Over the past two decades or more, scholars and advocates of the new regionalism school have written a number of works calling for the creation of new forms of regional governance in American metropolitan areas (e.g., Dodge, 1996; Orfield 1997; Peirce, Johnson, & Hall, 1993; Rusk 1995, 1999; Savitch & Vogel, 2000). Regardless of the specific forms of regional governance advocated by the new regionalists, these authors appear to have essentially the same purposes in mind. The first is the establishment of formal or informal methods of combining local governments in metropolitan regions to promote cooperation across a range of issues on the theory that such cooperation will enable regions to be more competitive in the global economy.

A second purpose has been to address, through mechanisms of regional governance, the negative externalities or spill-over effects produced by uncontrolled development within governmentally fragmented metropolitan areas. A final purpose has been to use the newly established...
mechanisms of regional governance to provide fiscal and other forms of relief to beleaguered central cities. Indeed, it often appears from reading works by new regionalists that the latter purposes (controlling spill-over effects and helping ailing central cities) are somehow essential to achieving the former (regional economic competitiveness).

The new regionalists share a good deal in common with earlier generations of scholars and advocates of regional governance, a.k.a., the metropolitan reformers, although there are significant differences as well. For example, both groups believe that mechanisms of regional governance are necessitated by issues of efficiency and equity (e.g., fitting regional structures and policies to appropriate region-wide issues or problems, such as air and water pollution and putting public resources to work where needed in a region regardless of location of those resources).

While the new regionalists and the metropolitan reformers may agree in their diagnoses of the problems confronting metropolitan areas and the resulting need for regional governance, they differ fundamentally in two important ways. The first is that the new regionalists have shifted the primary rationale for regional governance from issues of efficiency and equity to that of regional economic competitiveness. The metropolitan reform literature generally does not offer an economic rationale for metropolitan reform comparable to that found in the new regionalist literature. This is primarily because the metropolitan reformers made explicitly normative arguments. They claimed, for example, that both the nature and dimensions of the metropolitan problems that they identified demanded metropolitan solutions and that these solutions, in turn, ought to be adopted to promote the overall good of the entire metropolis. That these structures and policies, by and large, have not been adopted is another matter to which I will return.

Even though an economic reform rationale was not a part of the metropolitan reform literature, per se, it nevertheless has appeared prominently in efforts to secure metropolitan reform since at least the latter half of the nineteenth century. For example, it was not unusual in the late 1800s for city officials and boosters to claim that annexation would enable cities to solidify their economic competitiveness or even dominance vis-à-vis other American city regions and also to secure the benefits of future economic growth (Jackson, 1972; Teaford, 1979). Indeed, one of the principal reasons advanced for New York City’s 1898 consolidation was to ensure its economic supremacy over Chicago and other perceived regional competitors (Adams, Lewis, & McCroskey, 1929).

In more recent times, advocates of metropolitan reform in a variety of cities (e.g., Nashville, Indianapolis, and Jacksonville in the US, and Toronto in Canada) have used economic growth and competitiveness as rallying cries to gain support for city-county consolidation or other metropolitan structural reforms. Additionally, boosters in these cities often claimed (frequently without much empirical data) that the adopted reforms actually produced the outcomes proclaimed in the pro-reform campaigns, e.g., a stronger city and regional economy and an enhanced ability to compete economically with other regions (Rosentraub, 2000).

Second, the prescriptions of the new regionalists and the metropolitan reformers are quite different. A review of the metropolitan reform literature developed in the first three decades after the end of World War II shows that, for the most part, the metropolitan reformers urged formal structural change in metropolitan America (see Committee on Economic Development [CED], 1970; Greer, 1962; Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations [ACIR], 1969; Wolff, 1960; Wood, 1958a, 1958b). For metropolitan reformers, area wide governmental organizations were needed to counter the negative effects of suburban sprawl and governmental fragmentation. These organizations were also needed to address negative externalities and to achieve a degree of equity in the regional distribution of public resources. In other words, the metropolitan reformers believed that formal government, with its capacity to achieve and im-
plement authoritative decisions, was necessary to get important things done for the metropolis as a whole.

