land consumption and economic production went in one direction: up. While certain regions, particularly those whose economies relied heavily

on manufacturing, concentrated on economic development planning, for most others regional planning understandably emphasised growth management, development controls, facility siting and land conservation.

The phenomenon of the shrinking metropolitan region – between 2000 and 2009, a stunning 50 of the US's 366 metropolitan regions lost absolute population[1] (US Census Bureau, 2010) – brings new regional governance and planning challenges. The first is achieving a regional perspective on a challenge experienced locally. Places losing population, typically the central city, inner-ring suburbs and in some cases outlying rural communities, confront fiscal challenges, vacancy, property abandonment and service needs (Kromer, 2009). Their needs and views may differ sharply from those in receiving suburban and exurban jurisdictions where population shifts affect taxes, schools, infrastructure, services and traffic. Uneven experiences – some places growing, others declining – hamper a unified government response, with individual jurisdictions focused inward and counties or regional authorities tasked by default as regional planners.

That regional shrinkage is occurring against the backdrop of a projected additional 130 million US inhabitants by 2050 (Passel and Cohn, 2008) increases the pressure on governance. Regions with sound governance capacity and relationships will fare better implementing strategic plans, forging strategic intra- and inter-regional partnerships, and framing the conversation for region-scale understanding and action. Those with inferior governance capacity, including weak relationships with state and national governments with largesse, may lose out in the inevitable competition for inhabitants, infrastructure and investment. Leadership at all levels and across sectors – regional civic organisations are already taking the lead in macro-regional planning (America 2050, 2010) – will be essential.

The challenge of regional planning governance

The necessity of addressing climate change, homeland security and regional shrinkage at scales larger than a single town or city is obvious. In the US, however, the means to plan regionally are constrained.

[1]   A unique case due to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Metropolitan Area leads the list with a decline of 9.6 per cent since 2000. Numerically, the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area lost the most residents over the period, a decline of over 76,000 followed by the Cleveland Metropolitan Area's loss of nearly 57,000 people. Most of the declining regions are in the industrial heartland of the northeast and Midwest, although a few, including Wichita Falls, Texas, Danville, Virginia, and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, are in the south.

The problem

At the crux of the regional planning governance problem is a territorial mismatch between the scale of a regional problem and the scale of a political organisation to address those problems. Regional problems transcend local political borders, causing externalities and generating coordination problems that defy solution by a single local unit.

The challenge of matching region-scale management to region-scale problems in the United States might be trivial but for a legal reality. Under the US federal system, legal authority is structured at three levels: national, state and local. The US Constitution divides authority between the federal and state levels, outlining federal powers in the Constitution and its amendments and reserving to the states all powers not specifically delegated to the federal level. Through state-enabling laws and charters, states in turn may delegate authority and powers to local governments – municipalities, townships, counties, districts. Whether one views the amount of delegated local planning authority as too little (Barron et al., 2004; Frug, 2010) or too much (Rusk, 1999), the practical point is that local authorities tend to hold it dearly and cede it sparingly.

Given strong and fiercely guarded local planning power (even when regional residents and planners agree on the benefits of region-scale management), the necessity to collaborate on regional matters, the importance of reaching regional consensus on goals and priorities, the need to coordinate service delivery and resolve intra-regional disputes, the value of planning strategically for infrastructure and environmental assets, and the wisdom of presenting a common front to higher-level governments, in practice creating a strong regional planning governance system is hard to do.

The solution

In theory, the solution to the regional planning governance problem is as simple as the challenge is difficult. For every regional planning problem a society could create and empower a regional decision-making entity with boundaries neatly matched to the territory affected. The resulting regional jurisdiction would be free of internal borders, and thus of cross-border coordination and externality problems. This solution implies a system of overlapping, problem-delineated entities each addressing a particular regional issue. In fact, regions do often rely on districts and authorities managing a particular issue such as flood control, public transit or sewer provision. In addition, independent local governments often collaborate, more or less formally, to tackle common problems. Ad-hoc partnerships address irregular regional issues, such as a military base closing.

Problems with the solution

However, many regions, even while they sport one or more regional planning authorities and ad-hoc partnerships, stop shy of fully embracing this simple solution. Why should this be?

