

## Regionalism, Localism, and Metropolitan Governance: Suggestions from the Research Program on Local Public Economies

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**L**IKE MOST NEW intellectual or political movements, the recent movement called New Regionalism is a mixed bag of old prescriptions and new remedies to address problems both new and longstanding, not to mention both real and imaginary. Part of New Regionalism is hardly new at all. Instead, it is the long-abiding faith in metropolitan consolidation and central city expansion (see Rusk 1995) applied to the latest generation of metropolitan problems.

Part of the movement responds to growing problems that occur on a more regional scale and that seem to require some sort of regional solution—in particular, transportation and infrastructure problems that derive, at least in part, from sprawling patterns of development. New Regionalism also represents progress in conceptualizing the general problem of metropolitan governance, reflected in the very choice of the term “governance” (and the associated complexities it implies) rather than “government” (Altshuler et al. 1999). Yet, some of those who now embrace institutional solutions other than metro government do so mainly because of the political infeasibility of massive jurisdictional consolidation (see Downs 1994), not out of an intellectual conversion to alternative approaches.

In this article, we focus on those intellectual elements of New Regionalism consistent with how we understand metropolitan governance to work in America, which have real potential to address real problems. We begin by reviewing the research program on local public economies that grew out of the efforts of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) in the mid-to-late 1980s to reconceptualize the problem of metropolitan governance. The findings that emerged from this research program contribute to and support many of the tenets associated with New Regionalism. Combined with the work of metropolitan historians (in particular, Teaford 1979; 1997), the research program in local public economies suggests promising directions for New Regionalism. At the same time, any concern for regionalism must be appropriately balanced with a concern for localism, both old and new. The strength of metropolitan governance in America is that it makes a place for both.

### The Research Program in Local Public Economies

Between 1985 and 1992 the ACIR sponsored an extensive research program on local public economies aimed at rethinking the prob-

lem of metropolitan organization and governance. Previously, ACIR had been a staunch supporter of orthodox metropolitan prescriptions; it argued that the multiplicity of units of local government inhibited effective metropolitan governance, urged the elimination of the very smallest units, favored general-purpose over special-purpose governments, and supported city-county consolidation that would unite central cities with their suburbs (see ACIR 1982). Yet, research had clearly begun to show that "fragmented" metropolitan areas spent less on local government and that key local services, such as police, were more effectively and responsively delivered by relatively small local agencies (see Ostrom, Bish, and Ostrom 1988). Given the historical resistance of local citizens to consolidation efforts, the ACIR decided to reexamine the central issues as a basis for new recommendations.

The research program consisted of three closely related efforts. The first was theoretical, an effort to articulate a framework for the study of metropolitan areas that could be used to examine the real variation that exists among them. This resulted in an ACIR report, "The Organization of Local Public Economies" (ACIR 1987), recently revised and expanded by Oakerson as *Governing Local Public Economies*. The second effort consisted of a pair of case studies in the St. Louis and Pittsburgh-Allegheny County areas, chosen as cases of extreme fragmentation measured in terms of the number of local governments per capita. These, too, were published as ACIR reports (ACIR 1988; 1992).

The third effort, begun in the ACIR publications but continued elsewhere, was our joint revision of the theory of metropolitan governance. Drawing on the local public economies framework and the two case studies, we explain the findings from metro-area research in a way that differs not only from the traditional public administration story of fragmentation but also from the standard economists' story of competition among local governments based on Tiebout (1956). The

result was a series of publications mainly in the journal literature (Oakerson and Parks 1988; 1989; Parks and Oakerson 1989; 1993; Blomquist and Parks 1995; Oakerson 1999b).

The study of local public economies is distinguished by its use of several key conceptual or theoretical tools. For example, provision of goods and services may be separated from their production (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961). Moreover, there is a distinction between fragmented and complexly organized local governance structures, with the concept of a "local government constitution" explaining how the latter are crafted (Oakerson and Parks 1989). Political mechanisms exist to enhance the exercise of citizen voice and public entrepreneurship (Oakerson and Parks 1988). Also considered in the study of local public economies are fiscal disparities and equity and efficiency outcomes (Oakerson 1999a).