For the new regionalists, by contrast, the principal mechanisms for achieving regional governance involve forms of voluntary cooperation. However, the specific mechanisms for regional governance advocated by the new regionalists are not always immediately obvious. This is because throughout the new regionalist literature terms like regionalism and regional governance, more often than not, are not defined. Indeed, it is the exception rather than the rule to read a new regionalist work that explicitly defines regionalism or regional governance (i.e., Dodge, 1996). For the most part, definitions of regional governance are only implicit in that literature and lead to the inference that regional governance essentially involves regional cooperation (that is, intergovernmental and intersectoral cooperation within a defined territory). To avoid confusion and redundancy, I use the term regional governance as synonymous with regionalism and metropolitan governance throughout this article. My definition of regional governance follows.

In perhaps the most explicit and expansive rendering of the new regionalism, Savitch and Vogel (2000) asserted that it is “both a policy agenda and a set of public interventions designed to fulfill that agenda” (p. 158). They go on to note that the principal problems driving the new regionalism agenda “are related to fiscal disparities, social segregation, environmental problems, economic expectations, and questions about the extent to which government should try to address these issues” (p. 161). They also argue “the new regionalism requires that communities look outward to the larger metropolis and consider their collective future” (p. 161). Finally, they distinguish between government, which they associate with older forms of metropolitan reform, and governance, which they associate with the new regionalism. According to Savitch and Vogel (2000), “governance [emphasis added] conveys the notion that existing institutions can be harnessed in new ways, that cooperation can be carried out on a fluid and voluntary basis among localities and that people can best regulate themselves through horizontally linked organizations” (p. 161).

DEFINING REGIONALISM

Not defining regional governance at all or failing to define it clearly appears to serve the interests of the new regionalists. On one hand, to define regional governance in terms of overarching area wide structures of government would be to relegate it to the boneyard of regionalism because such structures are nearly impossible to establish today (Downs, 1994; Ross & Levine, 1996). On the other hand, to define regional governance essentially as cooperation would be to rob it of any pretense that it can get things done authoritatively. As Frisken observed, one reason for the switch in the new regionalist literature from government to governance may have been the realization that “full fledged regional government was not going to happen, but that something less substantive (and authoritative) could take its place” (Frisken, personal communication, June 23, 2000). Bollens (1997) makes a similar argument.

The absence of explicit definitions of regional governance in the new regionalist literature poses at least four problems. First, in the absence of an explicit definition, especially one that can be operationalized, it is difficult to know what is being discussed. Is it regional governance, or is it regional cooperation? Is regional governance the same as regional cooperation, or is regional governance something qualitatively different, such as governmental consolidation or the establishment of other formal structures of regional government?

Second, without an explicit definition of regional governance, it is difficult if not impossible to know if it exists. For example, an observer may claim that the existence of formal public authorities or special districts to address certain functions implies regional governance. This
might be true especially in the absence of an area wide government. But, as Bollens (1997) showed in his study of Southern California, true regional governance does not necessarily follow from such an arrangement. Instead, he found that even though area wide in scope, limited function special districts produced only “a fragmented and restricted type of regionalism” (p. 117), a “shadow regionalism [that] bears but a faint connection to the true potential of regional governance” (p. 118).

While it is possible to claim that nearly any set of intergovernmental arrangements produces regional governance, the actual existence of such is an empirical matter. In the case of Southern California, according to Bollens (1997), although the regional public authorities performed their narrow functions, they were unable to “articulate an effective regional vision or strategy” or ameliorate the problems of growth in the region (pp. 106–107). Thus, their performance did not substitute for true regional governance although Bollens felt that the districts might be an incremental step in that direction.

Third, because regional governance is rarely defined explicitly, it is difficult, if not impossible, to operationalize it for analytical purposes. Simply put, if we are unable to define regional governance clearly and identify how it actually functions (e.g., to improve regional economic competitiveness, address negative externalities or provide assistance to central cities), we cannot know either whether it exists or, if it does exist, whether it works as specified and produces the results claimed for it.

Fourth, while regional cooperation is almost certainly better than conflict, cooperation is not sufficient to achieve regional governance. As Downs (1994) and others have noted, cooperation is the weakest of all institutional responses to metropolitan problems. Cooperation is not governance because, among other things, parties to cooperation can decide not to cooperate, and often do, especially on tough and controversial issues. And, these are precisely the issues that the both the new regionalists and the metropolitan reformers feel should be addressed regionally.

