City, Town Challenges Cry out for Regional Solutions
By Tom Condon

For three or four decades, it has been Groundhog Day in Hartford. We've living in a time loop, fighting the same battles on drugs, poverty and schools, pushing the same rock up the same hill.

This wasn't always the city's history. It was once very wealthy — look at some of the older buildings — with a three-layered economy based on insurance and financial services, manufacturing and agriculture.

But after World War II, much of the manufacturing disappeared. Much of the middle class left the city and moved to sprawling suburbs (that often displaced agriculture). After the riots at the end of the 1960s, the city and its problems have been much the same.

We've made some incremental progress with such things as charter schools and downtown housing, but the postwar template is still much the same.

How to get off the schneid?

Someone defined insanity as doing the same thing and expecting a different result. We have tried to solve our problems on a town-by-town basis. Hartford may well be too small to solve its own problems; it's hard to be an inner city without an outer city.

What if we actually tried to do what much of the world does and solve some of these problems regionally? I moderated a panel on this topic a week ago at Trinity College, part of the school's new Center for Urban and Global Studies, and came away with a scintilla of cautious optimism.

Forgetting any altruistic motives, towns may have to act together because it's getting too expensive to keep going it alone. To paraphrase Ben Franklin, we must hang together or we will go broke separately.

The postwar era of American prosperity was built on cheap and plentiful energy and little international competition. That party is over.

We need to change, to get lean and smart, but we're not organized to change. Lyle Wray, executive director of the Capitol Region Council of Governments, told the panel that we're organized on the town state and national level, but that many problems come at us on the neighborhood, regional and international level.

Such issues as transportation, affordable housing, energy, and economic and workforce development are regional.

Heidi Green, president of 1,000 Friends of Connecticut, offered the valuable observation that how we grow will greatly influence how well we grow. She's right. To keep pushing low-density sprawl further out into the fast-diminishing countryside will cause more driving, energy use, urban and suburban isolation and higher costs for services. To recreate prewar densities in cities and preserve farms and forests is to retain and enhance a quality of life that attracts business. This is a regional mission.

We have good companies; from the Fortune 500 and 1,000 lists, as John Shemo, vice president of the MetroHartford Alliance, pointed out. We have an educated workforce. But we're getting old,
as a state, and need to attract young workers. That is a regional challenge.

Will we meet these challenges regionally? Clyde McKee, Trinity political science professor and longtime observer of Hartford politics and planning, noted that since county government was abolished in 1960, there has often been sentiment for regional cooperation, even governance. With the growing cost of running 169 municipalities, more officials might be open to regional solutions. Professor McKee pointed to the consolidation of probate courts as a possible harbinger of sensible regional measures.

A number of writers — Bruce Katz, David Rusk, Neal Peirce and others — see the region as an economic driver in the world economy. The question here is how to create a region that can compete against Berlin, Bangkok or Brussels, instead of fighting among ourselves over which town a company will set up shop in (see: ING).

The good news is that we are making a start. In addition to long-standing regional entities such as the Metropolitan District Commission, an $8.5 million state incentive grant program this year has yielded new regional programs for police training, animal shelters, information technology and health screening. Recent "responsible growth" legislation encourages local plans that adhere to the state Plan of Conservation and Development.

The trick is to keep it going. I’d like to see a good study comparing the cost and quality of regional services with that of local services. People don’t care whether the garbage truck or fire engine is local or regional, as long as it shows up. If some kind of regional confederation makes sense — and there could be different regions for different services — let’s see if we can sell it.

If we were starting Connecticut from scratch, we’d never divide it into 169 towns. Some town boundaries were set in the 1600s, when transportation was an obstacle. It may well make sense for some towns to confederate, even to merge.

The liberating truth is that we can organize ourselves any way we want. Let’s at least have the discussion.

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