

Regional Planning in Michigan: Challenges and Opportunities of Intergovernmental Cooperation

Executive Summary

This report summarizes one of the first academic studies to systematically examine the factors that affect the formation and ongoing operations of regional governmental planning efforts related to land use issues. Using semi-structured interviews of both regional planning participants and members of the business community, plus surveys of county officials and analysis of state law and other public documents, this Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) study finds:

- Despite constraints in state law, as well as the disincentives and competition associated with Michigan's tradition of home rule where decision-making authority on planning issues resides largely at the local level, many efforts are taking place throughout the state to improve coordinated planning across political boundaries.
- Most regional planning efforts fall within one of four models: local efforts (a city or village coordinating with surrounding townships); county-local efforts (county-wide coordination across multiple jurisdictions); multi-county efforts; and public-private specialized efforts.
- Participants from all types of regional planning efforts report valuable improvements in cross-jurisdiction communication and information sharing.
- Key factors that facilitate initiation of regional efforts include: potential cost savings; a climate of trust and collaboration; and the presence of strong leadership.
- Key factors that help sustain regional efforts over time include: prior results and cost savings; political will; and cooperation, communication and similarities of participating jurisdictions in terms of size, resources and goals.
- Key factors that inhibit and/or undermine regional efforts include: turf issues; lack of trust and information sharing; changes in leadership; rivalries; and competing goals of participants.

Research Conclusions

- State level policymakers should focus on economic incentives to encourage regional cooperation. Many regional efforts are initiated based on the prospect of practical economic benefits to participants, and the reality of economic benefits is an important factor in sustaining regional efforts.
- Local policymakers should focus on fostering a climate of trust and building regional efforts that can survive changes in leadership.
- Members of the business community should proactively join the regional planning efforts through participation in public sessions and where possible through (often non-voting) membership in the efforts themselves. The business community, especially through chambers of commerce and other business organizations, can often speak on behalf of the region, bring together regional actors, and help sustain their ongoing cooperation.



Overview

This report summarizes one of the first academic studies to systematically examine the factors that affect the formation and ongoing operations of regional governmental planning efforts related to land use issues. Michigan law (as with many states) allows numerous forms of regional planning, though state policy does little to actively encourage such efforts, and the state's tradition of home rule creates strong disincentives for regionalism. Despite these obstacles, many efforts are taking place around the state to improve planning across political boundaries. Governor Granholm's Michigan Land Use Leadership Council of 2003, for example, examined land use issues and recommended enhancements to state policies relating to regional planning. Locally, officials across the state are drawing together cities and their surrounding townships and villages to discuss how they might enhance their regional planning efforts. Surprisingly little is known, however, about the range of regional planning currently under way in Michigan or elsewhere. To help fill this void, the University of Michigan's Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), under the direction of Professor Elisabeth Gerber, conducted a study of existing regional planning efforts across the state.

Through interviews with participants in selected regional planning efforts and surveys of county officials across the state, the study investigates how local governments in Michigan currently conduct cooperative planning; what kinds of arrangements work and what

regional planning successes. Prior academic research on intergovernmental relations has identified potentially important differences in the factors that affect the **initiation** of collaborative efforts between governments versus the factors that affect **ongoing cooperation**. This CLOSUP study discovers a similar distinction among regional planning efforts.

The study finds that participants from all types of regional planning efforts report valuable improvements in communication and information sharing among members. They report that key factors for initiating regional planning efforts include: the potential for cost savings; a climate of trust and collaboration; and the presence of strong leadership. Factors that help regional efforts sustain cooperation over time include: results and cost savings; political will; and cooperation, communication, and similarities of participating jurisdictions (in terms of size, resources, and goals). Conversely, participants point to turf issues, a lack of trust and information, changes in leadership, rivalries, and tensions between the goals of participants as factors that undermine intergovernmental cooperation.

THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

The study also addresses the role of the business community in these regional planning efforts. With turf issues and mistrust hindering much cooperative planning, chambers of commerce and other business organizations may be able to make substantial contributions by serving as credible representatives of the regional community. While chambers have no authority over planning, they can help bring together actors from local government units, speak on behalf of the region's interests, and generate private sector support for a regional plan. For various reasons, however, chambers of commerce are often not formal members of regional planning initiatives. In these cases, chamber representatives can actively participate in public meetings to represent area business interests.