Additionally, parties to an agreement at any given time may not be the parties who will be responsible for implementing the agreement in the future. This leaves open the possibility (indeed, the probability) of endless renegotiation, stonewalling, and even withdrawal from agreements. Finally, parties who reach an agreement still must return home to convince their local colleagues and constituents to implement the agreement. As several local government officials have told me over the years, it is far easier to favor regionalism when speaking in the next county than it is to secure support for regionalism back home where local constituents have to approve measures that may mean giving up local powers or tax dollars.

Thus, even if cooperation works well (that is, it involves effective consultation among all parties, and a decision is reached on a regionally important matter), the parties to cooperation are left with two unsolved problems. First, who is going to carry out the agreement and, second, what happens if even one or more of the parties reneges?

For these and other reasons, therefore, it is important to define carefully what is meant by regional governance. Governance and cooperation are different terms with different meanings. To use cooperation as a synonym for governance, as many new regionalists do, is to render the term without theoretical or conceptual meaning.

Webster’s Dictionary (Merriam-Webster’s, 1987) defines governance simply and directly as government, which it defines as “the act or process of governing; specifically, authoritative direction or control.” It defines the term to govern as ruling, exercising sovereign authority and controlling the making and administration of policy. To govern also means “holding in check” and “restraining” (presumably behavior). By contrast, it defines the verb, to cooperate, as “1) to act or work with another or others: work together; 2) associate with another or others for mutual benefit.”
I prefer the traditional, and also more definitionally correct, approach and define \textit{regional governance} as follows:

The association of governments or residents in a defined geographic area for the purpose of controlling or regulating the behavior within and performing functions or providing services for the overall territory. Governance in a metropolitan territory is authoritative, occurs on an areawide basis and may involve a coercive element. That is, governing decisions and actions are binding across the territory and, if necessary, may be compelled (Norris, 2001, p. 535).

\textit{Regional cooperation}, on the other hand, essentially involves voluntary association and lacks a coercive element. Also, cooperation may or may not be area wide (Norris, 2001).

**EXTENT OF REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN THE US**

On the basis of this definition, two things are evident. First, although governance may involve cooperation, it is both different from and more than cooperation. Second, regional governance does not exist in American metropolitan areas today. With few and fleeting exceptions, such as Minneapolis and Portland (which together constitute 0.6\% of American metropolitan areas), it has not occurred in the 200 plus year history of the nation.

In his study, \textit{City and Suburb}, Teaford (1979) demonstrated that between 1850 and 1970, the norm in metropolitan America was separation and separatism. This was true despite a spate of successful annexations by central cities late in the nineteenth century and repeated, though largely failed, attempts in the 1920s and 1930s, and again in the 1960s and 1970s to reform metropolitan areas and provide formal structures of regional governance. Regardless of contemporary claims to the contrary, what Teaford found to be true between 1850 and 1970 is true today and probably will be true well into our future.

That is, there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that regional governance, as defined here, exists or is likely to surface anywhere in the US in the foreseeable future. Certainly, local governments will continue to cooperate with one another and with the private sector when they must (e.g., cooperative planning in order to receive federal transportation dollars) and when it is otherwise in their self-interests to do so (e.g., ad hoc law enforcement task forces to address crime sprees that cross jurisdictional boundaries). However, such cooperation generally occurs around system maintenance issues, not around really tough lifestyle issues like housing, education and social equity (Williams, 1967). Nowhere do local governments in American metropolitan areas, or their constituents, show a willingness to forego their independence and autonomy, even at the margins, to produce regional governance capable of addressing area wide issues authoritatively. The unwillingness of local governments to forego local authority voluntarily is hardly a new finding, but it is one that bears periodic repetition (e.g., Danielson, 1976; Downs, 1994; Williams, 1967).

Regardless of their respective contributions to the debate, the arguments of neither the metropolitan reformers nor the new regionalists have succeeded in producing much change in the nature or character of regional governance in metropolitan America. Except for Minneapolis and Portland, formal region-wide structural reform, as advocated by the metropolitan reformers, has not happened and does not appear likely to occur in metropolitan America. And, while a few city-county consolidations have occurred in metropolitan areas and one two-tiered structure (e.g., Miami-Dade, County) has been adopted over the past 50 years, none of these structures is metropolitan in scope, and they represent but a fraction of all American metropolitan areas. It has been clear to most observers for some time why the principal prescriptions of the
metropolitan reformers have failed to achieve fruition. The politics of metropolitan reform are
decidedly stacked against significant structural change.

