Concurrent Session Talking Points:
Thinking and Acting Like a Region: Building Support for Regional Collaboration in Rural Areas

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WHAT IS REGIONALISM?

I will define regionalism by what it is and what it isn’t:

- To me, regionalism is not a new concept
- It is not another layer of bureaucracy
- It is not an alternate form of government
- Regionalism is a conscience effort to work together
- It is a coordinated effort to improve the lives of our citizens
- It is an efficient approach that enables leaders to do more with less

I would define regionalism as a committed effort to improve communities through increased coordination and collaboration, maximizing efficiency through united approaches while preserving individual aspirations.

SO WHY IS REGIONALISM IMPORTANT?

I would suggest that there are at least 9 reasons why regionalism is important today. Whether you represent rural, suburban, or urban areas, regionalism is important.

1. **Our world is shrinking** – Not literally, but with the rapid expansion and interconnectedness of global markets our world is far more accessible than it was a century ago or even as it was a decade ago.

2. **Our world is more competitive** – Increased wealth, education, and capitalism of emerging and developing nations is vying for a larger piece of the global economic pie. There are dozens of nations trying to build a better mousetrap. It is not the community up the highway, the state’s large metropolitan community, or the state next door that is your competition—it is any number of emerging nations.

3. **Our world is more mobile** – The modern mobile lifestyle of American businesses and residents means that businesses and citizens no longer are forever tied to a specific community—they will pursue their success where it maximizes their return. They will follow opportunities, resources, and talent and abandon community roots.

4. **Our resources are key** – The availability of vital resources will drive future economies, and resources such as land, air, water, and talent will significantly impact development. These resources typically do not align along manmade boundaries and jurisdictional lines—they have natural flows and patterns that follow watersheds,
labor sheds, and air currents. If these resources can be stewarded and amassed from a regional approach it will create a competitive advantage for your community and region.

5. **Our financial resources are shrinking while the demand for services is escalating** – In today’s economic climate all levels of government are being constrained due to the recent economic downturn that is resulting in few tax-generated dollars to provide services. However, the constituent’s expectation for services continues to rise. To correct the imbalance of resources and demand for services, efficiencies in the delivery of programs and services must be pursued. Coordination and collaboration, and reducing and eliminating redundancy is the only way to balance the ledger between resources and demands.

6. **Your economy is regional** – To validate this point just look at the inflow and outflow of your workforce. Your local employers rely on external workers, and your local businesses rely on external consumers.

7. **Your target audience views you as a region** – Top site selection criteria is focused on regional assets. In all of the projects I have worked on I have never been asked to provide a City/County map but rather regional maps depicting the area’s assets such as rail, interstates, and the power grid because that is what is important to them and how they view their world. In other words, in order to effectively speak the language of business you need to think regionally.

8. **Your success and failures are felt regionally** – When the St. Louis Chrysler assembly plant closed the impact was felt region-wide. Not just in the city or county where the plant was located—it impacted the entire St. Louis metropolitan region and beyond. The ripple was felt for hundreds of miles.

9. **The competition is intense** – Many cities, counties, regions, states, and even countries are working to attract new business investment and new development leading to a very noisy marketplace. It makes sense to pool resources regionally and enter this competitive marketplace as one and not divided. Furthermore, the quest for funding to implement your action plans will be very competitive. To maximize success you need to speak as one unified voice—one message repeated to scores of audiences.

**SO WHAT DO YOU NEED TO DO TO LAUNCH A SUCCESSFUL REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION EFFORT?**

**You Need a Vision**

- Establish a regional identify and direction (Ask yourself: What are the common characteristics that shape our region?)
- Build from distinguishing features and natural boundaries
- Establish forums and governance capable of creating and implementing policy choices
- Strive to transform the region’s economic competitiveness

**You Need Benchmarks and Indicators**

- Identify and set regional performance benchmarks and indicators—which stimulates greater regional action and awareness, especially compared to other regions
- Use data to map assets of the region to serve as a foundation for future collaboration and partnerships
- Measuring progress toward achieving the vision, goals, and objectives is important to keep people and institutions engaged and focused
- You must enthusiastically and constantly communicate your accomplishments—because people like to associate with winners, actions, and results

