

Inner-ring metro cities are key to regionalism

Compromise on issues can help Detroit and suburbs

BY SHARON CARNEY and CONAN SMITH

May 19, 2006



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Regional cooperation in southeast Michigan is the only way this state is going to climb up from the bottom of the many lists it anchors. However, there's one little problem with this prescription for prosperity: Metro Detroit doesn't have a great track record on cooperation.



Conan Smith

For decades, we've experienced the same racially charged city-vs.-suburbs dichotomy in various forms, most recently taking the shape of rights to the Detroit Zoo and control of water rates. This "us vs. them" tension is deeply ingrained in our region. Time and again, we've seen relationships between urban and suburban leaders erupt into trash talking and fly-by accusations.

But things are changing. The distinction between city and suburbs has blurred, and older, inner-ring communities --

such as Warren, Ferndale and Lincoln Park -- are the gray space in between.

Like Detroit, they face challenges of deteriorating infrastructure, little undeveloped land, increasingly diverse populations, and growing concentrations of poverty. These communities have been struggling to retain residents as people migrate to the metropolitan fringe. Still, they are suburbs, and they have an interest in how water rates are handled and how the state doles out road dollars.

Not quite urban or modern suburban, metro Detroit's inner-ring cities are critical to the success of regionalism. They share common goals and interests with both the City of Detroit and the further suburbs. They are places where differences come together. Old and young, wealthy and needy, liberal and conservative, black and white -- these communities are the melting pot of metro Detroit. And they are where compromise can begin.

Many of the challenges facing our metro area could be resolved through policy reform. We can work toward that with a regional agenda in five key areas:

- **Regionalism.** Many of southeast Michigan's challenges demand intergovernmental solutions. We need new governing tools that acknowledge the importance of issues with greater-than-local impact.
- **Social equity.** Metro Detroit is the most segregated region in the nation. We must encourage regional leaders to open the lines of dialogue and identify core issues impacted by race, including transportation and housing.
- **Sustainable development.** The consequences of poorly planned development throughout our region are increasingly clear, from faltering air quality to the frequent beach closings because of water contamination. We need policies that encourage redevelopment in our cities and sustainable development of new communities.
- **Municipal funding.** State laws that limit property-tax revenue growth and major cuts to revenue sharing are forcing municipal governments of all types to eliminate city services. We need to resolve these problems and create a way to generate revenue on a multi-jurisdictional basis to more effectively fund regional benefits, such as mass transit.

- **Infrastructure.** Road maintenance is underfunded, our region faces a multibillion-dollar construction need for sewers, and our energy supply is heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels. We need state policies that recognize the role of our physical infrastructure and its importance to our regional economic competitiveness.

"Building the Metropolitan Agenda" will be the main topic of today's meeting of the Michigan Suburbs Alliance, from 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. at the Southfield Public Library.

We have evolved past city vs. suburbs. Geographically and demographically, the Rosevilles, Melvindales, and Hazel Parks of our region are the middle ground between urban and exurban interests and the key to moving southeast Michigan forward.

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