#### Provision vs. Production

Local public economies research makes an important conceptual and practical distinction between provision of goods and services and their production. *Provision* means public decisions about which goods and services to provide by public means; which private activities to regulate; how much public revenue to raise and how to raise it; what quantities of each service to provide and what quality standards to apply; and how to arrange and monitor production. *Production* means transforming input resources to make a product or render a service. One key insight of almost 40 years ago was that public provision did not require public production by the same governmental unit (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961). Indeed, all governments provide services to their citizenry that they do not produce in-house. What to contract and what to produce in-house is a city-specific decision. The choice of contracting vs. in-house production requires careful attention to the local market in public goods and services. Choosing contract production does not remove responsibility from contracting officials for service delivery.

Provision units are communities organized to make collective decisions. They include municipalities, counties, special districts, regional authorities, and associations of homeowners, neighborhoods, and businesses. Provision issues include preference expression and preference matching, fiscal equivalence, and accountability. Our research finds that multiple provision units accommodate multiple communities of interest at various scales (ACIR 1988; 1992; Parks and Oakerson 1993). Large provision units are necessary for area-wide interests such as air and watershed management, fiscal issues (including redistribution), and specialized functions such as primary traffic flow, transit, and areawide amenities. Small- and medium-sized provision units are preferred for local "lifestyle" interests such as police patrol, primary schools, local parks and recreation, and variance to land-use plans. Multiple provision units overlap one another in "nested" patterns in most metropolitan regions.

Provision multiplicity is constrained by transaction costs (ACIR 1987; Oakerson 1999b). It is costly in terms of both time and money to create and to operate a new provision unit. When permitted to do so, citizens create a new unit when the anticipated benefits exceed the costs of creation and operation; provision units do not simply proliferate. Preemption by city governments, however, constrains provision multiplicity in large cities. Residents of large cities are rarely given the authority to create provision units on a neighborhood scale. Neighborhood associations are important "shadow" provision units, but rarely have they been allowed to exercise significant authority in most large cities.

Provision units such as cities, counties, and even neighborhoods select or create production units to supply services to their citizens. Production units transform resource inputs into outputs, which in turn may affect outcomes. For many public services, production functions are not well understood. Time- and place-specific information is frequently crucial to effective production. Many public

services are coproduced, and consumer participation is required (Parks et al. 1982).

Scale and scope economies or diseconomies for service production vary by service component. A concern for effectiveness and efficiency in service production dictates a preference for a mix of small-, medium-, and large-scale service producers. For example, large-scale service may be appropriate for some service components (e.g., emergency dispatch, major crime investigation, laboratory services) but not for others (e.g., patrol and immediate response). The shift toward "community policing" in many large police departments, with responsibilities for patrol of small geographic areas delegated to a regularly assigned group of officers, is in part a response to research that finds advantages from small-scale production. Multiple production units enhance competition and accommodate vertical differentiation at appropriate scale (Parks and Oakerson 1993). Production multiplicity is constrained by scale economies, coordination costs, and the extent of the provision-side "market."

Provision units and production units can be linked in various ways. In-house production with own departments is but one of several options, including joint production units organized by two or more provision units, intergovernmental contracting, private or not-for-profit contracting, franchising, or vouchering (ACIR 1987; Savas 1987). Provision units that arrange production through competitive means can reduce potential "producer bias," such as capture by municipal unions (Downs 1976).

In fact, a seemingly "pure" local service like policing is very commonly organized using such a mixed approach. Ostrom, Parks, and Whitaker's study (1978) of police organization in 80 metropolitan areas found that nearly one-third of metropolitan populations obtained serious crime investigation from suppliers other than or in addition to a local police department; that one-third of local departments obtained dispatch services from a different organization; and that more than

80 percent of training and 90 percent of lab analyses were obtained from non-local suppliers. Separating the provision of police service from its production, especially production of components that benefit from scale economies, enhances efficient production through vertical integration of such components (Parks 1985).