TYPES OF REGIONAL PLANNING

Four models of regional planning efforts emerged during the research. Individual regional planning efforts within each category share a number of important characteristics and face common challenges and opportunities. The four models include the following: 1) local cooperative planning efforts, which involve representatives from a village or city and surrounding townships, 2) county-local efforts, which are county-wide attempts to coordinate the planning activities of the numerous jurisdictions within a county, 3) multi-county regional planning efforts, which cover a wider geographic area and often have substantial resources available for regional planning (several serve as the metropolitan planning organization for their region and thus receive federal transportation funds), and 4) public-private specialized planning efforts, which focus on one or two regional issues, such as sustainable development or community health. So far, all four models appear to be capable of positive results, with the choice among models dependent on local goals and circumstances and the types of issues involved.

SUMMARY

Despite numerous legal and political barriers, regional planning is occurring across Michigan, and has often been successful at achieving positive results. Lawmakers hoping to encourage regional planning would do well to focus on economic factors and tangible incentives for local actors. Local jurisdictions engaged in regional planning should work to foster a climate of trust and build systems that can survive changes in leadership. Business and other non-governmental organizations can be important players in successful regional planning efforts, but they may need to push their way into the process or it may occur without them – perhaps to the detriment of their members.

Despite legal and political barriers, regional planning is occurring across Michigan

kinds are likely to fail; how participants in these arrangements assess successes and failures; how and why public, private, and non-profit sector actors participate in these efforts; and how these diverse actors might contribute to



Michigan Regional Planning Efforts

The CLOSUP study included extensive research into the framework of existing laws enabling local land use regulation and regional planning. Michigan law generally allows local communities to engage in, either separately or collectively, activities deemed necessary for local land use planning. However, few requirements or incentives exist to guide regional cooperation. Because the state's enabling legislation is vague, regional planning efforts have developed on an ad hoc basis.

Based on analysis of interview and survey data, the following conclusions are drawn

about the types of regional planning currently taking place in Michigan and the factors that facilitate and impede cooperation between local governments.

FOUR MODELS OF REGIONAL PLANNING

Several distinct models of regional planning efforts currently operate in Michigan. Naturally, there are differences between the efforts within each category, such as the resources available, the participants' levels of commitment, the degrees of consensus between members, and the extent and nature of county involvement. Consequently, the scope and areas of emphasis vary substantially between efforts. Still, within-category similarities enable

generalizations about what different efforts can and cannot accomplish. The models also may serve as a tool for evaluating existing regional planning efforts or developing new ones.

Table 1 outlines the characteristics of the four models; a discussion of each model follows.

1. Local cooperative planning: These sub-county efforts tend to involve representatives from one or a few population centers (villages or cities) plus several surrounding townships. Representatives of local school districts and chambers of commerce may also be formal members of such groups; the level of county involvement varies greatly. An active county role may include providing staff support, data, figures, maps, etc., as well as educating local officials about regional planning.

Representatives come together on the initiation of individual participants or are encouraged to do so by county planning officials. These efforts tend to be organized quite democratically, have a limited

mandate/agenda (typically to produce a joint regional plan), and operate on small budgets. Cooperation may be fragile as few incentives exist for participants to accept policies that benefit the region but impose significant costs on their local constituencies. Narrowly-focused members and planning commissions likely portend failure for such initiatives. Moreover, tensions between townships and villages may undermine the group's effectiveness. But these efforts can be quite successful when the communities involved are similar in size and believe themselves to be facing similar challenges.

Since such groups often aim to develop regional plans, the success or failure of these efforts is relatively transparent. In addition, while standardizing the zoning nomenclature across local jurisdictions may be unrealistic, it may nevertheless be possible through local joint planning efforts to at least streamline and standardize land use classifications in a region. County planners undoubtedly would welcome such a result, even if some member jurisdictions ultimately fail to adopt the regional plan.

2. County-local planning: These county-wide efforts to coordinate planning activities of numerous jurisdictions within a county feature at least two key characteristics. First, the townships, villages, and cities have input in the creation of a county comprehensive plan. They are consulted about the plan, and public hearings are held across the county. Second, while the county can create a comprehensive plan (and a state planning and development district or regional planning commission may adopt it as a regional plan), it is up to the local government units to decide whether to implement the plan in their jurisdiction. As one county planning official explained, "Counties can plan all they want in Michigan, but at the end of the day, they have little power over planning." While these efforts have an advantage of leadership and resources provided by county officials, local governments may see them as power-grabs by the county and may be reluctant to adopt the land use vision of county officials.

