

**Defining the Midwest Mega-Region
September 8, 2005**

**Hosted by:
Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission
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Proceedings

Regional Plan Association (RPA) and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy convened on September 8, 2005 a meeting of Midwestern academics and regional experts to discuss the definition of the Midwest Mega-Region and possibilities for collaboration and research around challenges facing the Midwest. Hosted by Ron Thomas at the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission in Chicago, Illinois, the day-long discussion culminated in general agreement around a common definition of the Midwest Mega-Region, and next steps for collaboration and research. These notes from the meeting summarize the day's discussions, major findings, and actions steps for moving forward.

America 2050: The Context

Bob Yaro of RPA and Armando Carbonell of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy opened the meeting by introducing America 2050: a new, national initiative which aims to plan for the anticipated 40% growth of the U.S. population before the year 2050 by strengthening 8-10 emerging "mega-regions" across the country. Mega-regions are extended networks of metropolitan areas like the Northeast United States, which stretches from Virginia to Maine. These emerging mega-regions are anticipated to capture over 70% of the nation's population growth and over 80% of the economic growth in the next forty-five years. If we invest in critical infrastructure and make smart choices about land use, economic development and the environment, they can emerge as the new competitive units in the global economy, competing with similar networks of metropolitan areas in Europe and Asia, connected by high speed rail and strong environmental and land use policies.

Each mega-region faces its own set of challenges. The Midwest is unique because it faces extended population decline over the next half a century while the rest of the nation will gain population. One question driving the day's discussions was whether the Midwest has anything to gain from the planning framework provided by America 2050. Specifically, can the challenges of population and economic decline in the Midwest be addressed by a mega-regional approach to investments and planning?

Case Studies

The morning's discussion focused on two case studies of mega-regional research and planning already underway in the Northeast and the Southeast United States, respectively. First, Petra Todorovich, a senior planner at Regional Plan Association reported on a research and planning study underway in the Northeast Mega-Region, which was initiated by graduate planning students working with Bob Yaro and Armando Carbonell at the University of Pennsylvania. The Northeast was first recognized by the French geographer Jean Gottman back in the 1960's in his seminal study, Megalopolis. Today, the major metropolitan areas of the Northeast – Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Baltimore – continue to be linked by common transportation networks, development patterns, and challenges and threats to the Northeast's unique, major environmental landscapes. The U. Penn study, now taken up by RPA, proposed major investments in the Northeast Rail Corridor and a comprehensive strategy to protecting the Northeast's environmental resources. It also proposed a "hot and cold" approach of strengthening synergies between metropolitan areas to link strong market and weak market economies.

Catherine Ross, Director of the Center for Growth at Georgia Tech College of Architecture presented next a study of the Piedmont Atlantic Megalopolis – known as "PAM," which is centered by the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan region. This study was completed by a group of students at Georgia Tech under her direction, working concurrently as the students at University of Pennsylvania. This mega-region includes the metro areas of Birmingham, Alabama, Charlotte, North Carolina, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, and Atlanta, encompassing the I-85 and I-20 corridors. They consider their gateway cities to be Nashville, Tennessee and Miami, Florida. Dr. Ross cited major issues facing PAM as: growth, consumption of land, disparities, infrastructure and political fragmentation, which all point to sustainable solutions. Towards the end of the presentation, Dr. Ross emphasized the importance of focusing on place, and urban design solutions that can address the place-based issues of the mega-region. As a next step in PAM planning efforts, Dr. Ross is planning to bring together government leaders and stakeholders from all the areas of the Piedmont Atlantic Megalopolis for a meeting on January 30, 2006.

Midwest Focus

Hunter Morrison, Director of the Center for Urban & Regional Studies at Youngstown State University, laid the framework of the rest of the day's discussions by providing an historic perspective on the formation of the Midwest Mega-Region, and his own proposal for the Midwest Mega-Region's current boundaries. In defining the Midwest, he drew upon the historical and geographical precedents for the Midwest, including the glaciation that formed the Great Plains, the Great Lakes, and the major rivers, which together account for the Midwest's shared history.

Hunter addressed the general decline of the Midwest in recent decades, noting that five of the poorest large cities in the nation are located in the Midwest. He characterized the land

use consumption taking place in the Midwest as “no growth” and “low-growth” sprawl – the spreading out of the population and urbanization of land despite no population growth. Hunter also spoke of some of the Midwest’s important attributes and assets, such as the great university system and the clustering of artistic talent and cultural sophistication in places like Northeast Ohio, where there exists an excellent network of symphonies, conservatories and sophisticated audiences, which reinforce one another.