In sum, local public economies are composed of a provision side and a production side, each of which can be organized in quite different ways. Provision-side organization depends mainly on state-level rules for constituting provision units, or "local government constitutions" (Oakerson and Parks 1989). Production-side organization is driven to a great extent by the organization of the provision side: dominance by a single provision unit leads to a production side dominated by large urban bureaucracies. By contrast, the presence of a large number of small local governments leads to a much more diverse set of production arrangements that includes both large- and small-scale producers. The overall configuration thus varies among metropolitan areas, depending largely on the institutional history of the area and, especially, of the state in which it is located. The institutional history of the states regarding the formation of local governments is sufficiently similar, however, to permit a rather high degree of generalization.

#### Fragmented vs. Complex Organization

Conceptually, the fragmentation of governmental authority in a metropolitan area can take different forms. Under *political* fragmentation, each general-purpose local government provides and produces all local services for its citizens. Under *functional* fragmentation, each special district provides and produces distinct services for all citizens. Neither of these forms of fragmentation can be found in any real metropolitan area, despite critics' claims regarding metropolitan fragmentation—claims that continue to occupy the editorial pages of major metropolitan newspapers, even as they become less prominent in the

scholarly literature. Instead of textbook fragmentation, real metropolitan areas exhibit varied and complex organization: a variety of small-, medium-, and large-provision units are linked to a variety of production units. Provision and production are differentiated, both geographically and functionally. Jurisdictional differentiation on a small scale is augmented by organizational overlays that provide and/or produce services on a larger scale. Functional integration across provision units is common for many key service components (ACIR 1988; 1992; Ostrom, Bish, and Ostrom 1988).

Thus, much of the debate over metropolitan organization has been couched in terms of extremes that rarely, if ever, occur. On the one hand, the "ideal-type" industry structure envisioned in proposals for unified metropolitan governments (e.g., Rusk 1995; Lowery 2000) implies complete horizontal and vertical integration. One police department, for example, would organize patrol on an area-wide basis and produce all support services in-house. The department would be one of many vertically integrated bureaus organized by the unified government. On the other hand, the stereotypical image of a highly fragmented metropolitan area implies an industry structure that is horizontally differentiated among a large number of direct service producers, with complete vertical integration in each agency. Continuing the same example, each of many police departments would organize its own patrol service and produce all support services in-house. Each might even be organized by its own special district, with special districts for other services, too. Actual service production structures, however, do not correspond closely to either polar case, partly because industry structure varies with the production functions associated with different services, especially with the diverse economies of scale that affect production of both direct and indirect service components.

#### Governance

Tiebout (1956) offered a model of how a system of local jurisdictions could facilitate pref-

erence matching through citizen choice of tax-service bundles—that is, citizens are said to “vote with their feet.” Stein (1987) and Teske et al. (1993) further elaborated Tiebout’s model to show how it could operate in a limited-information environment. Locational choice among *horizontally* fragmented jurisdictions, however, is an insufficient governance mechanism for local public economies that are also *vertically* differentiated. Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren (1961) recognized this, arguing that a “metropolitan framework” for adjusting relationships among jurisdictions and resolving conflicts could be found in most metropolitan areas.

Exit, or “voting with one’s feet,” cannot alone account for the efficiency and effectiveness results found in complexly organized metropolitan areas (Oakerson and Parks 1988). Given the immobility of homeowners’ capital stock—which composes much of the local property tax base and simultaneously represents the potential impact of exit for the majority of citizens—consumer exit must have a limited impact in local public economies. An exiting homeowner has every incentive to find a buyer who will pay even more in property taxes than did the “exiter.” Exiting is a less effective form of competition that requires an individual customer to find a replacement before taking his or her business to another vendor.

Because of the weakness of the exit threat, local public economies depend more on citizen “voice” (Hirschman 1970) than on exit to motivate public entrepreneurs and to allow both citizens and officials to create appropriate organizational arrangements. Voice depends on political mechanisms, on institutions of governance. Governance can be distinguished from both the provision and production of public goods and services. It consists instead of the capacity to make, change, and enforce the rules within which provision and production are created and modified (ACIR 1987).