One answer lies in the fact that having multiple problem-based jurisdictions simply replicates the burdens of multiple local jurisdictions. Functional silos, each with authority over just one element of the regional system – water, sewer, transit, housing, air quality – create coordination and externality problems of their own. Moreover, the territory for many regional issues, including metropolitan growth boundaries, coastal zones and social services, may shift continually in response to demographic, economic, and environmental trends.

There is also a political impediment to forming and empowering regional authorities. Regional power must be delegated or ceded from other units – federal, state or local – each with interests not necessarily compatible with a strong regional governance outcome. Regional planning governance thus confronts intergovernmental balances of power.

The US federal government routinely asserts the national interest in state and local planning. Federal agencies including the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Transportation and Army Corps of Engineers intervene in housing finance, national park formation, clear air regulations, construction of Interstate highways and the like. Each federal intervention requires negotiating state and local interests, determining whether the issue is sufficiently ripe for federal intervention (Whitfield and Hart, 2000).

States encounter a similar dynamic in supplanting local government authority with their own power or that of a regional authority. Some, including Hawaii, Vermont, Florida, Oregon, Washington, New Jersey, Georgia and Maryland, have been famously active in centralising powers at the state level or creating strong regional planning bodies (DeGrove, 2005). Other states have been reluctant to supersede local planning authority aggressively, rather encouraging local entities to craft local solutions to regional challenges.

Local interests likewise need a compelling motivation to cede power to a regional authority voluntarily. Even when local actors willingly collaborate – through a council of governments, metro mayors caucus or intergovernmental service agreement – relations may sunder when local interests conflict with regional ones (Greenblatt, 2008).

Regardless of the direction of empowerment, regional planning activity requires sign-off from public-sector entities. A regional planning agenda without sanction from voter endorsement or approval from elected or appointed bodies empowered to act on the community's behalf is destined to be a toothless tiger, the chronic lament of regional planning governance in the United States.

The institutions of regional planning governance

Institutions, a society's rules and regularised practices, norms and values shape regional planning governance. Although seemingly stable and established, institutions are ever-changing and contested, the object of often slow-moving yet sometimes stunningly abrupt reform.

Two types of institutions matter. *General institutions* are the codes and cultural norms shaping regional planning in the US and distinguishing it from planning in societies with different general institutions. *Specific institutions* reflect the history, heritage, economy, political culture, geography and social relations differentiating one place from another within the United States. These institutions help account for why regional planning governance in Washington, Texas or Virginia – or, for that matter, Seattle and Walla Walla, Austin and Lubbock, and Arlington and Roanoke – exhibits finer grain variation in planning structure, process and outcomes.

General institutions

At first glance, the 'general institutions' listed in Figure 1 are lofty abstractions far removed from everyday planning practice. Yet such institutions answer familiar questions of US regional planning such as: why doesn't the US practice national spatial planning and regional redistribution as in Europe; why do citizen groups and activists have such leeway to influence planning outcomes in the US; why is natural resource management in the US so different from resource management in Japan; why don't state governments curb powers of local governments – they're state creations, after all – and install regional governments for metropolitan areas (Canada does that … why not the US)?

Consider the fundamental imprint of US institutions on regional planning.

* The nation's formation as a democracy – as opposed to a monarchy or theocracy – prioritises government by the people, rule by majorities, equal status under the law and respect for (plentiful) individual voices. Civic engagement is a widely respected democratic ideal. Planning efforts and resource allocation decisions

Figure 1 General institutions of US regional planning governance

democracy	rule of law
civic engagement	federalism and state's rights
equal opportunity, fairness	dispersed and divided authority
liberty, individualism, independence	checks and balances
private property rights	localism, home rule

typically require public hearings, direct election of policymakers, citizen participation, and sometimes a popular vote.

- Values of equal opportunity, fairness, independence and liberty protect the rights of individuals to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. The 5th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution guarantee equal protection under the laws, and explicitly prohibit the taking of 'life, liberty or property' without due process. These private property rights and protections, while considerable compared to those of other societies, are not absolute. There are limits on individual freedoms in favour of the common good. Police powers, zoning laws, environmental regulations, the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, eminent domain provisions and other rules bound what individuals can and cannot do.