The question is whether the economic imperatives that the new regionalists believe to exist
and to impel the adoption of mechanisms of regional governance can overcome the political
impediments to regional governance? Another way to phrase the question is to ask whether it
is possible to have regional governance without regional government(s). In the remainder of
this article, I will endeavor to answer this question.

The problem is not definitional. Certainly, as I define regional governance, institutions of
government appear to be necessary because of the authoritative dimension of the definition
(Easton, 1953). Yet, as I have shown above, the new regionalists believe that something other
than regional government can produce regional governance. Regardless of definition or of the
structures or mechanisms involved, however, for regional governance to exist, it must be pos-
sible, for the participants in regional governance to make and implement decisions on issues
of regional significance. Decision-making of this sort is inherently political in nature. It in-
volves the allocation of scarce public resources (Easton, 1953) as well as of who gets what,
when and how (Lasswell, 1950). As such, one’s attention is logically drawn toward an exam-
ination of the political factors affecting the ability to achieve regional governance. Therefore,
in the following paragraphs, I discuss what I believe are the most important factors constrain-
ing the development and effectiveness of both formal structures and informal mechanisms of
regional governance in American metropolitan areas.

POLITICAL FACTORS LIMITING REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

American Local Government Ideology

Americans strongly believe that local government, the government closest to the people, is
the best government. This rhetoric is, in part, an artifact of American history and, in part, an
expression of every day experience. At least since Thomas Jefferson, a central theoretical view
of American government has been that of the sovereignty and autonomy of the individual in
his or her local community (e.g., Syed, 1966.)

At a practical level, Americans live in local communities and experience government and
governance there. They receive most of their governmental services, particularly the ones
that affect them most significantly (e.g., police and fire protection, public education, land use
regulation, etc.) at the local level. Citizens are also the most able to make their views about
governance and service delivery known with the greatest impact at the local level. Indeed,
the historic and prevailing local government ideology is an important part of the reason why
local citizens oppose nearly anything that would threaten the existence, powers, services or
autonomy of their local governments.

The Residential Bias of the American People

Nearly every public opinion poll on the subject shows that large majorities of Americans
prefer to live in suburbs, small towns and or rural areas (see, for example, “Where we’d
live,” 1989). Additionally, and dating back at least to Jefferson, there is a strong anti-city bias
abroad in the land. Americans generally profess to dislike large cities. In combination, these
attitudes mean that, ceteris paribus, Americans not only will move out of and away from cit-
ies to suburban and fringe areas, but they will not be kindly disposed to participating in ef-
forts (especially those involving their tax dollars) to help central cities. This is true regardless
of the merits of such campaigns or the dire needs of central cities. Moreover, for at least the
past 50 years, the suburbs are precisely where Americans have moved, and when they get there
they have shown virtually no interest in either assisting the central cities that they have left or
surrendering the autonomy and independence of the suburbs and rural communities into which
they have moved.

**Constitutional Status of Local Governments**

State constitutions in the United States expressly provide for the creation of local govern-
ments and for the roles and functions of elected local officials. This grant of constitutional
and legal status to local governments is fundamentally important. Not only do state constitu-
tions provide the legal basis for local government, these documents also rarely provide a com-
parable basis for the existence of regional governmental structures. In fact, throughout the US,
it is far more difficult to establish a regional form of government than to incorporate a new
municipality or create a special district. As I have argued elsewhere, both inertia and partic-
ular interests grow up around extant local government structures, and they function to favor
the status quo over governmental change and reform (Norris, 1997). Constitutional and legal
status, thus, mean that local governments exist in law; are accorded structure, functions, and
powers; and, once established, they beget an existence that is largely unchallenged. Moreover,
the existence of local governments helps to preclude the establishment of other governmental
structures in local governments’ regions.

**Territory**

The constitutional and legal status of general-purpose local governments gives them unique
territory over which to exercise sovereignty and provide services. At best and in nearly all
regions, the territories encompassed by regional organizations, such as regional planning coun-
cils and councils of government, include already existing local governments, and the latter are
decidedly not interested in giving up either territory or powers to the former—nor can they be
compelled to do so. As such, regional bodies are at a serious disadvantage when compared to
local governments that inhabit the regional territory. The former have no independent hold on
the territory while the latter clearly do.