The last slide of Hunter’s presentation, below, proposed a definition of the Midwest Mega-Region, defined by environmental features, geography, history, and functional relationships. Centered around Chicago, it encompasses the Great Lakes, stretching west to Minneapolis, south to St. Louis, east to Pittsburgh and Buffalo, and north to Toronto, Canada.



After Hunter’s presentation, Robert Marans posed several discussion questions. He addressed the topic of competitiveness between states and cities in the Midwest that currently exists and asked, what is the value of acting as a mega-region?

Discussion in response to this question included the observations below.

- The Midwest is underperforming because it is unattached from the global economy.

- Competition between underperforming cities within the Midwest is currently perceived as a problem, whereas this could be repositioned as the Midwest competing globally, if it comes together as a mega-region.
- One of the Midwest's assets is that it has the largest size and concentration of research institutions in the country. This asset should be built upon to pioneer new research, such as in exploring new energy technologies.

Geoffrey Hewings, Director of the Regional Economic Applications Laboratory (REAL) at University of Illinois spoke next, giving a presentation of the Midwest economy with an emphasis on economic interactions and flows within the Midwest. He described a suite of models at REAL that provide forecasts through 2030. They use BEA functional economic areas, which are based on commuter sheds, as the basis for much of their analysis. He is studying a six-region model, which includes the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin. Dr. Hewings made several key points, including:

- 1/3 of commodity inflows and outflows stay within the states in the Midwest. This is mostly intra-industry trade (in the same commodity space.)
- The Midwest has experienced a trend of de-clustering.
- Greater specialization and economies of scale is leading to larger interstate trade. States have little control over what is going on in their economies.

He also presented some interesting data on the migration behavior of residents (county – to-county), based on where people submit their tax returns from year to year. Though an imperfect model, he observed that 20% of people leaving the Midwest are going to the major metropolitan areas in the country, and a lot seem to migrate down to Florida.

Participants were extremely receptive to the models and methods of analysis presented by Dr. Hewings and identified his institute as an important resource for this effort moving forward. Discussants were interested in how Dr. Hewing's research could demonstrate how a more prosperous Midwest has spillover effects on the larger nation.

Scott Bernstein, Director of the Center for Neighborhood Technology spoke next, focusing on a Midwest transportation framework. Mr. Bernstein's presentation emphasized models of transit-oriented development as an important tool in planning for the Midwest Mega-Region, and ways for the government to encourage people to live next to transit, such as with Location Efficient Mortgages. It is important to demonstrate the fiscal benefits of investments in transit, such as by quantifying the time savings of investments in better transportation infrastructure. The Midwest should focus on goals of efficiency, productivity, and value capture.

Mr. Bernstein also emphasized the potential political power of the Midwest – a vast area of swing states that receive abundant media and policy attention during presidential elections. If the Midwest could define a cohesive policy agenda before the next presidential election, it may have some success in seeing it implemented.

The final presentation was given by John Austin, Nonresident Senior Fellow of the Brookings Institution, who reported on a new Brookings project, the Great Lakes Regional Economic Initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to perform a broad regional assessment of the major challenges and to propose a policy direction for the region to adopt. He discussed broad trends underway in the Midwest, including population decline, the production and loss of knowledge workers, a modern economy but lack of entrepreneurship, and lagging income growth. Mr. Austin emphasized the paradox of disinvestment on the part of the states in the Midwest's many important research universities. He recommended that the federal government reinvest in research and development in the Midwest, a key underperforming asset of the region.

In closing, Bob Yaro summarized several points he heard from the conversation. He drew a comparison to a strategy used by Glasgow, Scotland adopted in the wake of the transformation of its industrial areas. Glasgow put a strong emphasis on quality public spaces and their cultural heritage, which has proved tremendously successful. For the Midwest, he stressed four assets to build upon:

1. Amenity – quality of life in the Midwest and environmental assets: the Great Lakes
2. Transportation network – rail freight
3. Universities – Research base
4. Energy – Can the Midwest be a net energy producer? (Wind farms)

In conclusion, Margaret Dewar led a discussion of next steps for further research and collaboration for the Midwest. Participants identified key issues as:

- Agreeing on a common definition of the Midwest Mega-Region
- Using common data sets, indicators and methodology
- Identifying assets and challenges
- What will be achieved by the study.

In closing, Kate Foster, director of the Buffalo University Institute for Governance and Regional Growth, volunteered to host the next meeting of this group next year.

Appendix A

Key Findings and Next Steps

Ron Thomas, Executive Director of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission provided a written summary of important outcomes of the meeting, which is provided below.