- Recourse to the courts itself – a familiar battleground and venue for planning reform – is supported by the rule of law. As a nation of 'laws, not men', the United States uses legal documents – national and state Constitutions, charters, bodies of law – to express the rules of society and balance and safeguard order and liberty. Planning rests on laws protecting and regulating property, individual and group behaviours, and government exercise of power. Laws identify and protect certain species and habitats, grant easements and establish heritage areas, provide for the declaration of disaster areas and, internationally, the ratification of treaties affecting global resources. Although debate endures over the substance and interpretation of laws – debate itself reflecting core values of democracy – the premises of law-making and enforcement are paramount.

- The twin philosophies of federalism and state's rights support experimentation in 50 'laboratories of democracy'. Hard-won compromise in drafting the US Constitution ensured state sovereignty within a federal system. That the states were colonies with identity and traditions decades before the nation formed provided a basis for what eventually became 50 mini republics. With 50 states come, conceptually, 50 ways to do something. Regional planning is one such something, and its state variations highlight a range of interests and priorities.

- Federalism also implies divided authority and checks and balances. The hierarchical court system, enabling second chances before justices at state courts, appeals courts, the federal bench, and ultimately the Supreme Court, reflects at once a national caution and confidence about democracy. For regional planners, divided authority compels regional entities to aggregate authority from federal, state, and local entities, and separates planning, implementation, and enforcement powers across planning agencies. A council of governments may develop a regional plan, for instance, with individual localities implementing, non-governmental groups monitoring and state governments enforcing the plan.

- Divided authority also inclines US governance toward decentralised authority. Values of localism and home rule, including protections from state and federal

intervention in local affairs, are embedded in State Constitutions and local government charters. This does not imply vertical equity. Higher-level government may overcall local rules, as happens in designated coastal zones and historic districts, and in the trumping of national values – for environmental protection, say – over state and local preferences. Still, relative to other nations and systems, US local governments enjoy strong powers to control their planning.

National institutions help account for why regional planning happens differently in the US than elsewhere. The 27-nation European Union, for example, reflects its aims of 'peace, prosperity and freedom' and 'unity in diversity' in institutions of resource harmonisation, economic integration, and common policies on sustainable development, security and competitiveness. Regional planning entails spatial planning, regional cohesion policies (redistribution to strengthen weaker parts of the union and narrow intra-regional disparities) and regional competitiveness (reinforcing assets and networks with global competitive positioning). In contrast, the US federal government does scant spatial planning and eschews overtly redistributive inter-regional aid.

Within North America, institutional variations differentiate US regional planning from that of its northern neighbour, Canada. Both nations are federal systems with divided authority and both share a common foundation of democracy and civic engagement. Yet important institutions vary. The Canadian Constitution gives considerable power to the provincial level, including control over land, forests, water, minerals and other provincial resources (Hodge and Robinson, 2001). Only the province may set up regional planning agencies within its territory; the federal government must negotiate with provincial officials to establish national entities. The 'relative political dominance of the provincial government in local policymaking under the Canadian federal system' leads to 'more robust metropolitan governmental and planning institutions in Canada than in the United States' (Rothblatt and Sancton, 1998, 498). Among the differences are the more frequent mandatory review of local plans by regional authorities and the high prevalence of regional tax base sharing in Canada relative to the US.

Studies contrasting the US and Canada cite political and cultural institutions for bi-national differences. Higher levels of local political fragmentation in the US versus Canada (Goldberg and Mercer, 1986; Rothblatt and Sancton, 1998) and 'sharply different organizing principles' (Lipset, 1990, 225) reflected in an ethos of competitive individualism and egalitarianism in the US and an emphasis on group rights and benefits in Canada also help explain stronger regional planning in Canada versus the US. The merger of six Toronto jurisdictions in 1997 into an amalgamated City of Toronto, accomplished by provincial decree despite the overwhelming opposition of Toronto voters, would simply not have happened in the US.

Specific institutions

Notwithstanding laments about indistinguishable physical and cultural landscapes, sub-national and sub-state differences abound. While some (Garreau, 1981, for one) note that state political borders badly demarcate cultural phenomena – media markets, dialects, and socio-economic character routinely transcend state lines – state-level identifiers from driver's licences and tuition bills to tax codes and social service eligibility formally distinguish New Yorkers, Nebraskans, and Arizonans.