Co-existing within political geography that is fundamentally held by other governmental
entities which also have strong constitutional and legal status as well as strong citizen support
weakens regional institutions for other reasons as well. As I indicated earlier, many important
public services are provided by local governments. Among other things, this means that local
citizens have little or no direct contact with regional organizations and are unlikely to think of
them as their own governments—if they are aware of the existence of the regional entities or
think about them at all. Moreover, most of the officials of local governments that share terri-
tery with regional bodies do not feel much ownership in or love for regional bodies. The en-
tities are often seen as remote organizations that do little but are organizations in which they
are forced to participate.

Sharing territory with local governments usually means that the governing boards of the
regional bodies are comprised of representatives, usually elected officials, of the constituent
the local governments. Citizens are not directly or proportionately represented on governing
boards of regional bodies. This makes the regional bodies creatures of the local governments
and further removes them from the attention and interest, let alone the direct control, of local
citizens. This, in turn, makes it difficult for citizens to attach psychologically or emotionally
to regional institutions as they do to their local governments.

Such an arrangement is notably undemocratic as well. Nearly all local governments in the
United States elect their officials on a constitutionally mandated, one person-one vote basis.
This is not so for regional bodies where the prevailing mode is one government-one vote. This leads to an anomaly in which small units (e.g., villages of a few hundred or a few thousand individuals) have as much power on the governing boards of regional bodies as large units.

State Political Tradition

As Berman (1995) noted, although state governments have the constitutional authority to do so, they generally do not get involved in the business of their local governments. Although there have been notable instances since the end of the Civil War of state interference with, and takeovers or near takeovers of, local governments or their functions, these are relatively rare. The reasons for states’ laissez-faire approach to the operation of their local governments vary, but, for the most part, states establish or provide the mechanisms for the establishment of local governments and expect the local governments to function properly and effectively.

And, in fact, most local governments work reasonably well most of the time.

State officials also do not meddle in local affairs without ample reason because they know that to do so would create an unenviable backlash by local voters. Then, too, state officials have state governments to run, and choose, because of both lack of time and inclination, to let local governments run themselves.

Electoral Structure and State Elected Officials

Another very important reason that state governments do not often intervene in local governmental affairs has to do with state and local electoral structure. Many state elected officials have come up through the lower elective ranks, beginning in local government. They have a healthy respect for local government, and they know that their constituents do as well. Consequently, state legislators are not inclined in the first place to interfere with local governments without good cause.

Additionally, state legislators are elected from local districts that encompass all or parts of one or more local governments. This means that local governments and their residents bring problems and issues and express their policy preferences to their state legislators. This reinforces the legislators’ knowledge of and respect for local government and local affairs.

Finally, state legislators are fully aware that if they act, especially without good cause, to intervene in the affairs of local governments (particularly to do anything that adversely affects the territory, finances or powers of local governments), the legislators will almost certainly be opposed at the next primary or general election by local elected officials or local citizens who take serious exception to their actions.

The Strength of Pro-Sprawl and Pro-Fragmentation Forces

This is a game, in the sense of the term as employed by Long (1958), that pits developers, builders, real estate organizations, suburban residents, and suburban elected officials against academics and “goo-goos” (e.g., the good government groups like Leagues of Women Voters, chambers of commerce, and editorial writers). Cross-jurisdictional coalitions may be another category of player (Orfield, 1997, 1998; Weir, 2000). However, with the possible exceptions of Minneapolis and Portland, such coalitions exist hardly anywhere in the US or are too politically impotent to matter in the calculations of the regional game.

In nearly any contest between pro-sprawl and pro-regionalism forces, the staying power is clearly with the former who have strong and immediate financial interests at stake and who are organized and well-financed. The latter, by contrast, are mostly amateurs and volunteers who may have strong intellectual and emotional reasons for involvement, but who are usually
poorly organized and financed. As George Washington Plunkitt said about the municipal reformers of his day, they “were only mornin’ glories—looked lovely in the mornin’ and withered up in a short time, while the regular machines went on flourishin’ forever, like fine oaks” (Riordon, 1994, p. 57).