Research Methodology

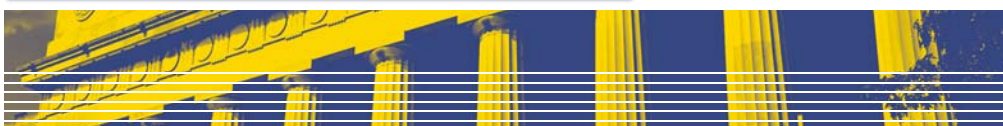
Research began in the fall of 2002, with a team of four University of Michigan/ Ford School of Public Policy Master's students working under the direction of Professor Elisabeth Gerber and supported by the Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce and the staff and resources of the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy. The research included four inter-related components:

1. Analysis of public documents. October-December 2002: Project staff reviewed relevant legislation and constitutional provisions that enable intergovernmental cooperation and regional planning in the state.

2. Semi-structured interviews of regional planning participants. January - July 2003: students conducted hour-long telephone and face-to-face interviews with participants from 19 regional planning initiatives of various types. See the CLOSUP website for a list of these initiatives.

3. Web-based surveys of county planners. June - July 2003: CLOSUP staff administered a survey to county officials (county executives, planners or clerks) across Michigan to obtain information about county planning activities, especially the role of county officials in facilitating cooperation between local governments, and to identify current regional planning efforts within each county. 58 out of 83 counties completed the survey.

4. Semi-structured interviews regarding business community participation. Spring 2003: project researchers conducted additional interviews with participants from the original sample of 19 regional planning efforts to assess the extent and impact of business community involvement in regional planning. Project staff interviewed previously contacted participants, additional participants, and chamber of commerce representatives (where applicable).



All of the county-wide planning efforts interviewed were at an early stage in their operations. As a result, it is difficult to report on the success of these efforts so far, but eventually it will be possible to quantify their success: Was a county-wide plan developed, and if so, by how many local units has it been adopted and implemented? One county official interviewed predicted that success at getting a county comprehensive plan adopted by the local units would hinge on the level of involvement of the local units in the process of developing the plan, and on the degree to which the county planning department provides ongoing technical assistance to the local units.

3. Multi-county regional planning: While some of these groups evolve from existing regional governments such as metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), others are created specifically to address regional land use issues. These efforts provide information to, and promote coordination among, local governments, and often have the advantage of a pre-existing organizational structure and regional reputation, as well as greater resources for regional planning activities. On the other hand, such groups can be hindered by the wide range of interests, perspectives, and priorities among their members. Many jurisdictions are represented in these bodies, including townships, villages, cities, and counties. One effort studied also includes representatives from the respective county road commissions, as well as county and state transit officials.

Several multi-county planning entities are the MPOs for their regions. Consequently, much of the funding received by these groups is designated for transportation planning and flows from the federal government to the MPO. Because transportation money is a clear benefit to members involved in an MPO, this particular type of multi-county regional planning effort has “no teeth, but strong gums,” in the words of one official.

4. Public-private specialized planning: These initiatives, featuring involvement from the private sector, the non-profit community,

or both, focus on one or two main issues, such as workforce development, sustainability, community health, or housing.

Both directly and indirectly, these efforts can impact a region’s businesses. Often, business community participation in such efforts occurs through local chambers of commerce and/or convention and visitors bureaus. Universities and community colleges may be involved too. And while one or more counties may also participate, they generally do not play a large role in such efforts.

Public-private specialized planning efforts include watershed partnerships, transportation studies, housing coalitions, etc. While members from these types of initiatives may agree on long-term goals, they often disagree on the steps toward those goals. As with the

multi-county planning efforts, the success of public-private specialized planning groups is more incremental and difficult to judge.

INITIATING COOPERATION

County officials cited economic considerations and potential cost savings as the primary factors helping local governments initiate cooperative planning efforts. Other factors mentioned were trust, communication, a history of collaboration, and leadership. Planners stressed the importance of a “champion” of the cause or a small group of dedicated individuals pushing the initiative forward.