Governance supplies institutional structure by means of a local government consti-

tution that allocates authority for citizen choice (Oakerson and Parks 1989). Included are rules of association that specify the types of local government units that may be created and the procedures for their creation. What, for example, is required to establish a city of the second class? How many potential residents are required to sign a petition? Must there be review by an oversight agency or a referendum vote? Fiscal rules specify the ways in which local governments may raise or otherwise receive revenues. For example, what property and transactions may be taxed, and at what rates? What user fees may be imposed, and on whom? Boundary adjustment rules specify how local government boundaries may be changed (through annexation, governmental consolidation, or dissolution). Contractual rules specify how local governments may enter into agreements with one another and for what purposes (ACIR 1992). As they create and modify governmental units and the linkages among them, citizens and local officials make choices according to these rules.

The local government constitution is not static. Its rules are enacted initially by state legislators and constitution makers, and these initial rules can be modified as changing circumstances yield problems not well addressed under the existing rules. Metropolitan provision and production structures result, therefore, from “playing by” the rules and modifying the rules with subsequent “play” (Oakerson and Parks 1989; Sokolow 1993; Lewis 1996). Governance depends on mechanisms for rule making, application, enforcement, and modification. Differentiated patterns of provision and production are sustained over time by a governance structure of voluntary agreements and associations among local officials and citizens.

Governance mechanisms may include those that allow citizens to “vote with their feet” as they choose among different tax-service packages offered by provision units, but such mechanisms must also allow for citizen voice and, in some ways, amplify it. In complex

metropolitan areas, low citizen-to-representative ratios may make representatives more attentive to their constituents. Overlying jurisdictions, too, are an important governance mechanism. In addition to addressing provision and production issues at larger scales, overlying jurisdictions may offer forums for dispute resolution; processes whereby resources may be redistributed and augmented; and mechanisms to enforce local, state, and national constitutions. Additional governance mechanisms include professional associations that link service specialists across jurisdictions and multijurisdictional forums in which local officials meet regularly to discuss and seek solutions for cross-jurisdictional problems.

### **Fiscal Disparity and Equity**

Provision-side differentiation reflects and facilitates citizen choice of different tax-service packages, which enhances efficiency of allocation (Tiebout 1956); a differentiated local public economy will therefore exhibit inequalities in provision. Inequalities that are the result of citizen choice are not truly inequities unless citizen choice is constrained in inappropriate ways. However, in the real world, the tax-service packages available to some citizens and some communities can fall outside a range deemed acceptable in a democratic society. How can inequities of this nature be resolved?

One possibility favored by some reform advocates is the consolidation of differentiated provision units into a single, large, income-heterogeneous government that might then achieve intrajurisdictional resource redistribution through service delivery (Rusk 1995; Lowery 2000). However, there is little evidence that poor and minority communities are better off under this approach. Instead, they may simply become poor and minority neighborhoods of a larger jurisdiction, and thereby find their voice weakened (Savitch and Vogel 2000; Blomquist and Parks 1995). Worse, poor and minority residents may find their limited tax base exploited to finance improvements that primarily benefit better-

off citizens of the new jurisdiction, as Rosen-  
traub finds in consolidated Indianapolis (Rosen-  
traub 2000; see also Powell 2000, 236-  
237). Similar results are reported for Phoenix  
(Guhathakurta and Wichert 1998), one of  
Rusk's (1995) "elastic" cities.

An alternative possibility for reducing inequities, one much more consistent with the way in which local public economies are commonly organized, is to achieve needed resource redistribution among differentiated provision units by means of intergovernmental grants and distributions from overlying units (Oakerson 1999b). This redistribution may take the form of direct revenue redistribution, as with property tax-base sharing in Minneapolis-St. Paul (Orfield 1997), sales tax sharing in St. Louis County (ACIR 1988), state aid to local governments in Wisconsin (Parks and Oakerson 1990), and the federal revenue-sharing programs of earlier years. Redistribution can also occur through the assumption of previously local responsibilities by an overlying provision unit (e.g., the special district for regional art, culture, and education assets in St. Louis City and County; the regional asset district in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania) or service production arranged by an overlying unit and distributed among smaller, differentiated local units (e.g., the provision and production of special-education services in St. Louis County, Missouri [see ACIR 1988]). Redistribution by these mechanisms preserves not only opportunities for citizen choice and citizen voice (for the poor as well as the better off) but also the provision system necessary to a differentiated production system. This local public economy approach to redistribution is recommended for practical concerns, too, because most metropolitan citizens do not favor large-scale consolidation of existing government units.