**Race and Class**

In America, metropolitan separation and separatism can be explained partly by likes choosing to live with likes. Were this all that they did, of course, it would hardly be objectionable. However, likes do more than simply choose to live with likes. They also express their preferences through public policies such as zoning ordinances and building codes designed to keep the unwanted out. The unwanted are generally persons of lower socio-economic status and often are non-white. For this and other reasons, suburban areas are increasingly differentiated from their center cities along social class and racial lines. Certainly some suburbs may be poorer or more affluent than others. Likewise some suburbs may be middle class, some working class, and some clearly upper class (as defined by occupation and income); and some may be majority black while others may be majority white. However, suburbs in general are more affluent and more middle and upper class than central cities. Suburbs are also generally much more likely to have far lower numbers and concentrations of minorities and poor persons than central cities. There is also evidence that, in recent decades, racial and class distinctions between central cities and suburban areas in the US have become even more extreme (Lowrey, 2000).

Additionally, suburbia as a whole (including recently arrived members of minority groups and lesser affluent residents) does not want to have much or anything to do with the central city, especially if this would mean providing financial support or helping in other ways that could be perceived as threats to the suburbs (such as “fair share” housing). While the suburban, anti-city view is partly due to reasons of race and class, it is also peculiar to suburbanization itself. That is, having escaped the central city, suburban residents (regardless of class or race) do not want to look back and do not want to contribute their time, energy, and especially their tax dollars, to help the central city.

**Local Government Financing and Tax Structure**

On average, local governments in the US rely on property tax for about a quarter of their budgetary needs (US Bureau of the Census, 1997). Because of the importance of property taxes, American local governments are highly competitive over securing desirable land development, especially commercial and industrial development and upscale housing, within their boundaries. Interestingly, Wolfson and Frisken (2000) came to a similar conclusion in their study of the behavior of local governments in the Toronto area.

It is simply not in the interests of local jurisdictions to give away tax advantage. Thus, the idea of entering into regional arrangements that might threaten the ability to maximize the generation of local taxes is anathema. Similarly, local governments are not inclined to support proposals for such things as regional tax base sharing (mainly to assist ailing center cities) because nearly everyone sees them as a zero sum game in which the suburbs subsidize the central city.

Additionally, varying economic circumstances do not seem to matter to this equation. In good economic times, it is difficult if not impossible to convince local governments to surrender competitive advantage for the good of the whole territory. None of these governments sees the need to do so because all are doing relatively well, and none sees any benefit accruing from his or her individual sacrifice. On the other hand, when economic times are bad across a region or when one or a few local governments in a region are in financial trouble, it is hard
to convince those who are well-off to contribute either to the weaker few or to the overall
good. Again, the well-off see no benefit accruing from their contribution or surrender of advantage.

Local Government Autonomy

Local government autonomy—or the ability of these governments to exercise their police
powers (“the power to regulate private activities in order to protect the public health, safety
and morals,” Gray and Eisinger, 1997, p. 365) broadly within their territories—is sacrosanct
in the US. And, there is absolutely nothing new about this conclusion. It has been well known
for over 100 years (Danielson, 1976; Teaford, 1979). Indeed, local autonomy is the principal
reason that American local governments are unwilling to enter into arrangements for regional
governance.

Arrangements for regional governance that would have “teeth”—that is, would involve lo-
cal governments ceding authority to regional entities to address certain matters now under their
exclusive control (e.g., land development and public education) would directly threaten local
autonomy. As Williams (1967) pointed out over three decades ago, although local govern-
ments may be willing to cooperate with one another on matters of systems maintenance (es-
pecially house-keeping and infrastructure matters), they are highly unlikely to give up control
over lifestyle issues. Nothing much has changed in this regard in the past 30 plus years.

A recent example is found in the state of Maryland, which is being widely touted as the
“Smart Growth” state. Smart growth legislation, legislation which its supporters claim will
begin to reverse the decades-long trend toward urban sprawl in Maryland, has not touched
local governments’ zoning authority and has only barely influenced their land use planning
authority. Indeed, when presenting his initial smart growth legislation to local governments in
Maryland, Governor Parris Glendening vowed not to interfere with counties’ zoning powers
(a choice widely viewed as necessary to get the legislation passed). Without significantly curb-
ing local governments’ almost exclusive ability to control land development through local land
use planning and zoning, anti-sprawl legislation cannot be expected to have much impact.

