Levin Regional Cooperation Survey

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Dr. Roland V. Anglin and Rene Kizys

Abstract

Regionalism is defined in many ways. Some define it by regional tax sharing and consolidating local units of government into a larger city/county statutory governing arrangement that may encourage equity and efficiency. Notable examples of this include Indianapolis and its “Unigov” consolidation with many surrounding towns, municipalities; as well as the City of Nashville and Davidson County in Tennessee. Other consolidations are bilateral city-to-city policy setting arrangements, such as the Metro Council, that determine growth and development policy for the Twin Cities, Minneapolis-Saint Paul. This study proceeds on the belief that regionalism can also be defined in functional terms based on necessity and evolving trust among local governments. Using a survey of mayors and managers in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, we found there are bilateral and multilateral relationships that are growing based on an uncertain economic environment and declining intergovernmental support. What results from these growing functional relationships is unclear, but they do form the organic base for broader collaboration and cooperation.

1 Dr. Candi Clouse, then on staff at the Levin College, contributed to this analysis. Many thanks to the Cuyahoga County Mayors and City Managers Association for their assistance and feedback. Thanks also go to Levin colleagues, Hunter Morrison, Wendy Kellogg, Robert Gleeson, Meghan Rubado, Joanna Ganning, and Tom Hilde for advice at various stages of the project.
Introduction

For many, regionalism is the answer to managing city challenges brought about by metropolitan sprawl. Defined in many ways, proponents of regionalism tend to rest their policy recommendations on regional tax sharing or increasing local coordination and sharing of services. Northeast Ohio has seen its share of efforts to achieve both. For the most part, such efforts have not made it far on the policy agenda, mainly due to fear of the “free rider” problem in the case of regional tax sharing, and the fear of losing local autonomy with distributed governance.

But the context for local autonomy has changed over the years. Jurisdictions that were fiscally sound now find that they are not immune from fiscal constraints. The question then becomes, does fiscal uncertainty encourage new governance arrangements? The goal here is to see how widespread and significant collaborative arrangements are in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. This one county defines our regional frame. The study question is important because interlocal agreements can be thought of as the building blocks of sustainable regionalism. The more concrete agreements and examples that are developed in a geography, the better examples they are for adjacent geographies to emulate if they so choose.

The Survey

The Levin Regional Cooperation Survey was designed and administered by a team of researchers at the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University. The purpose of the survey was to examine regional collaboration efforts currently underway in Cuyahoga County and to get a sense of whether there is widespread interest in collaboration as a way improving city management and operations. The survey was sent out in late 2018 and weekly reminder emails followed for the following twelve weeks. In total, fifty-seven mayors and city managers from each municipality in the county were invited to participate in the survey. In order to increase the response rate, the survey and subsequent email reminders were sent out through the Cuyahoga County Mayors and City Managers Association. Thirty-one municipalities responded, yielding a 53% response rate; however, not all municipalities provided answers to every question.
Who Completed the Survey?

The survey asked participants to identify their role in local government. Eighty-seven percent (twenty-seven respondents) were the mayor or city manager of that municipality. Of the other four respondents, one was a chief of staff, and three were city staff members, answering on behalf of the mayor. The respondents’ careers ranged from three to forty years in public service. The thirty-one respondents reported a total of 520 years in public service, with an average tenure of seventeen years. These are seasoned public servants.

Setting the Stage

Central to the analysis is what types of municipal services are being shared or provided through an interlocal agreement. In this case, we provided eighteen predetermined services (see chart 1). Respondents were asked to identify which of the eighteen predetermined municipal services were currently provided through any mechanism, including direct provision, interlocal agreements, or contracts. Of the thirty respondents to this question, all cities indicated that they are providing Police; Fire; Emergency Medical Services; Street Maintenance; Building and Housing Permits; Building Inspection and Code Enforcement; and Planning and Zoning. Between twenty-four and twenty-nine municipalities were providing Dispatch; Garbage Collection and/or Recycling; Snow Removal; Water and/or Sewer; Property Building Maintenance; Economic Development; Parks and Recreation; and Senior Services. The next two categories, Renovation Assistance and Neighborhood Development, each were being provided by sixteen out of thirty municipalities (53%). Finally, only six municipalities (20%) confirmed a provision of Before- and After-School Programs.

As a follow-up to the previous question, respondents were asked to identify which of the same eighteen predetermined municipal services were currently provided directly by city employees. Of the thirty respondents, only Police service was being provided directly by all who answered. Fire; Emergency Medical Services; Snow Removal; Street Maintenance; Building and Housing Permits; Building Inspection and Code Enforcement; and Planning and Zoning were all provided by between twenty-five and twenty-nine municipalities (83% to 97%). Between twenty and twenty-three respondents indicated that Property Building Maintenance; Economic Development; and Parks and Recreation were provided directly (67% to 77%). Half of the municipalities were
directly providing *Water and Sewer* and thirteen provided *Dispatch* (43%). Nine respondents (30%) directly provided *Garbage Collection and/or Recycling and Neighborhood Development*. Twenty-seven percent of municipalities (eight respondents) provided *Senior Services*, 20% provided *Renovation Assistance* (six respondents), and only 3% provided *Before- and After-School Programs* (one respondent).