### **Key Findings and Conclusions from the Research Program**

Several findings and conclusions that emerged from the research program on local public

economies apply directly to the concerns addressed by New Regionalism. Perhaps the most fundamental conclusion is the usefulness of the local public economies framework for organizing data, building theoretical explanations, assessing problems, and suggesting potential reforms. First, the framework enables investigators to make sense of the complex array of units of local government and public agencies found in any metropolitan area. An understanding of a metropolitan area's complexity must inform reform proposals. Second, the framework focuses on the importance of structure (on both the provision and the production side), without implying that only one structure (i.e., metropolitan government) is right for a metropolitan area. At the same time, the framework can be used to identify structural weaknesses that may underlie extant problems.

The research program also clearly indicated the possibility of metropolitan governance without metropolitan government (ACIR 1987; 1988). Based largely on findings from the St. Louis study, we concluded that metropolitan governance, and thus the ability to address metrowide problems, could be obtained by adjusting local government constitutions—the broad set of rules for constituting, organizing, and operating local government units, as well as forming relationships among those units. The formal responsibility for changing most of these rules rested with the state legislature, but the device of special legislation allowed the legislature to devolve this responsibility largely to the St. Louis delegation, whose members are not beholden to any single unit of local government. “Constitutional” decision making across local governments was thus separated from “operational” decision making within local governments; no single local government need be dominant. This finding has informed many New Regionalist recommendations of recent years (see Altshuler et al. 1999).

Equally important is the process that underlies adjustments in the local government constitution—a process of consensus-build-

ing among local governments. This process is facilitated by a metropolitan civil society composed of voluntary associations of local governments and local officials (e.g., municipal leagues, organizations of police chiefs and fire chiefs, and regionally oriented citizen groups). This network provides forums for raising and discussing issues as well as negotiating and resolving differences related not only to board questions of governance but also to operational relationships among local government agencies (see Fishman 2000, 120–21).

Structurally, the research program pointed to the importance of “nestedness” on both the provision side and the production side, a feature also cited by the recent National Research Council's Committee on Improving the Future of U.S. Cities through Improved Metropolitan Area Governance (see Altshuler et al. 1999, 128–29). Nested provision allows communities of interest that occur at various scales within various boundaries to form a government, engage effectively in collective action, and accept primary responsibility for their own governance, thereby enhancing responsiveness and accountability. At the same time, nested provision allows for intergovernmental transfers designed to address inequities. Nested production allows diverse economies of scale to be utilized in the production and delivery of complex services that depend on multiple service components, and thus enhance effectiveness and efficiency.

The importance of nested structures called into question the adequacy of the most prominent economic explanation of how “fragmentation” works in metropolitan areas: the Tiebout model of competition among local governments. The Tiebout dynamic assumes political fragmentation (i.e., a flat structure of horizontally differentiated local governments that compete for mobile residents). The existence of organizational overlays both blunts competitive differences and depends on extensive cooperation among “rival” municipalities. The relevant economic model for examining the production-side relationships

among local governments is the model of industrial organization, not a market. If not local government competition, then what?

An explanation of how fragmentation works requires some sort of mechanism. Based on the findings from St. Louis, we suggest a combination of citizen voice and public entrepreneurship (Oakerson and Parks 1988). Voice is amplified in a number of ways: first, the use of referenda to decide basic structural questions, including consolidations and annexations, not to mention (in the case of St. Louis) tax increases. Second, voice is amplified by the low ratio of citizens to elected officials, which greatly increases access. Public entrepreneurs are local officials (both elected and appointed) who exercise initiative in behalf of structural innovations or tax packages designed to improve services. The multiplicity of local governments makes public entrepreneurship possible by providing multiple sources of initiative while at the same time encouraging entrepreneurs to be responsive to public concerns.