Another example comes from England where, 10 years after the abolition of true metropol-
itan governments, local governments remained adamantly opposed to regional governance in
any form. The most that they would accept, unless forced by central government, were rather
minimal levels of cooperation with other local governments in purely voluntary associations
which lacked the power to address significant regional issues authoritatively (Norris, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Calls by the new regionalists for greater levels of regional governance are normative argu-
ments. As normative arguments, they are not unlike arguments for metropolitan reform that
preceded them in the 1920s and 1930s and the 1960s and 1970s. For example, although Wood
(1958b) called the problems of metropolitan areas both “real” and “genuine,” he also said:
“they are not categorical necessities. They are fundamentally questions of value and of judg-
ment, of what we should and should not do and of how much” (p. 119). He called his ap-
proach a normative framework.

Also, not unlike their predecessors, the arguments of the new regionalists have failed, thus
far at least, to produce the results desired by their proponents. This is because a mere shift of
the rationale for regional governance to that of economic competitiveness is insufficient to
overcome the powerful political factors that militate against the adoption of both formal struc-
tures and informal mechanisms of regional governance. Indeed, because the new regionalists
fail to take into account the politics of regional governance, their arguments are little more
than wishful thinking.
Even if it were true, for example, that suburbs and central cities are interdependent or that the economic health of the suburbs is dependent upon the economic health of center cities, participants in the governance of a region would have to accept and act upon these premises in order for the new regionalist’s argument to produce desired results. (For a spirited debate on the issue of interdependence, see Savitch, Collins, Sanders, and Markham, 1993, and Ledebur and Barnes, 1993, on the one side; and Hill, Wolman and Ford, 1995, and Blair and Zhang, 1994, on the other.) The participants would have to follow the new regionalists’ logic and adopt and implement new regionalist policies (e.g., to control spill-overs, aid central cities, etc.) in order to make regions more competitive economically. The available evidence, however, strongly suggests that few, if any, of them believe or act on the premises underlying the new regionalists’ arguments (e.g., Norris & Stenberg, 2001).

Additionally, while one may be sympathetic to the new regionalists goals, a regionalism based on voluntary cooperation, which is essentially what the new regionalists call for, would be wholly insufficient to produce agreement about or to implement the policies necessary to achieve them. As Lowery (2000) noted, “In fragmented governmental settings, the dice are institutionally loaded against policies designed to enhance desegregated housing location, the matching of fiscal resources and fiscal needs and the effective management of growth and economic development” (p. 73).

This is because these and other policies advocated by the new regionalists—redistributive in nature, as they are—generate opposition from both urban and suburban participants in the region’s governance who perceive the policies as threats. Hence, they refuse to participate in such policies and, because their participation is voluntary, they can make their refusal stick. Consequently, regional governance under voluntary cooperation is nearly always a victim of the lowest common denominator phenomenon. Any single unit can scuttle decisions made and policies adopted for the good of the overall territory (see, Norris, 2001). Only a strong regional governance (one that could produce and compel compliance with decisions) would be sufficient to produce policies that would achieve the goals of the new regionalists. Thus, contrary to the claims of the new regionalists, it may well be impossible to have regional governance without regional government.

Writing more than 40 years ago, Wood (1958b) endeavored to forecast what regional governance, circa 1975, might look like. After reviewing what he believed to be the salient trends affecting metropolitan America in 1958, Wood wrote:

There are not enough reliable data over a long enough period of time to weigh the relative pulls of metropolitan dominance [metropolitan reform] and grassroots renaissance [metropolitan fragmentation]. But, there are enough data to allow us to be sceptical [sic] of the one community hypothesis [whether a single metropolitan “community” might come into existence] (Wood, 1958b, pp. 118–119).

Today, ample data are available to suggest the primacy of separation, competition, and fragmentation over metropolitan reform, of whatever stripe. In a particularly telling example, Wyly, Glickman, and Lahr (1998) examined the 10 top trends affecting American cities and metropolitan areas. A trend toward regional solutions to urban problems or regional governance was not among them. Furthermore, the primary reasons for the lack of support for regional governance are found in the political impediments previously discussed. If this conclusion is correct, the next question is where should the debate over regional governance proceed from here? What, if anything can be done to strengthen regional governance given the certainly that, in framing regional approaches, politics trumps an economic rationale for regionalism just as it trumps more openly normative justifications.
Four choices appear to be available. The first is a continuation of the current rhetoric for metropolitan reform. That this rhetoric has not been successful in producing much meaningful regional governance anywhere in the US during the past 50 years or more, however, might suggest that such is a flawed approach.

