

Champions of Regionalism

By Jim Dove

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A Presentation to the House Rural Development Council

Chairman Terry England and Chairman Jay Powell

August 14, 2018

Elberton, GA

Thank you Chairman England, Chairman Powell and Members of the Committee for this opportunity to come before you today to discuss Georgia's Regional Commissions and their work throughout Georgia.

I am Jim Dove, Executive Director of the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission based in Athens as well as president of the **Georgia Association of Regional Commissions**, which is comprised of all twelve of Georgia's Regional Commissions. Today, I am here as GARC's president.

I am very excited to report that the GARC, composed of the 12 executive directors and a policy official from each region, held a strategic planning retreat just two weeks ago to further define and enhance the association's role in promoting regionalism. Our retreat undertook the task of shaping the association to be a more **hands-on, peer-review** organization. We are now developing plans to improve the **quality** and **consistency** of services among all twelve Regional Commissions through **best-practices evaluations and assistance**.

Our state has become increasingly interested in the concept of regionalism in recent years. Thus, it's interesting to note that Georgia was a pioneer in the formation of the regional development concept in the early 1960s. RCs, even if by other names, have been promoting regionalism for nearly six decades, and rural areas have benefitted greatly from that approach. In the late 60's a future U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, and a future U.S. Senator, Sam Nunn, each served as chairs of what were originally known as Area Planning and Development Commissions.

The state legislature enacted the Georgia Planning Act in 1989 that charged the RCs statewide with the responsibility of preparing and adopting regional plans. The Planning Act was refined in 2008 when the legislature enacted HB 1216, which further enumerated the RCs responsibilities to develop, promote and assist in establishing coordinated and comprehensive planning for the following areas: Land Use, Environmental, Transportation, and Historic Preservation.

Each RC has an executive director who reports to a governing regional council comprised of the following members as required by the Georgia Planning Act:

- Chief elected official of each member county;
- One municipal representative from each member county;
- Three appointments by the Governor, one of such appointees shall be a member of a school board or a superintendent of schools and two of such appointees shall be non-public residents;
- One non-public appointment by the Speaker; and
- One non-public appointment by the Lt. Governor.

The DCA Commissioner may authorize additional members of the Council as deemed appropriate.

Regional Commissions are funded from a variety of sources including dues paid by local governments, funding from the Department of Community Affairs specifically to carry out the planning responsibilities contained in the State Planning Act, and federal funding emanating from the Economic Development Administration per our respective designations as an Economic Development District.

Enhancing **regionalism** is the focus of today's agenda. Let's take a moment to look at some of the core services offered by Regional Commissions, and how often they lend themselves to a regional approach.

➤ **Planning**

- RCs provide member communities with assistance in developing their Basic Comprehensive Plan required of local governments. But RCs help to produce other types of plans, too -- plans for transportation, economic development, historic preservation, environmental, urban redevelopment, downtown development, hazard mitigation, bike and pedestrian routes, river corridors, and regional recreation efforts.
- RCs employ experienced, professional staff who work on plans for multiple communities, and thus can disseminate best practices among cities and counties, both large and small. But they are also positioned to help counties and communities coordinate across boundary lines so that we have win-win plans for more than one community.
- **Geographic Information Services (GIS)**
 - Regional Commissions offer mapping assistance to our local governments including: zoning, future land use, utilities, and local resources. RCs are also working with state entities to develop statewide up-to-date transportation, economic development, and other datasets to support long-range planning and asset management efforts across Georgia.
- **Local Government Assistance**
 - This may include help with things like developing local ordinances, planning commission consultation, and budget preparation assistance.
- **Grant writing and plan implementation**
 - Nearly every edition of a Regional Commission newsletter will tout a grant award won through the RC's help. Our rural communities especially need help in this arena and again, professional grant writers housed in a Regional Commission can deliver.
- **Demographic Information**
 - Grant-writing and administrative chores depend on accurate demographic information. RCs are the repository for this often-needed data.
- **Data Affiliate for U.S. Census Bureau**

- Many communities would be unable to fully maximize the census count without the help of their Regional Commission. That would mean money lost from federal sources for both the community and the state.
- **Local officials training**
 - From teaching city clerks how to take minutes, to training Chamber of Commerce officials, and everywhere in between, RCs provide valuable coaching on the technical aspects of governing and public service to communities large and small.
- **Economic Development Districts** designated by the U.S. Economic Development Administration
 - Regional Commissions prepare mandated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) for each region. These strategies identify infrastructure needs which enhance economic development opportunities and often result in federal funding. Grant applications for EDA funds are prepared and administered by Regional Commission staff. This is an example of our organizations being in position to leverage significant federal funding that otherwise would not be available.
 - Regional Commissions assist communities and **local economic development authorities** in a number of ways.
 - They provide data necessary to respond to Requests for Information from industries and businesses searching for a new home
 - They can provide an economic impact analysis of a new firm and can help local authorities structure what incentive programs should look like by calculating costs to provide additional services such as water and sewer.
 - The RCs also identify external funding sources to help make those water and sewer incentives affordable.
 - The Middle Georgia Regional Commission in Macon hosts periodic **Development Authority Training** and these sessions are open to communities statewide. On occasion they even coordinate sales team training with the economic development pros at Georgia Power.
- **Champion and Facilitator for Regional Cooperation**

