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Civic Led Strategic Planning for the New York Region:
A Regional Plan Association Case Study

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Overview

This paper describes the role that Regional Plan Association, a nearly century-old, non-statutory organization that does strategic planning and advocacy for the New York Metropolitan Region, America's largest urban area.

RPA's experience should be of interest to officials and scholars interested in improving strategic planning and management for the London Capital Region. With 24 million residents and a \$1.5 trillion economy, no other large metropolitan region in the world is more like London than New York, in terms of its size, the diversity of its population, its portfolio of industries, its leading role in the global economy and its strong economic and population growth.

And as in the London region, New York lacks a statutory metropolitan government institution to address the issues and manage the major systems that function at the regional level. These include transport, environment, energy and telecommunications systems and housing and labor markets.

Obstacles to Establishing a Statutory Metropolitan Planning and Implementation Body

In an ideal world, the NY Region would have a strong statutory body to manage these systems. (Think Singapore!) But we don't live in that ideal world, and for much of the past century the region has used other means to address these needs.

There are several reasons for this --some geographic and others political. The first is historic: 350 years ago King Charles II decided to place the border between the newly constituted colonies of New York and New Jersey down the middle of the Hudson River, immediately west of Manhattan Island. Further, HM Government left in place the western boundary of Connecticut Colony only 25 miles east of Manhattan. These boundaries were recognized by the United States Constitution and its federal system, which delegates control over most urban systems to the states. This wasn't a problem until the early 20th century, when a rapidly growing New York City expanded into portions of New Jersey and Connecticut, Long Island and the Lower Hudson Valley.

There were also considerable political obstacles to empowering a strong statutory body to manage metropolitan-scale urban systems. Principal among these has been the sheer size of the metro region in comparison with that of the three states from which it is comprised. The population of the New York metropolitan region represents two-thirds of New York State's population of 19 million, and more than 80% of its economy and tax base. Similar ratios apply in New Jersey and Connecticut. So establishing a strong statutory body, with regulatory, taxing

and other powers would create alternative power structures in all three states, threatening the political base of governors and legislatures, and creating a powerful dis-incentive for politicians to create such a body. Similar circumstances apply in London, where the metropolitan region encompasses more than one-third of the UK's population and half or more of its economy.

Finally, there is the fundamental challenge that Americans --and New Yorkers-- have long been suspicious of large, distant public authorities and other government entities. (Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the American Declaration of Independence said that "All men were entitled to life, liberty and freedom from distant tyranny." In the late 18th century, this meant King George III; today distant tyranny means large public authorities.

Managing the Development of the New York Metropolitan Region

Now after nearly four centuries it is probably no longer fair to blame Charles II and George III for New York's problems. And it would be reasonable to assume that at some point a visionary politician would have stepped forward to fix this problem. That someone was New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who, prodded by the federal government, worked with his counterparts in New Jersey and Connecticut to create the Tri-state Regional Planning Commission in 1965. However, Tri-state had only limited powers to conduct strategic planning for transportation, environment, housing and spatial development across the metropolitan area. And it never gained broad public or political support, and when the Reagan Administration eliminated metropolitan planning requirements and funding in the early 1980s, Tri-state was abolished.

Rockefeller also acted on RPA's recommendation that a Metropolitan Transportation Authority be established. But RPA's vision for a tri-state transport authority was never realized. Not wanting to relinquish control to a large regional bureaucracy, New Jersey and Connecticut have both maintained their own transport agencies.

The metropolitan development and infrastructure challenges faced by the NY metropolitan region pre-dated the creation of Tri-state by several decades. For this reason, early in the 20th Century a visionary group of political, civic and business leaders promoted the creation of two entities --one public and statutory, and the other civic and non-statutory. The first of these was the Port of New York Authority (now called the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey), established in 1921 to manage inter-state transportation systems. The PA now manages the region's airports, part of its rapid transit system, bus terminals and trans-Hudson bridges and tunnels.

Creation of Regional Plan Association

One year later, Regional Plan Association was created as an independent, non-statutory civic group to prepare a long-range strategic plan for the fast growing metropolitan region. RPA was established by a well-connected group of business and civic leaders, including two former Chicagoans, Charles Dyer Norton and Frederick Delano. They had led in creating the Burnham plan for Chicago in 1909, and believed that New York needed a similar long-range vision for the entire metropolitan area. And importantly, Delano's nephew, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, later became Governor of New York, and then President of the United States, providing RPA's vision with a powerful friend in the state capital, Albany and then in Washington.

RPA's visionary 1929 Regional Plan for New York and Environs was led by Thomas Adams, founder of the Royal Town Planning Institute. The Plan set forth a broad vision for the region's growth and development through 1965. It laid out proposals for the world's first metropolitan limited access highway system, an expanded and integrated regional rail network, a system of regional and state parks and preserves, and proposals for urban development and housing across the region. Importantly, Adams' plan was built around the concept of what he called "concentrated deconcentration," resulting in proposals to decant development and population from New York City out into a polycentric network of regional centers.

From Plan to Action

Much of the plan was implemented before the onset of World War II, by master builders Robert Moses and others, with funds provided by President Roosevelt's New Deal public employment programs. Delano left RPA in the early 1930s to join the Roosevelt Administration as head of the National Resources Planning Board (the planning arm for the New Deal's public works programs), where he directed funds to New York's ambitious highway, parks, housing and other programs that emerged from the Plan, and which which became models for other American cities.

These investments underpinned New York's growth and development and quality of life through the middle of the 20th century. RPA's Second Regional Plan was completed in 1969 to address a new set of issues facing the region, including the need for environmental restoration and managing suburban sprawl. RPA's Third Regional Plan, A Region at Risk, addressed the issues of disinvestment in the urban rail network, urban disinvestment and destruction of water and ecological resources. The Fourth Regional Plan, A Region Restored, will be completed in late 2017 and will address the challenges of climate change, increasing social and economic inequity and rising housing costs, the need to reform regional institutions and tax systems and other urgent issues facing the region.

Following completion of each of its plans, RPA has led ambitious advocacy programs to promote implementation of key policies and investments called for the plans. Over nearly a century, perhaps three-quarters of RPA's key plan recommendations have been implemented. This is a result of the organization's persistence, the credibility and connections of its leadership and staff, and the power of big ideas to attract public and political support. The organization's \$5 million annual budget is funded in part by membership contributions from concerned citizens, civic leaders and major employers, and additional support from philanthropies and public authorities and agencies.

Upshot for London

The upshot of New York's experience for London is that if it is not possible to create a statutory strategic planning and implementation body for the Capital Region, a non-statutory, civic led group could assume this role, and achieve many of the benefits that a statutory group would provide.

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