State distinctions significantly shape governance choices and processes (Elazar, 1972; Fineman, 2008). State laws enable and empower different types of local government. Counties in Connecticut and Rhode Island are geographic units but have no functioning government. Town governments are much more powerful in New England states than in Southern states where county governments dominate. Cross-state differences in incorporation, annexation, debt ceilings, taxes and state aid to local governments similarly explain variations in local government operations (Wolman et al., 2003). Local government arrangements vary by state philosophies and practices. As of 2007, for example, the State of Nevada had a *total* of 19 municipalities, fewer than in Essex County, New Jersey, an area roughly one-thousandth the size of Nevada and one-third its population (US Census Bureau, 2007).

Region-scale identity, particularly at the sub-state level, is more elusive yet evident. Although regional flowers, flags, anthems, ID cards, and formal rights and responsibilities are rare, regional differences persist in building types, home-town sports allegiances, paces of life, dialects, cherished assets, foods, idioms and attitudes.

Within-state variation underscores the impact of culture on regional planning. The strong regional planning culture in the Rochester (New York) region, evidenced by successes of the nine-county Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Council, stands in contrast to scant regional planning in the Buffalo region 65 miles to the west. Regional culture and politics, including a history of tense relations between municipal and county governments, alternative models of county government (Erie County has an elected executive; Niagara County relies on an appointed administrator), and political ideologies – the Erie County executive specifically rejected the creation of a county planning board and is lukewarm about regionalism generally, for example – create a notably different atmosphere for regional planning in Buffalo and Rochester.

Organising regional planning governance

Regional planners achieve regional planning governance either by: (1) creating regional organisations encompassing the territory of a planning problem; or, (2) forging relationships and processes mimicking regional governance through informal means. Given their institutions, history and culture, US regions not surprisingly make

different choices, yielding varied outcomes for regional planning. Still, there are tendencies and trends.

Planning for a special regional resource or facility – dam, forest, canal, environmentally sensitive area – typically occurs through resource-scaled, federal- or state-empowered special-purpose districts with high independence and authority, including the power to overcall local planning choices. The Adirondack Park Agency serving upstate New York offers an example. When federal or state governments want even greater control over planning in a resource area, they may take over the territory themselves, as occurs in national parks. Regional authorities are also common for big-ticket, high fixed cost infrastructure systems – airports, transit, water, sewer and utilities – in metropolitan or rural regions. A classic example is the Tennessee Valley Authority, the energy, environment and economic development entity serving parts of seven south-eastern states.

Multi-purpose, multi-county entities governing regional planning are exceptional in the US. No metropolitan region has a single-tier multi-function regional authority. Even Metro, the nation's most powerful regional government covering a mostly urbanised segment of the Portland (Oregon) metropolitan region, contains multiple local governments, including 25 cities with independent planning powers. Besides Portland's Metro, the most prominent is the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, a Minnesota governor-appointed regional service entity most distinguished by its regional tax base sharing policies. City–county consolidations offer a backdoor way to achieve alignment of single county and central city planning, but such mergers are not only rare – roughly 35 in the US in the last two centuries – they are also non-comprehensive, leaving multiple jurisdictions holding independent planning powers within the consolidated territory. An example is 'Unigov', the product of consolidating Indianapolis with unincorporated Marion County.

Regional councils offer a more common governance model for regional planning. Numbering over 500 in 47 states and covering roughly 90 per cent of the nation's local governments (National Association of Regional Councils, 2010), regional councils are advisory rather than authoritative and typically serve as cross-border planners and conflict resolvers. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council serving over 100 municipalities in Greater Boston is one example. Nearly 180 of these regional councils also serve as a region's federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organisation (MPO), a designation bringing authority and responsibility for transportation planning and allocation of federal funds. For example, the Mid-America Regional Council serving the Kansas City Metropolitan Area is both a council of governments and the region's MPO for transportation planning. Another roughly 200 MPOs are independent transportation agencies operating outside of regional councils. One such freestanding MPO is the Yuma (Arizona) Metropolitan Planning Organisation offering multi-modal transportation planning for several local governments and tribal areas in that region.

Region-scale special districts, while narrow in function, may have significant influence over regional outcomes from soil conservation to housing. Often criticised as a pragmatic but ultimately fragmenting organisational choice (Fahim, 2009), single-purpose entities are the fastest growing and most numerous form of government in the United States (Foster, 2001), and the most common type of county-scale or larger planning entity. A prominent example is the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which operates the water infrastructure and programmes for nearly 19 million residents in a 5200 square mile area over 6 counties.

