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We're All In This Together

Regional Thinking Needed To Keep State Competitive In 21st Century

By KELLY KENNEDY

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It's election time again, and with it comes another chance for residents in every town to elect leaders who understand that Connecticut's towns are part of economic regions, not independent fiefdoms with make-believe powers to go it alone.

How We Live

The way we govern at the local level in Connecticut is out of alignment with the way we live, and it has significant ramifications for our economic future.

Our 21st-century society is highly mobile. Most of us probably live in one town, work in another, and shop, recreate and attend religious services in yet others.

As the U.S. population continues to grow, people are spreading out, shifting population and jobs. Between 1990 and 2000, population in America's suburbs grew by 17 percent, twice the rate for cities.

"Metropolitan areas are where the business of life gets carried out," points out Bruce Katz, director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. That's where 80 percent of America lives, that's where 85 percent of America's jobs are, and that's where 84 percent of America's economic output comes from.

As a result, labor and housing markets aren't viewed on a town-by-town basis, but from a metro perspective. Supplier and distribution networks span regions. Traffic reports focus on traffic across a broad metro area, not within single towns. Mass transit systems serve regional areas. Sports teams, entertainment venues and many retail stores draw people from across a region.

As Katz and others make clear, metropolitan areas - cities and their outlying suburbs together - are the new competitive units in the global economy.

How We Govern

Our local government structures operate according to boundaries devised for life in the 18th century, not for a mobile society that operates across a metropolitan region. Connecticut's 169 town lines were often drawn based on who owned what land, arbitrarily, or for the convenience of church parishes and how far people wanted to ride their horses to church. We don't live this way anymore!

The challenges our 21st-century mobile society faces are regional. Problems such as traffic congestion and transportation, affordable housing shortages, sprawl, brain drain, air quality, and water quality and supply are regional. They don't start and stop at the borders of any particular town. So naturally, they won't be solved by each town acting in isolation. Fragmented governments simply lack the authority to meet the challenges of 21st-century living.

Why It Matters

This disconnect between how we live and how we govern matters because it is deeply destructive to our economic success and prosperity.

Today's economy is a global, knowledge economy. Technology and communication make it possible for companies to locate almost anywhere. Businesses have lots of choices about where to set up shop. The best jobs go where people are educated, creative, innovative, ambitious and hard-working.

Talented, educated, creative, innovative, ambitious workers are in demand, which means they have a choice about where they live. Educated, creative knowledge workers tend to prefer places that are interesting, clean, safe, stable and affordable.



Metro areas, which compete with one another for people, jobs and commerce, should be focusing on giving good companies and good workers what they want and what they need to thrive and excel. The smart, competitive metro areas do.

Contrast Connecticut, where we cling to the redundant, expensive, ineffective local government model in which town lines divide regions and governments based on factors that faded from relevance long ago.

Chopping up a metro area into small, fragmented governments guarantees parochialism in an increasingly global marketplace. Fragmented government discourages cohesive planning for the metropolitan region as a whole. Fragmentation means that separate governments (and bureaucracies within them) make their own decisions on regionwide issues including transportation, housing, land use and economic development.

Fragmented government means redundancy, and lots of it. Connecticut is notorious for insisting on duplicating infrastructure, staffing and services in almost every town. Preferring redundancy to efficient economies of scale serves only to increase the cost of government - and therefore the costs of living and doing business here.

Balkanized governments, constantly competing in a zero-sum game for property tax revenue, encourage sprawl and all the air pollution, increased infrastructure costs, obesity implications and health care costs that accompany it.

None of this is a recipe for success in the global marketplace. Jennifer Smith Turner, a former deputy with the state Department of Economic and Community Development, sums it up well, saying, "China isn't thinking about one town as competition to them. They're thinking about the United States. So we need to think a little more broadly. We need to see that all the little barriers we've put up are not helping us. We have a bigger issue here and that's competing in the global economy, not from town line to town line."

If part of government's role is to ensure a foundation for its citizens to prosper, we're going about it all wrong.

What To Do About It

It's all well and good to have a thousand instances of inter-town cooperation already. But if that were enough, our economy wouldn't be losing ground and town after town wouldn't be spending money and losing time on one budget referendum after another.

Don't get me wrong - towns and town governments aren't going away, and nobody is out to do them in. We just need a fresh, relevant way of thinking.

Since we act regionally, we ought to think regionally. We need to find a balance between local control in the extreme and genuine economic competitiveness for the long term.

Towns across the capital region need to get organized and capitalize on our collective assets. We need to figure out what this region's unique value proposition is - what Metro Hartford has to offer that is unique - then prove we still have some Yankee ingenuity and leverage the heck out of it.

Like any successful team, we need to assign ourselves roles that play to our strengths. Those roles are probably going to cut across town lines. Certain parts of the region might be shopping destinations, other parts might be restaurant destinations, others might be arts and music destinations, still others might be outdoor recreation destinations. You get the idea: Figure out our best features and make the most of them. Accentuate the positive.

Certainly, we need to bolster the authority and strength of regional organizations to spearhead strategic regionwide planning and execution efforts. As urban expert David Rusk said in a 2004 interview with Tom Condon: "If Connecticut does anything, it should be to have the state empower its councils of government with more decision-making responsibility."

We need to seriously pursue economies of scale so we can invest more in the things we say really matter. To think that we can continue to afford to duplicate police departments, fire departments, school systems and the like in every town, year after year, is just plain delusional.

We need a new culture of inter-town collaboration and metropolitan governance that spurns myopia and parochialism for what they are: economic suicide. We need to engage business, civic and community leaders as intermediaries that think and act across town lines. We need people like you, readers, to step up and be collaborative regional stewards.

It will be interesting to see whether residents in towns across Connecticut, and in Metro Hartford in particular, will take on the challenge of truly competing in the global economy - or if we just sign up, again, for more of the same.

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