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For Region: Cooperation

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Simsbury is by most definitions an affluent town, with lovely homes, good schools and top amenities, including a major ice skating center and a scenic bike path. But the economic downturn threatens to sink all boats, even the cruise ships. Earlier this month, First Selectman Mary Glassman invited top officials from five other Farmington Valley towns to meet and talk about ways to share services or otherwise work together to save taxpayer money.

If Simsbury feels the pinch, it's fair to assume that every city and town in Greater Hartford does as well.

When The Courant has proposed agendas on its editorial pages in the past, they have often centered on worthy local projects that we believed should be tackled in the next year: Save open space here, build a new charter school there, finish that sewer upgrade. Those were the good old days.

The severe economic downturn changes the picture. Before the bottom fell out, local expenses were rising at an average of 6 to 7 percent a year, while grand lists were growing at a rate of 1 to 2 percent a year, according to the Capitol Region Council of Governments. Now things are worse.

Town officials who wish to maintain current services have few good options. It's going to be harder than usual to raise taxes. As it was, many towns faced wearying budget battles in 2008, and some saw multiple budgets go down in referendums.

The possibility of increased help from the state fades in the midst of a projected \$3 billion deficit next fiscal year and another \$3 billion budget gap the following year. Likewise, unless a town's "shovel-ready" project is sprinkled by the incoming president's infrastructure fairy, help from the debt-ridden federal government is not to be counted on.

Thus, the 2009 agenda for the region is regionalism. The municipalities in Greater Hartford must work together to a greater degree than ever in the past. There are at least three reasons to do this.

First, as a number of national experts have taken pains to point out, the metropolitan region is the economic driver of the 21st century, as it has been for millennia. It is at the regional level where ideas are germinated, relationships are developed and ventures are created.

Regions that can plan, marshal their assets and respond to opportunities are the ones that are thriving



around the country. Greater Hartford, although it has excellent resources, is lagging behind.

Second, many functions and services that towns want to provide cannot be done on a local level. Transportation systems, workforce training and many environmental initiatives cross local boundaries.

Finally, working together should save money. This is not a given in all instances. So the first step ought to be a study, done as well and quickly as possible, to determine whether — and if so, how much — money could be saved by performing services on a broader scale. This could be publicly or privately funded, and should also consider what local and state services could be effectively melded. For example, if the state has a sand and salt storage facility in a town, can the town share it?

There could be considerable savings, at least in some areas. For example, there are now at least 107 "public safety answering points" — centers that answer 911 emergency calls — in the state. The technology exists to reduce that number dramatically, even to one answering center, saving millions of dollars.

There appear to be savings with regional animal shelters, jails, billing and dozens of other services. Many towns have already begun sharing services. In the Farmington Valley, for example, Avon and Canton share an assessor and a social services director.

We do not suggest the region give up local government and form a Portland, Ore.-style metro government, though the idea has some style points. We propose that towns retain their legal identities and core governments and try, as Farmington Valley towns are trying, to achieve economies of scale that will reduce the cost of government.

Who knows where this could lead? Local leaders might see the value in regional planning, which would lead to better zoning and less low-density, sprawling development. Town leaders and residents could chose to share some of the property tax revenue generated by commercial development, as Minneapolis does, so they don't waste time and resources battling with each other over where a particular company will locate.

The region could decide to tax itself for a major public works project, as many metros have done. We could, someday, go after another major pro sports team, as Oklahoma City just did.

If the towns in the region agree to work together, what should the priorities be? To put it another way, as the author Stephen R. Covey might, what are the habits of a highly effective region?

The Brookings Institution, the Washington-based think tank, has embarked on a multiyear initiative called "Blueprint for American Prosperity — Unleashing the Potential of a Metropolitan Nation." As the title suggests, Brookings is trying to make the case that the metro areas are what drive the U.S. economy, and thus to enhance them is to increase the nation's economy.

Brookings has identified several factors that separate the dynamic metros from the drudges. These include infrastructure, innovation inputs (developing new technologies and businesses), human capital, quality of place and effective regional governance to put it all together.

Greater Hartford is better at some of these factors than others, but they all offer opportunities for the region to work together. For example:

Human Capital

The region has Capital Workforce Partners, which coordinates job training and employment programs for a 37-town region in the central part of the state. It is the largest of five workforce investment boards in the state.

One of the board's areas of emphasis is the workforce of the future, a critical issue in a state with the seventh-oldest population in the country. The board is trying to get local high schools to focus more on directing students to successful careers rather than directing every possible student to a four-year college.

The idea is to introduce students to possible careers while still in high school and give them college-level courses in those areas. They can then go on to an associate's degree or other professional training, and get a good job. The board has a few programs running or in the pipeline in such areas as manufacturing, culinary science and health care. If all the high schools in the region bought into the idea, we would have a better balanced workforce.

Innovation

The state Department of Economic and Community Development, Connecticut Innovations and the nonprofit Connecticut Technology Council do a good job of encouraging the formation and growth of new high-tech firms. However, the effort could benefit from better statewide coordination and faster availability of early-stage capital to entrepreneurs. The old days when Danbury made hats, Waterbury made brass and Manchester wove silk are long gone. We need everyone pulling together.

The University of Connecticut just announced it was hiring six new researchers in the area of sustainable energy. It is a hard choice at a time when the school must cut back in other areas. Yet if we can afford it — perhaps the new hires can land federal research dollars — it's the kind of investment that's needed for long-term job creation. If the region and state were working together, it could assist other colleges and institutions, such as hospitals, to bring research to the marketplace.

Place

Central Connecticut is a lovely area that is being overtaken by sprawl. Farms, forests and ridgelines are all being lost to subdivisions and strip malls. We are always promoting ourselves as the home of white-steeped churches and village greens, but then we build chain pharmacies with drive-throughs.

State efforts to slow sprawl have yet to bear much fruit. Some towns have been better than others at buying and preserving farms and other open space. Also, most of the region's best parks and recreation areas were developed many decades ago. What have we done for our place lately?

If the region worked together, we could do planning based on natural resources, as Mansfield and a couple of other towns have done, and then protect sensitive and scenic areas. Towns could work together to develop new parks — as they are doing with the terrific Riverfront Recapture project along the Connecticut River in Hartford. They could get the East Coast Greenway and other bike paths built throughout the region.

How the region looks is vital to its ability to attract and retain workers. Open space and historic preservation are economic development. We could do better at both by acting regionally.

Infrastructure

The region's great failing in this area is in transportation, and in development related to transportation. Greater Hartford bet the ranch on a huge highway system 50 years ago. It has served us well in many respects, but it's getting crowded and wearing out.

Regional governance

Alas, we have no regional governance. We have a number of regional organizations — a council of governments, a metro business group, a water and sewer authority, etc. — but no regional governance. County government, or what was left of it, was abandoned nearly a half-century ago, and there's no clamor to bring it back.

But a regional entity with some power might be helpful in achieving regional improvements. One way to do it? Merge the Capitol Region Council of Governments with the Metropolitan District Commission, the water and sewer authority. The MDC charter allows it to take on greater responsibilities.

Whether that happens or not, the possible silver lining of this worsening recession is that towns have to work together. As Ben Franklin said in another context, "We must hang together or surely we will hang separately."

The Farmington Valley towns get it. Officials followed their early December meeting with another two weeks later. Ms. Glassman said they are looking at sharing "a whole list of things," from information technology and emergency dispatch to catch basin cleaning. She said they are trying to coordinate library hours, so if one town has to reduce its hours, a library will be open in one of the other towns.

It's a good start.

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