- Regional cooperation involves efforts that include multiple governments, whether that is cities or counties or a combination thereof, as well as those that involve more than one region. In Northeast Georgia, the formation of the Upper Oconee Basin Water Authority (UOBWA) and development of the Bear Creek Reservoir is a prime example. This four-county collaboration resulted in a water supply to serve Barrow, Clarke, Jackson, and Oconee Counties, not only on a daily basis, but in periods of our greatest droughts. The Reservoir project, which had a \$75 million price tag, was constructed ahead of schedule and at a cost of \$69 million. Revenue Bonds, utilized for construction, have been re-financed on two occasions, resulting in additional savings of more than \$4 million. The project was conceived by our organization which has continued to administer the Authority's activities.

- Another excellent example of regional cooperation is the four-county Stanton Springs Industrial Park, owned by the Joint Development Authority of Jasper, Morgan, Newton, and Walton Counties, and including 1620 acres. Over 200 acres have been developed with more than one million square feet of world class advanced technology bio-pharmaceutical processing, quality control labs, R & D facilities, and the state-of-the art Georgia Bioscience Training Center. Baxalta/Shire, a global leader in biologic medical therapies, is located there and its capital investments will exceed \$1.85 billion, and 1500 new full-time positions over 20 years. The facility's average annual salary exceeds \$60,000. Facebook recently announced a 400-acre data center to be located in the Park with a \$20 billion investment over 20 years and 250 new jobs. The Joint Development Authority has already retired all debt and is planning new infrastructure.

- Regional Commissions have worked tirelessly with officials on Regional T-SPLOST efforts throughout the state. Four areas – River Valley, Heart of Georgia, Central Savannah River, and Southern Georgia – have passed this innovative financing tool, resulting in much needed projects being addressed by state and local leaders.

- Some regional efforts include cooperation between large counties and small counties. As an example, Athens-Clarke County and Oglethorpe County came together several years ago to solve a solid waste issue. Oglethorpe County did not have resources available to develop a state-of-the-art municipal landfill, and Athens-Clarke did not have land available for a Construction/Demolition Landfill. An agreement was reached where by Athens-Clarke handles all municipal waste for the two counties, and Oglethorpe disposes of all CD waste.

In addition to these so-called “Core” responsibilities, RCs provide numerous **added benefits**. For example:

- Ten of the 12 RCs serve as the administrator for their local Area Agency on Aging.
 - The AAAs, as this committee well knows, provide not only home-delivered meals to the aged and infirmed, but numerous other programs that allow our senior citizens to age at home, rather than dunning Medicaid to live out their years in a nursing facility.
 - In 2016 the legislature transferred the Community Care Services Program (CCSP) to the Department of Community Health. But, AAAs are still responsible for the boots-on-the-ground administration of this important program. Home and Community-Based Services are also administered by the AAAs.

- Ten of the RCs serve as administrator for the state’s **Workforce Development** programs. Legislators will likely remember Gov. Deal’s State of the State address this January, which introduced a young man who had changed his life through participation in a welding program at West Georgia Technical College. That young man’s welding class was a component of a workforce development program administered by the **Three Rivers Regional Commission**. Experienced welders are needed in my area, too, where Caterpillar has a plant desperate for trained workers. But nothing in Georgia outweighs the need for nurses, like those being trained through our region’s workforce development

program. Another one of the great needs we are addressing here in this region is the **re-training** of workers with new skills.

- All Regional Commissions participate in the **MAP 21 program**, verifying road data for the Georgia Department of Transportation in an effort to address problems with incorrect and out-of-date information. Local road information such as surface type, ownership, lanes, names, and so forth is being collected, verified, and ultimately compiled into a publicly available statewide data set. The program is intended to address challenges related to increased safety, improved infrastructure condition, decreased congestion, efficiency in freight movement, protecting the environment, and alleviating delays in product delivery.

Regionalism Opportunities in Rural Transit

Finally, I'd like to talk briefly about the Regionalism opportunities in Rural Transit. Rural Transit is vital to economic mobility and prosperity for rural Georgia. It's important to realize that RHST -- **Rural and Human Services Transit** -- is broader than just GDoT, DCH, and DHS.

- RHST is not coordinated by law
- Service duplication is alive and well
- Regulations exist in agency silos, creating a real impediment to efficient operations
- Service gaps and delays need to be addressed

What could we do to improve rural transit on a regional basis?

- Identify and **coordinate** all RHST fund sources.
- Establish state and **regional mobility councils** with the authority to coordinate funds and policies. RCs could serve in planning and administrative roles.
- Utilize common service delivery regions. RC's could administer transit programs, and coordinate with designated entities for services
- Provide a path to **coordinate capital purchasing**

- Increase participation with ride-hailing services to **fill service gaps**

Georgia's Regional Commissions have a long history and great depth of experience in making regionalism work. We stand ready to re-examine and sharpen our current practices and to work with the legislature and state agencies to imagine new ways to serve our citizens with a regional approach.

Regional Commissions seek to **EARN** and **OWN** the title as **Georgia's Champions of Regionalism**.

We look forward to working with this committee to achieve that goal, and I would be pleased to address any questions you may have.

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