**Welcome to Laurentide -- the Twin Cities as a mega-region**

**<strib type="image" src="** **http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/dartmouth\_map.png" byline="Garrett Dash Nelson and Alasdair Rae" credit="An Economic Geography of the United States: From Commutes to Megaregions"></strib>**

We frequently identify as Minnesotans or Midwesterners, as citizens of the metro area or greater outstate or our various hometowns, while some push the concept of defining this state as “the North.”

But how many consider themselves citizens of Laurentide?

This is just one of the unofficial ways researchers, regional planners and other experts have used to describe the Twin Cities and its surrounding areas as they redraw the United States to better reflect how different cities currently connect with each other and will in the future.

When it comes to mega-region maps, Minnesota usually gets lumped into regions like the Midwest, Great Lakes or Great Plains and often as a satellite of Chicago. But <a href=”<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0166083#sec002>” target=”new\_”>an analysis of census commuter data</a> by researchers at Dartmouth <a href=”http://discovery.dartmouth.edu/megaregions/“ target=”new\_”>paints a different picture, revealing the Twin Cities to be the center of its own universe.

“As cities have over-spilled their boundaries and into each other, the idea that we have these distinct cities has faded away,” said Garrett Nelson, historical geographer from Dartmouth University and an author of the study. “What we really mean is clusters of big and small cities and towns and even rural areas that form some sort of cohesive whole.”

In the Twin Cities’ case, the Laurentide mega-region – named by the researchers after the ice sheet that once covered the state – stretches across state borders into Fargo and Grand Forks to the west and LaCrosse and Eau Claire to the east.

The concept of mega-regions dates back to the 1960’s in reference to the Northeast megalopolis centered on New York City that was emerging at the time. While lacking a hard definition, the term describes areas that have common economic, infrastructural and planning challenges, share transit connections, ecosystems, labor markets and are generally intertwined – functionally forming their own region across traditional political borders.

One way of quantifying those interconnections is the flow of workers to and from cities, which the Dartmouth researchers used to radically redraw the national map into 50 alternative regions -- a feat they hope will they hope will reframe the conversation about cities and central planning

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“There was a time when these cities were distinct from one another, but now they have become deeply interlaced,” Nelson said.

Rather than simply eyeballing the current U.S. map and lump connected areas together using “common sense,” Nelson’s approach to defining mega-regions differs from the norm through the use of 4 million census data points to determine where people were commuting to and from work and the strength of those connections between different cities and towns.

“If a suburb of Minneapolis has many commutes into Downtown Minneapolis that’s a stronger connection than from Los Angeles to Minneapolis,” he said.

The process is completely blind to actual geography and doesn’t know that St. Paul is next to Minneapolis, he said, only how strongly connected they are.

So when it comes to drawing borders around these mega-regions, the goal was to place lines where there were the fewest commuter crossings, allowing them to distinguish where breaks or borders occur that aren’t necessarily visible to the naked eye.

Redrawing Minnesota like this, of course, is all a simulation. But it’s one driven by a real phenomenon describing how cities are actually bound together by people’s commutes to work.

“There really are these kinds of natural regions. I think this is the way in which the economy is working," said Tom Fisher, a University of Minnesota professor at the College of Design and director at the Metropolitan Design Center. "It’s also part of the conversation about how the global economy rests on cities.”

The U.S. Census commuter data used by Dartmouth researchers shows many people living in western Wisconsin and North Dakota more frequently driving into the Twin Cities than those from towns in Iowa, South Dakota or Illinois.

Though a vast majority of those commuting to the Twin Cities metro area – about 1.6 million -- come from within it, according to U.S. Census data. The numbers of workers from elsewhere are comparatively very small.

Among those who don’t live in the metro, about 14,000 are from areas in outstate Minnesota, including Duluth, Rochester and Mankato.

Roughly 1,200 come from La Crosse, Eau Claire and other points in Wisconsin to work in the metro. About 450 commuted from North Dakota, including Fargo and Grand Forks.

About 78 percent of commuters to the Twin Cities metro drove an automobile, about 5 percent used public transportation and 9 percent carpooled.

Some of the longest commutes found in the Census data come from San Diego, Tucson and Miami.

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As a caveat, David Levinson, a university professor and transportation expert, <a href="https://transportist.org/2016/12/09/on-supercommuters/" target="new\_">points out</a> that super-commuters - defined by the Census as those traveling 90 or more minutes to work -- don't always make those commutes daily. So people may be making journeys between Eau Claire and the Minneapolis for work, but not as frequently as those making daily commutes from St. Paul.

But Levinson said there are advantages to considering mega-regions as targets for central planning around economic and transpiration decisions, though it shouldn’t be the primary framework for such discussions.

“It’s difficult to get metropolitan regions to collaborate,” said Chris Jones, vice president of the Regional Plan Association, something he called “a major institutional undertaking.”

While he noted that the Metropolitan Council in Minnesota pioneered ways of tackling various planning challenges, problems of infrastructure and forging other sweeping intercity and interstate policies stand in the way of more effectively connecting cities into something more resembling functional mega-regions similar to the East Coast.

The Regional Plan Assocation projects what a future with greater regional cooperation and shared infrastructural development might come to look like with a mega-regions map of their own.

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According to the widely-circulated <a href=”<http://www.america2050.org/megaregions.html>” target=”new\_”>America 2050 map</a>, the United States could be defined by the 10 emerging regions identified by the RPA, with Minnesota being absorbed into a larger “Great Lakes” region centered heavily around Chicago and reaching the Rust Belt.

Based on the organization’s projections, such a Midwestern consortium would be one of the largest and fastest-growing regions in the country, with a 2010 population of 55.5 million, which could hit 60.6 million by 2025 and 71.6 million by 2050 – a 28 percent jump in about 40 years.

So if the Dartmouth map is a glimpse at what present mega-regions might look like, the America 2050 peers into a future where these regions have expanded and bled into one another even more, stretching stronger ties between cities ranging from Minneapolis to Pittsburgh.

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To reach this point, cities have a number of common challenges to tackle, Jones said, in the realms of economics and transportation.

Some of those challenges involve the development of physical connections between cities, by way or roads, high-speed transit and other means. Experts also cited political polarization, a lack of cohesive regional planning as particularly difficult issues standing in the way of regional development.

Levinson said though transport has historically sped up over time, it’s stagnated recently. To him, digital commuting via the Internet may emerge as the next logical step to further tighten economic bonds across cities. Self-driving vehicles, too, could take some of the pressure off drivers and allow them to travel longer distances while also engaging in other tasks.

“The 20th century version [of regional competition] has Minneapolis competing against St. Paul. But in the 21st century the competition has to be with other regions. Otherwise we’ll be less successful globally,” Fisher said.

“A region needs to stick together,” he added, “including its urban and rural areas.”

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