

21st Century Governance: Regions, Regional Equity and Opportunity in Sacramento

By Chris Benner and Bill Kennedy for the Coalition on Regional Equity

Introduction

In the midst of the worst economic recession in four generations, many people in our country have lost faith in the ability of government to help solve their problems. In the Sacramento area, many families feel the dissonance between their hopes and dreams for the future, and the policies adopted by their elected leaders. The Sacramento area continues to suffer from high foreclosure rates, widespread unemployment, and increasing homelessness—just the most obvious indicators of the broader struggles poor and working families in the region continue to face—yet our local and state governments seem powerless to turn the tide of economic hardship while also slashing funding for education and needed social programs. This separation fosters widespread discontent in government, at all levels, and threatens our democratic institutions.

But perhaps the problem is not government itself, but rather the outdated structures of our public institutions. Perhaps we are trying to govern in the 21st century using 20th century government structures. Former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel famously said shortly after the November 2008 elections, “Never let a good crisis go to waste”. The continued economic crisis provides us an opportunity to rethink how we can grow in the 21st century and what role public institutions can play in shaping that growth. Regionalism may be the answer.

Why should we focus on the Sacramento metropolitan region as a whole and rethink our *regional* development patterns in addressing social and economic opportunity? There are two simple answers to this question. The first answer lies in the daily activities of our lives. Perhaps 50 years ago, people lived more frequently within a single city, but today our lives rarely fall neatly within city and county lines. We cross those lines daily, without thought, as we travel to work, take our children to school, shop or seek family recreation or entertainment. The second answer lies in recognizing that the social and economic development opportunities in all of our neighborhoods are largely shaped by regional development patterns. The disinvestment and resulting vacant lots of Del Paso Heights and South Sacramento, for example, are driven in large part by the last fifty years of sprawling investment in the region’s Eastern Suburbs. Similarly, downtown Sacramento’s continued economic challenges, including the struggling Westfield Mall and high office and residential vacancy rates, are largely shaped by development opportunities in other parts of the region. Conversely, opportunities for growth anywhere in the region, such as renewable energy and energy efficiency jobs in the new green economy for example, will be driven not by conditions in a single neighborhood or city, but rather by the quality of educational institutions throughout the region and dynamic innovation in clusters of firms not rooted in a single city.

With regional dynamics now playing such an important role in our social and economic lives, it is high time that our political institutions and public processes catch up to this 21st century reality. Fortunately, there are signs that more people are recognizing the need for regional solutions, and there are many immediate opportunities within the Sacramento region for making major gains.

Regionalism and Regional Equity

Over the past 20 years, a range of different constituencies have paid increasing attention to regional dynamics and development patterns. Business leaders and economic development professionals have led much of this work for perhaps obvious reasons. Economies pay little attention to jurisdictional patterns, firms are not limited by city boundaries, and commute patterns typically cross many jurisdictional lines—from suburb to city, suburb to suburb, and even increasingly from one metro region to the next in our sprawling ‘megapolises’. Environmentalists have also increasingly been focusing on regional development patterns, for similarly obvious reasons. Preserving agricultural land and green space on the urban periphery requires promoting denser developments in the urban core. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions requires promoting denser mixed-use developments throughout regions. Even city planners and local government officials, often seen as the epicenter of a local control movement, are paying attention to regional planning processes. While still reticent to give up local land use control or enter into regional tax-revenue sharing systems, local officials are increasingly recognizing the importance of regional planning for promoting economic development and planning transportation.

Along with the growing attention to regionalism, in recent years there has also emerged a growing *regional equity* movement around the country. Led by community and labor organizers, policy advocates, and civil rights organizations, people concerned about expanding opportunities for disadvantaged populations have increasingly turned to regional approaches in their work. This regional equity movement has emerged along three parallel dimensions:

- *Analytically*, a regional equity perspective recognizes that many of our country’s most challenging urban problems are created by our patterns of metropolitan development, particularly the spatial configuration of cities and suburbs. These patterns of metropolitan development aren’t simply market processes, but are driven in large part by policy and public actions. Economic decline in inner city neighborhoods, for example, is driven in part by the ways we subsidize suburban development, primarily through tax-payer funded highway construction and disproportionate subsidies for homeowners over renters. Our fragmented system of local government, including local school districts, reinforces divisions between jurisdictions and creates highly unequal tax bases.
- *Practically*, a regional equity perspective emphasizes the multiple solutions to urban problems that require regional solutions. Effective economic development strategies, for example, involve regional coordination of stakeholders and targeting of high priority industry clusters. Workforce development initiatives must be integrated with regional labor markets. Environmental preservation and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

requires regional coordination to preserve greenspace on our urban periphery and redirect growth to urban infill and brownfields developments. Even affordable housing initiatives can be most effective in expanding housing opportunities in non-traditional, job and opportunity rich sites in many suburban job centers, rather than further concentrating affordable housing in poor neighborhoods.

