

Voluntary Regional Planning [15]  
“Making Voluntary Regional Planning Better”

The Regional Planning Commission’s new, \$450,000 federal grant to develop a regional land use plan as guidance for its transportation decisions opens up a real avenue of opportunity. I have four suggestions to improve RPC.

1. RPC’s new planning process would link transportation decisions to the goal of sustainable communities. Broadening its decision-making criteria beyond the traditional highway engineers’ frame of reference is admirable.

“Sustainability” typically refers almost exclusively to environmental concerns. This report has argued that sprawl’s impact has been injurious to the social geography as well as the natural geography of the region. However, the only social concern cited in the federal grant application is access of low-income populations to suburban work locations.

**Thus, my first recommendation is that RPC’s scope must be expanded to consider other social issues, like concentrated poverty and the need for more mixed-income housing. RPC should be encouraged to seek other federal, state, or local funds to expand its capabilities to assess the impact of its plans on the region’s social geography.**

2. Achieving real public participation is time-consuming and expensive. Out of its \$450,000 grant request, RPC devotes about \$100,000 (primarily in year 2) to “community visioning and public education programs,” “preparation for regional scale community participation process (all groups plus non-traditional partners),” and “conduct regional visioning/education process.” RPC would add another \$50,000 from its regular budget and seek \$20,000 from other local sources.

By contrast, Portland Metro spends over \$1,000,000 a year on citizen participation in a community that already has built a tradition of grassroots involvement in regional planning over 25 years.

**My second recommendation is that RPC should seek additional outside funds to step up its community participation activities – more and sooner.**

3. RPC’s proposed work program is very sequential, yet Jefferson, Orleans, and St. Tammany parishes are all working now on major planning initiatives. **My third recommendation is that RPC ought to accelerate its schedule to have more regional analyses available earlier than proposed and integrate its work as fully as possible in the local planning processes.**

**4. My fourth and last recommendation is that RPC membership must be weighted so that votes by the commissioners reflect the populations of the respective parishes that make up the metropolitan area. All parishes that**

**form part of the metropolitan area should be RPC members or, at least, participants in its Transportation Policy Committee.**

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Broadening RPC's outlook, capabilities, and sense of public accountability can only help the cause of regional land use planning. Should RPC be reluctant – or unable – to broaden its regional role, to change its voting system to give more weight to those parishes that have larger populations, and to involve other parishes that are part of the metropolitan area, thought should be given to forming a new, more powerful regional planning that would have the capacity and authority to do serious transportation and land use planning.

A case in point. Because the Atlanta Regional Commission (another voluntary body like RPC) had virtually no power over its member jurisdictions, Governor Roy Barnes, with very strong support from the Atlanta business community, recently got the Georgia legislature to create a powerful new Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. GRTA's 15-member board is appointed by the governor without approval of the legislature and serves at the governor's pleasure. It was given statutory authority to make all major transportation and land use decisions in the Atlanta metropolitan area, *including the power to veto any local government's zoning decisions that conflict with the region's best interests.*

The moral of the story: when excessive infighting by local governments prevents progress in the face of regional crisis, state government can always take over.

[606 words]