**Chart 1: Number of Municipalities Providing Predetermined Services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Provided</th>
<th>Provided by City Employee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispatch</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Medical Services</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garbage Collection and/or Recycling</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snow Removal</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water and/or Sewer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Maintenance</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property Building Maintenance</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and Housing Permits</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Inspection and Code Enforcement</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovation Assistance</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Zoning</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Development</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Development</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks and Recreation</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Services</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before- and After-School Programs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Increasing Municipal Services**

Next, we asked these public officials for which municipal services, if any, the city has increased the budget, left it unchanged, reduced the budget, or eliminated the service completely, since 2012. The year 2012 was used because it is six years prior to the survey, which would cover about a term and a half of the public official’s most recent tenure. Figure 1 shows the results: a 22% increase in municipal service budgets; 61% of budgets remaining the same; 16% indicating a reduction. Only 1% percent of the municipalities reported that they eliminated programs. *Fire, Parks and Recreation, and Police* saw the most increases in local budgets.
Neighborhood Development (23 cities), Snow Removal (22 cities), Water and/or Sewer (21 cities), and Street Maintenance (21 cities) saw no change in their position in local budgets. Services that were cut included Property Building Maintenance (9 cities); Water and/or Sewer (8 cities); Police (7 cities); Emergency Medical Services (7 cities); and Senior Services (7 cities). Three respondents indicated that Fire services had been eliminated. Street Maintenance, Planning and Zoning, Economic Development, and Before- and After-School Programs were each eliminated by one city.

**Figure 1: Changes in Municipal Service Budget, 2012–2018**

We also asked what actions these jurisdictions have taken to address the fiscal challenges they have faced in recent years. Respondents were asked which of the thirteen reduced services were maintained at the level expected by constituents. Figure 2 shows the answers as a percentage of the total answers (27 respondents). Seventy percent (19 respondents) indicated that their city had implemented Operations Improvements and Collaborated with Adjacent Cities, which includes services such as Fire, Dispatch, and EMS. Sixty-three percent (17 respondents) indicated that their city had used Collaboration with County, Staff and Management Training, and Information Technology. All other mechanisms were utilized by less than half of the respondents; the least popular answers were Increased Property Taxes and Providing Retirement.
Buyout Incentives (11% or three respondents). Two cities indicated that instituting traffic cameras and applying for grants were methods used to increase revenue. One respondent noted that the municipality had not increased staff in ten years in an effort keep costs down.

**Figure 2: Mechanisms to Address Fiscal Challenges**

Collaborative Agreements

The next piece of the survey examined collaborative agreements between two or more municipalities as a method for providing municipal services more efficiently or cost effectively. All thirty-one respondents indicated that their city has entered into one or more collaborative agreements with another local government to provide services. Of the twenty-seven municipalities whose officials responded to the question regarding the number of collaborative agreements their city has in place, the range was from one to twelve, with an average of four collaborative agreements per city.

The same eighteen city services were used to query respondents about which services are currently provided in whole or in part through collaborative agreements with other local governments, including Cuyahoga County. The most popular of the services in which cities used a collaborative agreement was *Dispatch*, with twenty-three of the thirty respondents (77%). The next most popular services were *Police* (16 respondents; 53%); *Fire* (15 respondents; 50%); and
Water and/or Sewer (14 respondents; 47%). Thirty-seven percent of cities used collaborative agreements for Emergency Medical Services (11 respondents), and 33% did for Senior Services (10 respondents). All the other services were represented in fewer than six cities (Garbage Collection and/or Recycling; Street Maintenance; Property Building Maintenance; Building and Housing Permits; Building and Code Enforcement; Renovation Assistance; Planning and Zoning; Neighborhood Development; Economic Development; Parks and Recreation; and Before- and After-School Programs). No municipalities reported sharing Snow Removal. Interestingly, no one gave Poor or Terrible ratings to these collaborative agreements. Two respondents (7%) rated them as Average, while fourteen rated them as Good (47%) and fourteen rated them as Excellent (47%).

Next, cities were asked to indicate which services they provided using contracts with private companies and other nongovernmental organizations, including local development corporations and nonprofit organizations. Twenty-six municipalities checked at least one of the services. The most popular answer was Garbage Collection and/or Recycling with eighteen respondents (69%), followed by Renovation Assistance with seven respondents (27%). No city indicated that it used contracts or private companies for Police; Fire; Building and Housing Permits; Planning and Zoning; or Before- and After-School Programs. All others had between one and four responses (Dispatch; Emergency Medical Services; Snow Removal; Water and/or Sewer; Street Maintenance; Property Building Maintenance; Building Inspection and Code Enforcement; Neighborhood Development; Economic Development; Parks and Recreation; and Senior Services). Figure 3 shows each of the eighteen city services and which ones were provided by the city, provided via a collaborative agreement, and provided by contractors.
The majority (70%) of municipalities indicated that they worked with other cities, which included a list of thirty-five individual cities. Highland Heights, Mayfield Village, and Richmond Heights were noted as collaborators by four respondents (15%). Lyndhurst was noted as a collaborator by three respondents (11%).