Turf issues and the state’s home rule tradition were the most commonly cited obstacles to the formation of regional cooperative planning efforts. County officials reported that

Table 1: Models of Regional Planning

Model	Activity	Opportunities	Limitations	Business Involvement
Local Cooperative Planning	Develop a regional plan for a sub-county area.	Successful when similar communities involved. Possible to streamline land use classifications.	Few incentives for cooperation. Township-village tensions. Limited resources.	Chambers of commerce may be formal members and/or attend public hearings.
County-Local Planning	Develop a county comprehensive plan for local units to implement.	Benefit from county leadership and resources.	Counties cannot implement plans at local level. Townships may not share land use vision of the county.	Chambers may attend public hearings, open meetings, etc.
Multi-County Regional Planning	Provide and share information across region.	Benefit from substantial resources from multiple counties. May allocate federal transportation funds.	Range of interests represented is wide, potentially unmanageable.	Chambers may participate in subcommittees and/or attend public hearings.
Public-Private Specialized Planning	Various initiatives (e.g. workforce development, housing, watershed conservation).	Can function outside of government. Can involve wide range of private and non-profit sector interests.	Often have limited resources. Limited county role. Disagreement over tactics to achieve goals.	Chambers may be formal members. Chambers and businesses may sit on subcommittees or participate in specific projects.

Source: CLOSUP Interviews of Regional Planning Participants, 2003



Table 2: Initiating Cooperation

Factors that Facilitate Formation	Factors that Impede Formation
Economic considerations and potential cost savings	Turf issues
Trust, communications, history of collaboration	Home rule tradition
Leadership	Lack of trust
	Lack of information

Table 3: Sustaining Cooperation

Factors that Sustain Cooperation	Factors that Impede Cooperation
Results and cost savings	Change in leadership
Political will, cooperation and communication	Rivalries
Similar jurisdictions	Tension between participant goals

Source: CLOSUP Survey of County Planning Officials, 2003

local government actors fear loss of control and the uncertain outcomes they believe are associated with such initiatives. Lack of trust and information were noted as other impediments to the creation of regional planning efforts. Table 2 summarizes the factors that facilitate and impede the creation of regional efforts.

SUSTAINING COOPERATION

The factors that sustain existing regional efforts over time, according to county and local officials, include prior results and cost savings, political will, cooperation, and communication. In several cases, the significant involvement of county actors (such as county planning officials) has been seen as crucial to the regional planning effort's operations and effectiveness. However, several of the regional planning efforts formed due to townships' reluctance to leave regional planning up to their county. In these cases, representatives from the local units reported that they prefer to work together on planning issues rather than defer to the county's vision. In general, regional planning efforts are more likely to succeed when they comprise jurisdictions of similar size, resources, and goals.

Constraints on existing efforts were similar to the variety of obstacles that new efforts face.

Difficulties arise when there is a change in leadership or when rivalries develop among the participants. Additionally, where there is tension between the goals of different participants, success is less likely. Such disagreements often arise between a village and surrounding townships when they face very different growth pressures. Table 3 lists the factors that sustain and impede existing regional efforts.

INDIRECT BENEFITS

In addition to direct benefits resulting from more rationalized and coordinated land use planning and policymaking, participants from all types of regional planning efforts report that these initiatives have led to improved communication among members, through more frequent and more formalized information sharing. Most of the efforts reported holding meetings once per month. However, public participation in most efforts has not been extensive, and in many cases only a few members of the general public attend the monthly meetings. Nevertheless, at least among public officials formally participating in regional planning efforts, communication can help in building better relationships. Between meetings, for example, township representatives may share strategies for addressing issues or managing problems that each faces.

Participants in several of the arrangements also reported benefiting from informal collaborations among various participants. Several townships in one cooperative effort decided to work together to avoid duplicating efforts in the development of a mineral extraction ordinance and a purchase of development rights ordinance. Similarly, participants in another regional effort coordinated and pooled resources to develop a regional

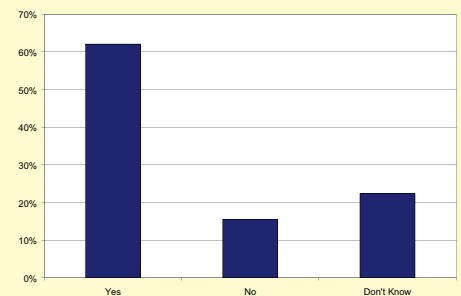
geographic information system. Additionally, regional planning initiatives often lead to collaboration between two jurisdictions to adopt a conditional land transfer agreement (Public Act 425) to facilitate economic development. For many members, these spin-off activities are valuable indirect benefits to participation in regional planning efforts.