**You Need Leaders**

- Develop advocates and champions for regional issues – “boundary crossers!”
• Build leaders to bridge sectors and jurisdictions in order to help unify a region
• You need private sector leaders engaged with your efforts
  • However bear in mind bureaucracy repels private sector participation so you must minimize bureaucracy to get them and keep them engaged

You Need a Network
• Develop formal and informal networks to identify goals and address perceived and real needs
• You need the right people at the table and plugged-in to create synergy
• Regions rich in networks are in better position to identify opportunities and mobilize resources to advance themselves

You Need a Process for Conflict Resolution and Collaboration
• Recognize that jurisdictions in a region collaborate on selected activities, but compete on others. For instance, you will need economies of scale or critical mass for resources and workforce to compete at the global level and therefore you must collaborate. Leave the competition to the local sports teams.
• Need to overcome fragmenting of regions by organizations that remain stuck in the old world
• Identify creative ways to mesh local development priorities with the broader regional goals
• Commit to resolving conflicts and seeking compromise. Don’t be that kid that takes his ball and goes home just because things aren’t going his way.

HOW CAN WE AS ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE GONE THROUGH THE PLANNING PROCESS AND ARE ENTERING THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE MAKE IMPLEMENTATION HAPPEN?

1. Get the right players engaged in the discussion and implementation — don’t allow key regional drivers to sit on the sideline and just observe and criticize
2. Identify commonalities — and use these as the foundation
3. Recognize and respect your differences — the uniqueness of each individual community is an asset to your region — accept this — don’t try to make all the communities look the same
4. Be open-minded — it is possible that someone else actually has a good idea. Listen.
5. Leave the past in the past. Don’t let historical rivalries impede your future success.
6. Mesh your local priorities with the regional effort. Row in the same direction.
7. Change your perspective – see yourself how the world sees you
8. Commit to compromise — compromise is not easy, and it seems to be a lost art in today’s society. Learn to give and take. A good compromise is not one that leaves everyone mad or dissatisfied; it is one that leaves everyone mutually content.

LEADERSHIP

Successful, impactful organizations share a common feature — they have a board of directors that is engaged, understands their role, and contributes their talents and expertise to the success of the organization.

I believe one of the greatest assets an organization can have is an educated and engaged board of directors.

They will:
• Challenge the status quo
• Align resources to problems
• Promote your organization and efforts
• Be your best marketing team

WHO SHOULD BE AT THE LEADERSHIP TABLE? The short answer is the key economic drivers of your region.
BOARD MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Once you identify who needs to be at the table and participate in your board and leadership, it is very important to get them engaged.

Board member engagement is far easier said than done. But nonetheless it is essential to get board members engaged and keep them engaged.

Here are a few suggestions as to how this can be done:

- Ask them their opinion—they have something to offer—find out what that is
- Allow them to take ownership in ideas, even if it is your idea. The goal is to get things done and make a difference. Remember it more about WE than ME.
- Provide value to them through information and project results. Board members love to see results and they love having the latest, most accurate information available. So give it to them...all they are going to do is promote your successes.
- Filter and interpret data to provide meaningful information. Board members don’t show up at meetings to hear an endless drone of data. They want to hear what that data means and how it will impact them and their communities. Therefore to get them and keep them engaged you need to reinforce your value to them by filtering and interpreting data into meaningful information.
- Board education is critical and must be constant. It is very hard to get board members engaged if they don’t know or understand what you do and what their roles and responsibilities are. Educating your board members must be a priority for your organization. Also, remember your board members are volunteers—they have other responsibilities and distractions. Expect to reacquaint your board members with key issues between meetings.
- Immediately educate and include new board members. I believe the sooner you can involve and engage new board members to your organization, the sooner they can become a champion for your organization. Don’t wait for them to find you. Seek them out, involve them, engage them, educate them.