State of the City: Linking the Region
New York Times (1923-Current file); May 24, 1975; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 22

State of the City: Linking the Region

Promoters of metropolitan area government have traditionally assumed that their goal, for all its soundness, cannot be achieved until conditions in city and suburbs alike approach the intolerable. History has so far borne them out. Half the drinking wells on the fringes of Minneapolis and St. Paul had to be contaminated with sewage before those rival cities could be moved to significant collaboration. The Toronto area had to endure similarly acute discomforts before it could become the classic model of municipal federation. Without such pain, politicians appear to be too addicted to the status quo to dare fundamental change.

The metropolitan area of New York is suffering its way toward some institutional change—but it is a change that cannot come quickly and need not come directly. The condition of the core city itself more than warrants drastic regional rearrangements; but the suburbs, while growing daily more uncomfortable, still suggest the position of the Chicago alderman who once said, "Chicago ain't ready for reform."

Like any core city, New York bears the cost of serving a daytime population enormously greater than its own taxpaying residential population. For the millions of people who daily pour into its offices, stores and factories from Connecticut, New Jersey, Long Island and upstate counties—to earn money which they will largely spend elsewhere—the city must provide police and fire protection, waste disposal, water supply, street and park maintenance, traffic controls, mass transit and other municipal services.

For taking care of these ebb-and-flow residents, it has only in recent years, and to a minuscule degree, exacted a return in commuter taxes. While commuters do pay sales taxes and generate business, the total return scarcely pays for the city's constant service to a transient population which is itself the size of a major city.

Against revenues from commuters, moreover, must be set the losses the city incurs from tax-exempt cultural, recreational and educational properties open to everyone including, of course, the suburban public. Even greater are its losses from businesses that understandably leave the core city to follow their customers to the suburbs. Most painful is the departure of upper- and middle-income workers who normally are expected to support so much of the city's cultural life and carry on so many of its civic good works.

Troubles of Suburbia

What of the suburbs? Life on the fringes is still far from that point of desperation that dictates imminent change, but suburbia is running into troubles that should make it think of cooperating more closely with the city.

Urbanized sprawl itself, the source of those troubles, is a consequence of a vacuum in official planning authority. Throughout the metropolitan region a multitude of tiny governments, unable to enjoy the economies that come with size and scale, are growing disproportionately costly. Stung by rising property taxes, suburbanites take out their anger on school budgets. Water supplies, polluted in some places and in others threatening to run out, call for a sane regional approach.

While residents in the New York metropolitan area now enjoy reasonable public transportation to the city, they have less from town to town than rural Americans had fifty years ago. The result is a dependence on the automobile which increasingly destroys an environment that, like the schools, was one of the original magnets that drew residents of the city to the suburbs.

With all these shortcomings, however, few suburbanites or exurbanites are as yet sufficiently disaffected to think dispassionately about the advantages of regional government. The phrase suggests importing the very problems they had fled the city to forget.

Many a New Yorker is just as sour on the idea. Specifically, he may have visions of footing the bill for improved transportation and other services to the outlanders.

Functional Regionalism

But if political consolidation is still anathema to many, *functional* consolidation in specific areas is a hopeful way to help both city and suburbs—and to build up the trust through experience that must be the basis of an ultimate rational system. The approach has worked well in Minnesota, where a Metropolitan Council, set up in 1967, has proved highly successful in coordinating the sewage, water and waste-disposal systems of the seven-county Twin City region.

The New York area would not even have to go so far as setting up a single council on the Twin City model. It could make a good start by slowly broadening the use of that all-purpose institution, the public authority. It could make more use of those independent bodies now in existence and, where necessary, move the governments of the three states involved to create such agencies.

Within this state, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, in spite of valid criticisms that have been made of it, has greatly improved the rail links between the city and the counties of Long Island. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has had to transcend state as well as local boundaries to manage the region's vast harbor facilities, its airports, interstate bridges and tunnels.

Another such body, endowed with no great powers now but capable of developing them if given the authority, is the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission. A task force of the Scott Commission, which studied the question of area-wide government a few years ago, recommended that the Tri-State agency be put in charge of coordinating a whole new system of regional entities. Each would deal with a function of great importance and complexity over an extremely wide area—transportation, solid waste disposal, water supply, air quality control, parks and even the distribution of public housing.

One advantage of this approach is that it calls for no advance blueprint of the kind that raises fears of a new layer of government and offers a target for attack. It leaves the boundaries of present political entities intact and is no threat to existing office-holders. In short, it opens the way to real change, but only by way of that pragmatic evolutionary process that is the genius of American politics.