- *Politically*, a regional equity perspective recognizes that regions are productive places for new coalitions to emerge and for building political will to address our pressing urban problems. This is in part because there is a broad confluence of interests that emerge at a regional scale. It is also partly because there are few political interests already well entrenched at a regional scale. Without formal political structures or elected positions, devising regional solutions requires a level of ‘deliberative democracy’ that creates possibilities for new sustainable coalitions among unlikely partners. Regional equity proponents, for example, have also paid attention to issues of economic competitiveness and sustainability, not just equity, creating opportunities for alliances between business leaders and equity advocates. Indeed the regional equity perspective frequently argues that the inclusion of low-income groups is central to recovering regional economies and thus in everyone’s interest. As a result, regional equity proponents have been experimenting with policies beyond the traditional anti-poverty fields of building low-income housing, launching local job training programs or reconstructing distressed neighborhoods. Likewise, regional equity proponents have sought to move beyond oppositional protest politics, looking for opportunities to build unlikely alliances across multiple constituencies.

Over the last 10-15 years across the country, this regional equity approach has clearly gained traction, support by growing research on the importance of regions to the evolution of economic, environmental and social inequalities, and prompted by the organizing strategies of numerous community-based, labor, and even business-oriented organizations. This convergence of interests and approaches around regionalism and regional equity has also found a home in the Sacramento, though driven by our own history and constituencies.

Regionalism and Regional Equity Opportunities in Sacramento

In many ways Sacramento has struggled to develop a regional identity and regional cohesiveness. This isn’t simply because it has a fragmented local government structure, though indeed with 6 counties, 23 cities, at least 70 distinct school districts, and over 300 other local government districts,¹ government in Sacramento is highly fragmented like most U.S. metro areas. Beyond the formal government structures, the region has struggled to build its own identity. Since its very origins, much of the Sacramento region’s growth and development was rooted in its service to other places, rather than locally rooted businesses or dynamics—from its origins as the refueling site for gold miners seeking their fortunes in the Sierra foothills, to its

¹ This includes irrigation districts, fire districts, cemetery districts, resource conservation districts, recreation and parks districts, community services districts, bond authorities, transit authorities, airport districts, mosquito abatement districts, job training agencies, water districts, landfill authorities, flood control districts, utility districts, port districts and reclamation districts. For a full listing of local governments, see: <http://www.census.gov/govs/go/>

long-term role as capital for the entire state of California, through more recent incarnations as a low-cost housing or back office site for people and firms seeking to escape sky-high real estate prices of the Bay Area. As a result, for much of the last fifty years, the region has simply sprawled along our major transportation corridors, with little cohesion or coordination.

Despite these various dispersing forces, Sacramento has experienced growing cohesiveness in regional initiatives in recent years. As elsewhere, much of this has emerged in the business community, driven in Sacramento's case in the 1990s by economic restructuring associated with the three military base closures in the region. Both private and public sector entities, such as the Sacramento Area Trade and Commerce Agency (SACTO), the Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA) and multiple city local economic development officials, collaborated on regional marketing, site development, and workforce development initiatives in response to this crisis. Valley Vision, a non-profit founded in 1994, has also contributed to regional coherence, brokering a "regional compact" in 1999 for example in which virtually every city and county in the region officially agreed that many public policy and community issues can only be solved at the regional level, and by developing the 2006 Partnership for Prosperity that brought together 34 prominent organizations in the region to develop a common economic development strategy with a growing focus on the region's substantial clean and green energy industry. Since the late 1990s, the region has also experienced increasing levels of local government collaboration led largely by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG). Their regional "blueprint" process in the early 2000s compared a base case scenario of sprawling and uncontrolled urbanization against other scenarios designed to promote denser development and expanded mass transit, and included more than 30 neighborhood-scale workshops, countywide discussions in five of the region's six counties, and a final regional forum on April 2004 that involved more than 1,400 people. All these processes have helped make regional approaches more prevalent in the Sacramento areas public and private sector leadership.