When formal structures are undesirable or impossible to achieve, regional planning occurs through voluntary local cooperation. Inter-municipal agreements exist for virtually any cross-border function from street-cleaning to GIS. Although informal agreements seem simple, success at forging and sustaining them depends on often elusive levels of mutual interest and trust. Interviews with municipal officials in greater Boston revealed numerous stories of failed cooperation and defensive localism, even in emergency services where mutual aid pacts are common. As one official noted in frustration, 'every town has a $700,000 ladder truck because we can't share' (Barron et al., 2004, 81). Local resistance to inter-municipal land use planning, education or taxation is exponentially greater.

Also planning regionally are hundreds of region-focused private or civic organisations. These range from non-profit land trusts – the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation of the Upper Mississippi River bluff lands is an example – to prominent business and civic associations, such as the New York City region's Regional Plan Association. Although their planning powers are ultimately advisory, the impact of non-public entities can be significant, particularly if they have financial and political power and enjoy strong relationships with public planning authorities.

The three questions of regional planning governance

Regardless of how a region organises its regional planning governance, all regional planning efforts, whether developing a bike trail across multiple jurisdictions, protecting a multi-state watershed or sparking metropolitan prosperity, must attend to three key governance questions: by what authority, exercised by whom, and in what territory?

Question 1: By what authority?

In the US governmental system the only entities with *legal* authority to formally adopt, implement and enforce a regional plan – or empower another entity to do so – are a federal, state or local government. Delegated authority comes in different types, as specified when establishing the regional body. The delegating government may limit or expand powers over time to reflect political context, culture and will.

Gerald Hodge and Ira Robinson (2001, 120–132) identified five types of planning authority – 'resources' in their formulation – for plan-making and plan implementation.

Plan-making authority

1 **Planning:** authority to develop determinative short- and long-term policies and agendas for the region.
2 **Professional:** authority to marshal and deploy talent, expertise, materials and facilities, such as professional staff, offices, information and fieldwork.

Plan-implementing authority

3 **Regulatory:** authority to make and enforce rules and laws governing public and private behaviours and activity under the entity's purview.
4 **Financial:** authority to collect and allocate resources for regional planning, including power to tax, impose fees and otherwise raise funds.

Hybrid plan-making and plan-implementing authority

5 **Political**: authority to make legitimised and accountable planning decisions and to influence internal and external actors.[2]

Several patterns arise from an application of this scheme to regional planning entities. First, planning authority and regulatory authority do not necessarily come together, such that agencies may prepare regional plans – excellent ones even – but lack authority to implement them. Political authority is thus crucial for effecting regional outcomes. If the regional entity enjoys strong political legitimacy, typically because its governing board consists of elected officials or others with high credibility, the likelihood of implementing its regional plan is greater.

Secondly, high regulatory powers are often accompanied by high levels of other types of authority. Agencies with ample authority to make and enforce policies – the Portland Metro and the Adirondack Park Agency offer examples – typically have high professional, financial and planning authority. As a directly elected regional government, Metro also enjoys high political authority delegated from regional voters. The Adirondack Park Agency's comparatively low political authority – its governing board is appointed – only modestly offsets the potent combination of regulatory and accompanying powers.

Thirdly, the presence of a power does not demand the exercise of that power. Commissions may have authority to assess fees on city and county governments

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2   This is a broader definition than that offered by Hodge and Robinson, who limit political resources to the legitimacy stemming from decision-makers' status as elected or appointed and thus directly or indirectly accountable to regional citizens and local authorities.

to carry out Commission operations, but for political reasons may shy away from exercising that power. The Bear Lake Commission spanning northern Utah and southern Idaho exercises fiscal restraint in part to stay on good terms with host local governments (Patrick, 2010).

Fourthly, even with formal regional planning authority, final say on and implementation powers for regional planning actions often rest with local governments. Local governments in the bi-state (Oregon and Washington) territory covered by the federal Columbia River Gorge Commission retain power to zone, adopt development codes and make the final decision on proposals affecting their jurisdiction.