Finally, the research program underscored the adaptability of the more highly differentiated local public economies, such as St. Louis and Pittsburgh-Allegheny County. Clearly, the most highly fragmented metropolitan areas do work out regional solutions to regional problems. Historical studies of other metropolitan areas lend further support to our conclusion (Teaford 1979; 1997).

### **Existing Institutions and Current Concerns**

In general, existing local public economies have been addressing new and emerging regional problems through existing institutions, without drastically altering their overall structure or method of governance. Growth-related concerns can be creatively addressed by following the principle of nestedness (Oakerson 1999a). One possibility is to constitute locally governed, special-purpose, regional planning districts that do not deprive local

municipalities of basic planning and zoning authority but rely instead on development-related fees indexed to potential demand on infrastructure as a means of constraining development. Another option is to adapt municipal incorporation procedures to encourage the formation of compact "new towns."

Institutions provide both opportunities and constraints, and some metropolitan areas do face serious institutional rigidities that restrict opportunities to address some problems. For example, the separation of St. Louis City from St. Louis County, accomplished as a matter of progressive reform around the last turn of the century, deprives the region of a major source of structural nestedness—the nesting of the central city inside an overlying county. The lack of nestedness created a rivalry between city and county that works to the serious detriment of the city (Parks and Oakerson 1993). Reversing the century-old reform, however, is extraordinarily difficult, and efforts to do so are made more difficult by confusing the issue of city-county separation with city-county consolidation.

The most serious institutional rigidity in metropolitan America, however, is the monopoly power enjoyed by many central city governments. Bringing the benefits of a more highly differentiated local public economy to central cities ought to be a high priority for urban reformers—though it does not appear to be a high priority in the New Regionalism movement.

One important lesson of the research program on local public economies is that regionalism must always be complemented by localism, just as localism must always be complemented by regionalism. Effective localism is the principal ingredient that has been missing in central cities, although important efforts are under way to remedy the deficiency. A growing number of states now permit the incorporation of business improvement districts (Oakerson 1999a) or community benefits districts (Baer and Marando, forthcoming) within the boundaries of existing city



jurisdictions. Such districts give citizens and local business owners the choice to provide services in addition to those provided through the city by taxing themselves to pay for these extra services and, in some cases, receiving intergovernmental aid to augment the revenues raised in the district. The rapid growth of neighborhood districts suggests that it would not be unreasonable to refer to a "new localism" alongside New Regionalism.

To advance beyond the orthodox faith that a "bigger box" created by consolidation or annexation is necessary for solving metropolitan problems (Rusk 1995), New Regionalism must come to appreciate that regionalism and localism are complements. Indeed, effective regionalism is actually built on effective localism; the history of metropolitan America provides a multitude of examples. Stressing either regionalism or localism to the exclusion of the other betrays the principle of nestedness that is the hallmark of successful metropolitan governance in America.

### The Continuing Challenge of Metropolitan Governance

The continuing challenge of metropolitan governance is how can citizens organize (and reorganize) systems of local governance that are responsive to citizen preferences, effective and efficient at service production, and equitable in service distribution and finance? Systems that attempt to meet this challenge will be complexly organized. Citizens' preferences for local goods and services are diverse, and they may aggregate at different levels—neighborhoods, districts, cities, counties, metropolitan subregions, metropolitan-wide, and beyond. Efficient production scale varies widely across services and service components (Hirsch 1984). Resources and needs are not distributed uniformly. Preferences, technologies, patterns of resources, and needs are dynamic. Today's metropolitan structures are the result of problem-solving efforts by citizens in the past (Oakerson 1999a; Tea-

ford 1979; 1997; Lewis 1996). Considering the specific challenges in each metropolitan area and the various ways in which they have been addressed by local actors in a variety of cultural and constitutional contexts, it should be no surprise to any but the most pedantic of metropolitan reformers that metropolitan governance structures vary significantly across metropolitan areas. Governance structures must empower citizens and their elected agents to make choices among alternative organizational arrangements. Instead of a single structure to impose a "correct" solution, metropolitan areas require structures that are sufficiently open to allow for diverse solutions that respond to varying conditions.

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