Equity advocates have also pursued important regional solutions designed to promote greater equity and economic opportunities for disadvantaged populations. One especially promising effort emerged in the early 2000s, when a broad coalition of community groups organized for the passage of California State Assembly Bill 680, which would have allocated sales taxes from new growth throughout the region in a tax-sharing formula, thereby helping to avoid the pointless city-to-city competition for new sales tax revenue in a zero sum game of auto-mall and big box retail attraction strategies. Unfortunately, though the bill passed in the Assembly, it lost in the Senate. Community coalitions were also critical during SACOG's blueprint process in convincing SACOG to host three sessions specifically focused on diversity in blueprint planning, and working with neighborhood residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods to participate in the process. In 2007, the Coalition for Regional Equity (CORE) was formed, by a broad collaboration of affordable housing developers, environmentalists, policy advocates focused on transportation, the homeless, and poverty, social service providers, organized labor, the faith community, civil rights leaders, and health groups.

While much of the gains from regional approaches to development will only be felt over decades—after-all, it has taken us 50 years to build our fragmented, sprawling, auto-dependent, and unequal urban areas and this won't be reversed over-night—there are immediate

opportunities for promoting social equity through regional processes that can result in real gains now, while also building for our long-term future. Here are just a few examples:

- *Land Use Planning, Transportation and Housing:* With funding from the Federal Government, the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOGs) is leading a broad regional planning process to accelerate transit-oriented development in the region. In the process of developing a Regional Plan for Sustainable Development, this initiative is trying to incorporate social equity concerns as a central factor in shaping priorities for new project developments, and to incorporate these concerns more centrally in SACOG's long-term planning efforts. [see map for example of an equity analysis related to selection of transit priority areas in this process.] This process is hoping to accelerate new affordable housing and mixed-used developments in many poor neighborhoods in the region, including Fruitridge/Stockton in South Sacramento, Washington Specific Plan area in West Sacramento, and portions of the Folsom Boulevard corridor east of Sacramento and in Rancho Cordova. Furthermore, any organizations in the region that apply for grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development have the potential for preferred status for the applications by ensuring their efforts fit within the broad parameters of this regional sustainability plan.
- *Public Transit:* A broad coalition of community and labor organizations, spearheaded by the Coalition on Regional Equity, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), and the ARC of California (a disability rights advocacy organization), are organizing in support of dramatically expanded spending on public transit in the region. Broad major goals include getting new regional revenue sources for transit operations, advocacy for more regional funds to be diverted from highways to transit, and improving the quality of service to disadvantaged communities in the region most dependent on public transit.
- *Education:* The Sacramento Central Labor Council is leading an initiative to simultaneously improve the quality of public education and improve employment conditions for the many para-teachers in our public schools. The initiative recognizes that one of the factors that leads to poor educational outcomes for young kids of color is that they have fewer role models to demonstrate the power and importance of education. While 73% of students in our public schools are African-American, Latino, Asian or Native American, only 30% of teachers are people of color.² At the same time, 75% of teachers aides and other para-professionals in the classrooms are people of color, and more than 10,000 new teachers are typically hired every year state-wide, to replace retirees and other teachers who leave. Thus, the labor council is working with school districts throughout the region and the Los Rios Community College District, to accelerate the training required for para-professionals to get their teaching credentials and fill these slots.
- *Health:* The California Endowment has entered into a ten-year commitment to support efforts in South Sacramento as part of their Building Healthy Communities initiative. These efforts recognize that improving the economic, physical, social and service

² Data is for the 2009-10 academic year state-wide, from the California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Office, <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

environments in which people live are often more important for building the lasting health of individuals, families, and communities than the provision of health care itself. This effort will result in tens of millions of dollars being invested in south Sacramento neighborhoods, as part of a process of linking area residents with regional opportunities and improving conditions in the neighborhood.

As these examples show, opportunities for promoting greater equity through regional strategies are widespread, and cut across a wide-range of issues and constituencies. And there are many other major opportunities that will emerge in the months ahead. One of the most important will be the continuing efforts to develop a new basketball arena, and to further development the downtown railyards projects, both of which are major regional assets and will generate thousands of jobs with the potential for leveraging community benefits through expanded training, local-hire, and improved transit access provisions.

There are certainly many challenges of regional strategies as well, ranging from entrenched local interests to lack of formal regional government structures, to the multiple tensions and tightropes that must be navigated in building regional collaborations. But these challenges are often no more daunting than the challenges of more narrow, local approaches to these issues, or broad national solutions. And more importantly, the regional equity strategy – in which relationships and strategies are negotiated face-to-face, place-to-place, and race-to-race – offers opportunities for new conversations and politics to overcome some of the most intractable problems facing our metropolitan regions. In the process, we might just be able to upgrade our 20th century government structures to more productively match our 21st century economy and society.

If you are interested in getting more involved in regional equity efforts, please contact Kendra Bridges, Land Use Policy Director for the Sacramento Housing Alliance, at (916) 455-4900 or kendra@sachousingalliance.org.