Fifteen separate county departments and agencies were reported as collaborators. The Cuyahoga County Department of Public Works was highlighted as a collaborator by seven cities (26%); the Cuyahoga County Department of Development and the Cuyahoga County Planning Department were each cited by four cities (15%); the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORSD) and Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) were each noted by three cities (11%).

Seven state agencies were noted collaborators. The most frequently mentioned was the Ohio Department of Transportation (6 respondents; 22%). Other agencies mentioned included the State Auditor, the Ohio Emergency Management Agency, the Ohio Department of Criminal Justice Services, the Ohio Department of Development, and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.
Barriers to Collaboration

The survey noted that there are many reasons why collaboration may not occur and asked respondents to identify the most significant barriers preventing their community from collaborating with others. Twenty-four municipalities responded to this question; the most common answer was *Strong attachment to local jurisdictional control* (15 respondents; 63%). Thirteen respondents (54%) chose *Resistance from local stakeholders* as a top reason. Four respondents (17%) indicated *Limited time and resources to convene local stakeholders*, and three respondents (13%) indicated that *Fear that sharing tax revenue would lead to one community benefiting more than another*. Write-in answers included that the idea has not been popular in the past, some communities do not want to share their resources, and concerns over the standards of service.

The next part of the survey included an open-ended question that asked what incentives would encourage each city to increase their regional cooperation. The most popular themes were *Increasing City Services* (6 respondents), *Long-Term Savings* (5 respondents), and *Immediate Savings* (4 respondents). Other themes were *Benefiting All Cities Involved, Generating More Revenue, Improving Communication, Improving Efficiencies, Improving Information Technology, Improving Political Will, Reducing Expenses, and Sharing Best Practices*.

Next, a set of regional initiatives was listed for respondents to rate their community’s level of participation. Figure 4 shows the results, with the blue levels indicating a high or maximum level of participation, orange indicating a low or medium level of participation, and gray indicating unknown or no participation on behalf of the city. The initiatives with the most municipal participation per the survey were the NEO Regional Parks Consortium (37%) and the Western Reserve Land Conservancy (35%). Six initiatives had more than 40% of municipalities indicate that they had low to medium participation: *Our Region’s Economic Competitiveness Agenda* (62%); NEO Regional Parks Consortium (52%); Cuyahoga River Remedial Action Plan (46%); EfficientGOVNOW Network (46%); Greenspace/Greenprint Plan (44%); and the Western Reserve Land Conservancy (42%). The initiative that saw the least participation was VibrantNEO 2040, with 79% having not participated.²

² Descriptions of many of these plans and initiatives can be found on Vibrant NEO’s web archive: [http://vibrantneo.org/neo-101/library/](http://vibrantneo.org/neo-101/library/)
The final question asked the extent to which respondents agreed with two statements about the impact of their community's participation in regional initiatives on local-level decision making:

*Our participation in the VibrantNEO process changed the way we make decisions in my community;*\(^3\) and *Our participation in regional initiatives, generally speaking, has changed the way we make decisions in my community.* Figure 5 shows the responses to the two questions. Rating their participation in VibrantNEO, 23% of cities responded that it was not applicable to them, 12% either strongly or somewhat disagree that it is important, 54% were neutral, and only 11% somewhat agreed that it was important. No one indicated that they strongly agree that VibrantNEO is important. In terms of participation in regional initiatives generally, only one respondent determined they were not applicable (4%). Eight percent noted that they strongly or somewhat disagree, 23% were neutral, 54% somewhat agree, and 11% strongly agree that regional initiatives changed the way decisions were made in their community.

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\(^3\) Vibrant NEO 2040 is an initiative created by the Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium ([http://vibrantneo.org/neoscc/history/](http://vibrantneo.org/neoscc/history/)).
Conclusion

Overall, the findings from the survey indicate that there is some movement toward further regional collaboration in terms of service delivery, especially in areas that have a clearer payoff such as dispatch, police, fire, emergency medical, water, or sewer services. Considering budget cuts and program elimination facing some cities, collaboration could be one answer to solving fiscal issues while allowing for continued program support for residents. Challenges will be faced, however, as cities are proud of their tradition of home rule and may resist giving up local control without a clear plan outlining both cost savings and community benefits.

The goal of this survey is to determine the current state of regional cooperation in Cuyahoga County; further research is needed to conclude any long-term trends. Future research could include redistributing this survey in Cuyahoga County incrementally over many years to see time related changes in the practice of regional cooperation. Also, the research can be expanded to include the other four counties in the Cleveland–Elyria Metropolitan Statistical Area: Geauga County, Lake County, Lorain County, and Medina County. Expanding the research in geography or time would result in more data and more conclusions to be drawn.