Finally, not all regional planning entities have delegated authority. Land trusts, conservation leagues, property rights groups, and non-profit planning organisations such as the Regional Plan Association derive their powers from 'developed authority'. Developed authority stems from internal and external capacity, such as a professional staff, ample expertise, high social capital with public entities, and policy sway resting in the persuasive powers of agency leaders and board members.

Question 2: Exercised by whom, how?

The composition and selection of governing members and the structures of decision-making influence the authority of a regional planning agency.

Decision-makers may be appointed or elected, with the former the rule for regional planning entities without regulatory authority. In terms of popular legitimacy, elected governing boards (Portland's Metro has one) have the highest regard, followed by indirectly representative governing boards (elected officials selected by legislative peers to serve on a commission) with appointed boards having the least regard. The latter are often criticised as favouring one interest or another, a common criticism for the Adirondack Park Agency Council (North Country Public Radio, 2010).

Although professional staff members have no formal role in regional planning decisions, their credibility and productivity shape regional planning outcomes. The size and capacity of a regional planning staff – the Bear Lake Regional Commission has 3 staffers; Portland's Metro has 762 – determines not only the scope of regional planning activity, but the nature, reach and cost of operations.

One by-product of low delegated authority and shared regional interests is the need for strong partnerships to make and implement regional plans. Although regional actors may agree on common ground – 'a high regional quality of life for everyone', for instance – their ability to keep multiple groups aligned around particular policies, rules, investments and actions is much harder. Determining which, if any, entity has the authority or legitimacy to even convene competing interests for a regional dialogue may be difficult. Not surprisingly, parties to voluntary regional arrangements may 'agree to disagree' on topics for which there is neither consensus nor a pathway

to achieve it. As a result, controversial but important topics from property rights to regional housing equity may go unaddressed.

Question 3: In what territory?

For regions of all types and particularly for natural territories – 'nature has no need for walls, stone or otherwise', as Freyfogle (1998) put it – setting boundaries is a challenge-filled dimension of regional planning governance. Different borders will change not only the defined scope of planning, but also the underlying dynamic of planning operations.

A first boundary-setting filter is the degree of boundary flexibility. Flexible borders are logically desirable, but practically difficult. Non-public, non-taxing regional planning entities, such as the Regional Plan Association, may operate with flexible, issue-based boundaries for their work. However, public agencies typically have fixed boundaries, often based on county or jurisdictional building blocks and rarely redrawn. Natural areas may determine the border – both the Columbia River Gorge Commission and the Adirondack Park Agency have fixed resource-based territories – but even these are only rarely adjusted.

A challenge for regional planners is setting borders to match the scope of the planning entity and planning problem. Both 'overbounding' and 'underbounding' are customary, particularly when borders reflect administrative jurisdictions, which themselves may bear little resemblance to a resource or service-based territory. Metropolitan planning entities are especially prone to underbounding, with boundary change lagging the pace and direction of growth.

Finally, regional boundaries – and policy applications – reflect political circumstances. Strong control over the use of private lands within the Adirondack Park has been controversial since its establishment in 1892, making it matter whether one's property is inside or outside of park borders. To please urban constituents, the Columbia River Gorge Commission exempted over 28,000 urban acres from rules that apply to other general management areas (Mason, 2008, 115).

Where this leaves us

What distinguishes US regional planning from its city, state or national counterparts is not its substance – at each scale, planners address issues of transportation, housing, land development and the environment. Nor does its distinction stem from technical or engineering requirements making planning for regions exceptional compared to other planning scales. Rather, what sets apart regional planning from other forms of planning is its governance. Regional planning is a multi-jurisdictional enterprise involving multiple actors with independent authority to make, act on, and enforce

decisions for part but not all of the regional space.

The challenge ahead for US regional planning practice, not only in climate change, homeland security and shrinking regions, but also in the traditional regional planning realms in transportation, environmental conservation, recreation and growth management, rests in the quality of its governance. A current of strong anti-government sentiment in the US combined with difficult fiscal times has yielded an especially difficult environment within which public sector or centralised planning may occur. That said, recent environmental and economic calamities – massive oil spills and global financial crisis to name two – reinforce the reality of shared futures in an interdependent world. In the end, regional planning governance in twenty-first century North America must conquer the classic collective dilemma: how to align often fiercely independent local interests into a coherent, policy-aligned regional whole.

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