Role of the County

Of the 58 Michigan counties that completed the web-based CLOSUP survey, 62% reported regional efforts within their counties while 22% were unsure, perhaps meaning additional regional efforts are occurring "below the radar screen" (see Figure 1). 84% of the counties have a county planning commission, 76% have a county-wide development plan in place, 57% have a planning department with either full-time or part-time staff, and 54% have a staff building inspector. Only 36% of the counties have a zoning ordinance in effect, while only 33% have a zoning board of appeals, 31% have a staff zoning administrator and 23% rely on a planning/zoning consultant. Table 4 summarizes these figures.

In many cases, the county planning department acts in an advisory capacity to local gov-

Figure 1: Local Cooperative Planning, Reported by County Planning Officials



"Are there currently any voluntary activities, authorities, or agreements between two or more local governments within your county that have an impact on land use planning and/or policymaking?"

Source: CLOSUP Survey of County Planning Officials, 2003



Table 4: County Planning/Zoning Functions, Reported by County Planning Officials

Planning and Zoning Functions and Capacities	% of Counties with Item
Planning Commission	84%
County-wide Development Plan	76%
Planning Dept. with Staff	57%
Building Inspector	54%
Zoning Ordinance	36%
Zoning Board of Appeals	33%
Zoning Administrator	31%
Planning/Zoning Consultant	23%

Source: CLOSUP Survey of County Planning Officials, 2003

ernments on local planning and zoning. Such support may involve consultation, technical assistance, training and education, and model ordinances. Cooperative planning efforts usually benefit from such county involvement, as reported in interviews of local regional planning effort participants.

84% of the counties responding to the survey actively participate in a multi-county regional planning effort, with each identifying the county’s state planning and development district (SPDD) as the primary mechanism. However, only 45% of the responding counties rely substantially on planning services provided by the SPDD or other agencies.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM

The survey and interview respondents were asked to offer suggestions for how the state or counties could better facilitate inter-governmental cooperation. Many responses focused on financial assistance that the state could offer, such as greater revenue sharing or tying funding directly to the level of inter-governmental cooperation in a region. Similarly, the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council has recommended establishing a “commerce centers program” that would direct state funds to “those areas working cooperatively with multiple units of government to solve

regional and multijurisdictional land use challenges.” The Council also proposed creating “incentives for local cooperation on regional and multijurisdictional infrastructure and economic development decisions” (The Michigan Land Use Leadership Council, “Principles and Recommendations for Planning and Development Regulation.” In Michigan’s Land, Michigan’s Future, p. 15. Lansing, MI, 2003). Additional research should be conducted on these potential reforms. Several study respondents suggested that the state should allocate more funds to regional planning groups. Perhaps not surprisingly, many county officials also suggested that counties should play a greater role in regional planning.

Business Participation

Project staff conducted 20 separate interviews focusing on the opportunities and challenges that regional planning efforts may present to the business community and the roles played by business organizations in these efforts. For initiatives with formal chamber of commerce participation, researchers spoke with a chamber representative, such as the executive director. In addition, interviews were conducted with at least one non-chamber member of every regional planning effort studied, including those in which the business community is not formally represented. These members included township supervisors, village managers, city council members, planning commissioners, county planners, and project coordinators.

IMPACT ON BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Business representatives emphasized that land use planning decisions, including those that guide zoning policy, annexations, sewer

and water provision, etc., can have important impacts on major business decisions. Planning and zoning decisions influence whether new businesses choose to locate in the region, precisely where they choose to locate, and whether existing businesses can expand at their current locations. Land use policy also affects businesses indirectly by impacting an area’s quality of life. As one county planner remarked, “Planning and land use shouldn’t be just public sector issues. Land use is residential, commercial and industrial – and commercial and industrial are private sector concerns. Residential is too, when you consider that it affects developers and home builders.”