Second, there is a laissez-faire option which would essentially accept the public choice position that the fragmented metropolis is, indeed, an efficient mechanism for allocating public values, and take no further action (see, Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations [ACIR], 1988; Bish & Ostrom, 1973; Oakerson & Parks, 1991; Ostrom, Tiebout, & Warren, 1961; Parks & Oakerson, 1989; Tiebout, 1956). This may, in the final analysis, be the smart choice. It certainly seems to be the most practical and least frustrating, especially given the nature, strength, and persistence of the political impediments to regional governance.

However, it would be a wholly unsatisfying choice for many urbanists because it would admit that efforts to address real and genuine urban problems (Wood, 1958b) must be abandoned. A laissez-faire approach would also mean, irrespective of the objective data about inter- and intra-metropolitan inequities, central city decline, and negative externalities, no ameliorative or remedial action should be advocated or taken.

A third approach is to seek ways to strengthen voluntary cooperation. In 1987, Walker suggested several alternatives to regional governance “with teeth.” His list (subsequently expanded by others, notably Atkins, 1995) contained at least 13 options that did not involve governmental reform in metropolitan areas. He also noted that many, if not all, of those options were in use in metropolitan areas throughout the US (Walker, 1987; see also Thompson 1997 for an examination of intergovernmental cooperation in the Detroit area). As shown earlier, however, there are two principal drawbacks to cooperation. First, cooperation lacks the power to compel compliance and second, it suffers from the lowest common denominator phenomenon.

Might it be possible, though a combination of incentives and disincentives, to strengthen cooperation? In other words, to give it teeth? In theory, of course, this might be possible. But the available evidence suggests that, as a practical matter, it is unlikely to happen. I use as data points the following: 1) the relative lack of success of metropolitan planning commissions and councils of government, even when they had A-95 review authority, to do much to affect control of land use in metropolitan areas or affect solutions to other area wide problems; 2) the relative failure of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) under federal transportation legislation to do much more than cobble together regional transportation plans based on the desires of individual jurisdictions (versus committing to regional transportation planning based on addressing the needs of the overall territory); and 3) the withdrawal of the federal government from supporting regional approaches and solutions, including, most recently, the failure of the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce air quality regulations in severe ozone non-attainment areas. Thus, cooperation will remain the weakest and least effective means of achieving anything resembling regional governance.

A fourth possible option presents itself in the role of state government. In her article in this issue, for example, Gainsborough (2001) identifies several means by which state governments can facilitate regionalism. Additionally, in her article Frisken (2001) shows that the success of regional governance in the Toronto area was largely the result of actions by the Ontario Provincial government. Both Gainsborough and Frisken, however, also note an important limitation to the role of state or provincial government—political will. As Gainsborough (2001) writes, “any rule is only as strong as the political will to maintain it” (p. 510). If over time, as in Toronto, the commitment to regionalism of the senior government wanes, separation, competition, and fragmentation can be expected to prevail within regions. Moreover, as Gainsbor-
ough notes, even when states act to facilitate regionalism, regional cooperation is easier to achieve on systems maintenance than lifestyle issues.

Where does this leave the matter? My conclusion is decidedly pessimistic. Because of the formidable political factors that hinder its development, the probability of achieving regional governance anywhere in the US in the foreseeable future is very low. At least it is low in the absence of a sustained crisis or crises which would require local governments in a region to cede some of their local autonomy and cooperate in meaningful ways or which would require senior levels of government to step in and force some form of regional governance. Clearly, however, history is not very sanguine that such will occur.

Advocates of regional governance of all types will undoubtedly continue their advocacy, and from time to time they will undoubtedly achieve some victories. Based on current trends, however, a reasonable forecast for the state of regionalism in the US 20 years or more hence would be that it will closely resemble the state of regionalism today. Economic imperatives will not overcome the political impediments to regionalism and regions will continue as governmentally fragmented entities resistant to nearly all efforts to achieve regional governance.

REFERENCES