FINDINGS

- The concept of an Upper Midwest Great Lakes Mega Region has functional, environmental and policy validity
- The nature of this mega region is seemingly composed of strategically located major metropolitan centers rather than the continuous urban structure found on either the Northeast or Southern California coasts.
- The Great Lakes and consequential transportation networks form the unifying systems for the Great Lakes mega-region.
- The two convenings of Great Lakes region research institutions and the Major Metros Regional Directors included critical participants to initiate a Great Lakes Mega-Region initiative.
- Interest emerged on organizing a multi-institution and regional agency initiative
- The Northeast study at the University of Pennsylvania and the Southern California study by SCAG and SANDAG demonstrate models and methodologies of a Great Lakes effort

RESOURCES

- Three strategically located major research institutions are prepared to take leadership roles as both research and convening resources including:
 - Margaret Dewer – University of Michigan
 - David Perry – Great Cities Institute, University of Illinois/Chicago
 - Kate Foster, Buffalo University Institute for Governance and Regional Growth
- Several research academics and resources are available to participate:
 - Hunter Morrison, Director, Center for Urban & Regional Studies, Youngstown State University
 - Geoffrey Hewings, Regional Economic Applications Laboratory, and Great Cities Institute, University of Illinois
 - Robert Gleeson, Regional Development Institute, Northern Illinois University
 - Nancy Frank, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
 - Robert Marans, University of Michigan and Michigan Land Use Institute
 - Edward Hill, Cleveland State
 - Armando Carbonell, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (National Resource)
 - Bob Yaro, Regional Plan Association (National Resource)
 - David Soule, Institute for Regional Futures, NARC (National Resource)
- Several Regional Agency directors are supportive and interested in participating:
 - NIPC, Chicago, IL – Ron Thomas
 - NOACCA, Cleveland, OH – Howard Maier
 - MORPC, Columbus, OH – Bill Habig
 - SEMCOG, Detroit, MI – Paul Tate

- MARC, Kansas City – David Warm (Will facilitate a “Heatlands” mega-regional initiative)
- Several other Regional Agencies need to be recruited including at least:
 - TMACOG, Toledo (in our network) (Tony Reams)
 - SEWRPC, Milwaukee (in our network) (Phil Evenson)
 - NIRPC, Gary, IN (in our network) (John Swanson)
 - GBNRTC, Buffalo, NY (not in our network)

ISSUES

Issues to address seem to fall into about three categories

- Upper Midwest Great Lakes Mega-Region definition – There seems to be consensus that Hunter Morrison has defined the mega-region for us
- Research Agenda
 - Topics related to:
 - Transportation and Travel
 - Economy
 - Environmental Systems
 - Lead institutions
 - Funding
- Political consequences – What is the intended results of focusing on the mega-region as that might relate to established regional agencies and programs?
- Policy Implications – What might be the follow-up policy related actions a Great Lakes mega-regional initiative would leverage (regional, state and/or federal)?

PROPOSALS

- Conveners – (Volunteered) Margaret Dewer, University of Michigan, Kate Foster, SUNY-Buffalo, David Perry, UIC
- Convenings Schedule & Agenda(s) - TBD
- ListServe – Margaret has volunteered
- Research – Suggestions
 - Studio project based on U-Penn model – Directed by Margaret Dewer
 - Economic Trends Study – Directed by Geoff Hewing
 - Great Lakes Regional Collaboration – Report summary applied to Mega-Region – Directed by Ron Thomas
 - Great Lakes Mega Regional Data Exchange Survey – Directed by NIPC
 - Policy Findings and Recommendations – Team
 - Other Components TBD
- Next Steps
 - Define participant roles
 - Agree on general study plan and schedule
 - Define funding requirements
 - Prepare funding proposal(s)

Appendix B
Defining the Midwest Mega-Region
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Participants

John Adams, Herbert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota

John Austin, The Brookings Institution and University of Michigan

Scott Bernstein, Center for Neighborhood Technology

Eugenie L. Birch, University of Pennsylvania School of Design

Armando Carbonell, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy

Margaret Dewer, University of Michigan

Dawn Dhavale, Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

Kate Foster, Buffalo University Institute for Governance and Regional Growth

Nancy Frank, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Robert Gleeson, NIU Regional Development Institute

Geoffrey Hewings, Regional Economic Applications Laboratory, University of Illinois

James C. LaBelle, Chicago Metropolis 2020

Robert Marans, University of Michigan and Michigan Land Use Institute

Hunter Morrison, Center for Urban & Regional Studies, Youngstown State University

Dave Perry, Great Cities Institute, University of Illinois Chicago

Erika C. Poethig, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Catherine Ross, Center for Quality Growth, Georgia Tech

Steve Rugare, Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio

Ronald Thomas, Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission

Petra Todorovich, Regional Plan Association

Robert Yaro, Regional Plan Association