Echoing this view that the business community has a stake in regional planning, a project coordinator explained, “Recruiting high-quality employees is a priority for businesses, and it’s easier for [business name] and others to bring in good people to work there if it’s a vibrant, economically and environmentally healthy community.” A county planner noted that the transportation, tourism, and quality of life issues that regional cooperation may address all relate to economic and business development.

WHAT CAN CHAMBERS CONTRIBUTE?

Given the significance of regional planning efforts to area business communities, how can chambers of commerce contribute positively to such initiatives? With turf issues and mistrust hindering intergovernmental planning, chambers are well positioned to serve as regional representatives of wider community interests. Chamber directors as well as county planners emphasized this point.

In some areas, school districts and chambers of commerce may be the most important existing regional entities. As such, chambers can help bring together actors from local government units to work on issues of regional concern. Often, chambers can speak on behalf of the region’s interests more credibly than local government representatives. Chambers can also encourage broad-based public buy-in



for a regional plan by generating private sector support. “If chamber [staff] are knowledgeable about the effort and have contributed to the development of the regional plan, then when it comes time to implement the plan, they will be supportive of it and will get the business community behind it,” observed one planner.

On the other hand, a chamber may squander its credibility as a regional voice if it takes political positions that favor one jurisdiction over another. And, there are limits to how much chambers can contribute to regional planning efforts since government units – not chambers – have planning authority and enforcement responsibility. Thus, elected and appointed public officials carry the most weight in regional planning. “As a chamber of commerce, you can act as the pivot and you can keep the group’s focus, but you have no political clout,” said a former chamber director.

OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION

Despite the mutual benefits from chamber involvement in regional planning efforts, often chambers are not formal members of these initiatives. Both the chamber and public actors may be at fault when there is no business community involvement. Counties and local governments may not invite the local chamber to the table, intentionally or not. In a larger city, where interest groups are many and diverse, numerous other groups may demand representation if the chamber has a place at the table. Consequently, the regional effort may be hindered by too many political viewpoints. In other cases, it simply may not occur to county planners and other officials to invite the chamber to participate in a regional planning project.

Additionally, depending on the local political environment, it may not be necessary for the chamber to participate in order for business interests to be represented. In small towns there tends to be much greater overlap between local business leaders and the political elite. “It’s common in small towns for people to wear several hats at once,” explained one

village manager. A village council member may be a chamber officer, a township official may be the local chamber president, and local elected officials are frequently business owners or executives. These individuals will keep business interests in mind as they participate in a regional planning initiative.

Several county officials expressed disappointment that the chamber did not participate more actively in their efforts. From the perspective of a chamber, the chamber’s leaders may believe that the regional initiative does not significantly impact the business community. When they do participate, chamber members may be viewed skeptically by local government officials as individual business owners rather than as area-wide representatives of the private sector’s interests.

Chambers of commerce are unlikely to have a vote in any initiative that is strictly construed as a regional planning effort (i.e., where the primary goal is the development of a regional land use plan). If a regional initiative begins to take on that mission, a chamber may lose its role in the process. When chambers cannot formally participate in a regional planning effort, respondents emphasized the need for chamber and business community representatives to attend public hearings and open meetings in order to represent the area’s business interests.

Conclusion

Despite constraints and limited incentives, many local units of government in Michigan are conducting regional land use planning efforts and are seeing benefits even at their early stages. Most existing regional efforts can be placed in one of four models: local cooperative efforts; county-local efforts; multi-county efforts; or public-private specialized efforts. Each model appears capable of producing positive results, with the choice among models dependent on local circumstances and the issues involved.

Although regional planning is often dis-

cussed in idealistic terms, survey and interview respondents were clear that it was the prospect of practical economic benefits that cut through the inertia to establish such efforts, and the reality of economic benefits that sustained them. This should be kept in mind as policymakers search for ways to promote and enhance regional planning in Michigan and other states. In addition, local groups engaged in regional planning should foster a climate of trust and build a system which is not dependent on the leadership of one individual if such efforts are to be sustained.

Finally, many regional planning efforts are occurring in the absence of chambers of commerce or other business organization involvement. Since business interests are closely tied to the results of such efforts, it is important that businesses be represented during the planning process. Chambers may also be valuable to regional planning efforts by drawing participants together through their roles as regional entities, and by building support for the results among community leaders and the public.

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Policy Report