

Regional Cooperation: The Western Reserve and 'The Livable City'

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After admiring the artist works inside the studio-lofts of the Tower Press building, an old converted warehouse that lodges many of Cleveland Institute of Art's recent graduates, I step outside to begin my run. Across from Tower Press, the historic five-story brick box, home to Cleveland's celebrated newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, reminds me of Cleveland's east-west rivalry manifested in the morning's headline, "Which side of town has the worst drivers?"¹ In downtown's commercial center, a portrait of Cleveland's NBA superstar LeBron James stretches across the face of a high rise under the slogan, "We Are All Witnesses;" the mammoth Nike advertisement incites some droll mockery on my part but also gives me renewed motivation of my own athletic goals; my pace quickens. I finish my run four miles east of downtown in Cleveland's "eds and meds" district, a concentration of thriving educational, medical, and cultural institutions called University Circle.² In my experience, the breadth, multitude and close-proximity of the celebrated amenities of city life simply cannot be matched anywhere else, if only by a sheer lack of numbers and density. This herein embodies the urban attraction. The culture, history, architecture, diversity, the natural dialogue of city life, the constant interaction between strangers and acquaintances alike makes Cleveland a "magnet for residents." Despite earning acclaim for livability in 2005, Cleveland has still not escaped its "Rust Belt" identity, a product of its reputable manufacturing-base having fallen by the wayside during the late 1980s. In light of the region's job losses, urban decay, out-migration and sprawl, citizens of Northeast Ohio have begun massive collaborative efforts to alleviate a widespread economic pinch.

In an unprecedented effort by the non-profit sector, a collaboration of over 70 nonprofit organizations called *Voices and Choices* has instituted a grass-root, citizen-based approach to

improve Northeast Ohio. Based upon the democratic premise that the collective view of the people deduces solutions that best suit an entire region, *Voices and Choices* has engaged tens of thousands of citizens and community leaders from Northeast Ohio in a three-phase process to inform, involve, and plan solutions for smart economic growth.³ As David Abbot, executive director of the George Gund Foundation, explained at this year's Western Reserve Studies Symposium, this exercise in Regionalism runs on the notion that an entire region's social, cultural, civic and economic vitality are what afford its competitiveness in today's global economy.⁴ For example, a city not only holds stake in the quality of its own schools; the modern reliance on a regional labor market requires that a city take interest in the education and preparedness of an entire region. Cities of Northeast Ohio must work together and pool resources in order to spur the area's much needed economic growth.

Examples of tax sharing and consolidation of services between political jurisdictions have proved that regional collaboration can work. Most recently, as Ohio State Senator Eric Fingerhut explained, Cleveland suburbs of Parma and Parma Heights combined their emergency services to decrease long-term costs and more readily serve the citizens of that area. Another cooperative effort uses tax sharing as a means to regulate business poaching between municipalities. This fall, Cleveland Mayor Frank G. Jackson reached agreements with his suburban colleagues to curb the game of "musical chairs" that municipalities play to attract local businesses away from their neighbors.⁵ After some finessing from Mayor Jackson, suburbs agreed not to lure businesses from the city of Cleveland using tax-incentives, a measure that will surely aid the city's renewal.⁶ However, the suburbs rejected Mayor Jackson's proposal when it came to the business of taking from each other.⁷

This fact that the suburb's agreement with Cleveland fails to discourage poaching within the entire region reinforces my skepticism about the feasibility of fragmented governments to cooperate on regional issues. In Regionalism's defense, Ken Silliman, Chief of Staff to Mayor Frank Jackson, pointed out that city governments are not coerced into working together. Cooperation between governments has largely been voluntary because things like tax sharing, business agreements and combining of services actually save money in the long run.⁸ Surely cities realize the regional benefit of cooperation on *Voices and Choices* goals. However, in the face of implementation, could municipal, county, and state governments actually work together on "attracting and growing businesses" if cities cannot agree on a location, or "ensuring equitable school funding and accountability" if cities opt not to tax share?⁹ In my view, regional dialogue between municipalities is sometimes not enough; annexing and consolidating political jurisdictions would allow governments to more effectively accomplish goals of creating equity, opportunities, and education.

The driving notion that cities cannot compete alone indicates that annexation of municipalities should be seriously considered as an option. Eric Fingerhut, State Senator in Ohio's 25th District, explained how this is especially apparent with East Cleveland, a first-ring suburb and arguably the most devastated political jurisdiction in the Cleveland area. "If the world made any sense, East Cleveland would have been annexed a long time ago," he said at the Symposium. East Cleveland simply does not have the resources to stand on its own two feet. In any case, there is no functional way to put these fragmented institutions "out of business."¹⁰

Frankly, there is also little incentive to revitalize destitute areas like East Cleveland. In my opinion, Regional planning solutions like *Voices and Choices* misrepresent the most pressing needs of the region, such as aiding East Cleveland. Surely, much skepticism pertaining to the

intent or capability of the masses in the decision-making process is unfounded. *America Speaks*, the director of *Voices and Choices*, have come to this conclusion through their many public engagement projects, such the planning for the World Trade Center redevelopment and New Orleans recovery efforts. They found that contrary to the conventional wisdom, most voters make decisions based on a common good and not on isolated self-interests, and the average person understands the complexity of the issues at hand.¹¹ According to the participants in *Voices and Choices*, Northeast Ohio's most pressing challenges are inequitable public school funding, government fragmentation and inefficiency, creating a 21st century workforce, racial isolation and income inequalities, an uncompetitive business environment, and sustainable land development.¹² These challenges represent collective need of the region, however, a criticism of *Voices and Choices* is that the plans offered to tackle these challenges, (plans that were chosen through the *Voices and Choices* Choicebook), were too limited in number and too broad in spectrum. As participant and retired professor of Political Science at John Carroll University Kathleen Barber explained, people had a lot to say about the region's problems, but community discussion possible solutions only scratched the surface of the underlying issues.¹³

For example, the goal in reducing sprawl and increasing regional connectivity was to "plan for the future development and growth of the region," which was one of the three highest priorities overall. In some aspects, Cleveland suburbs like Westlake, OH and Beachwood, OH have become leading examples of the New Urbanism experiment, a new urban planning movement aimed to contain sprawl through the development of walkable, community-oriented mixed-purpose spaces in the midst of suburbia.¹⁴ However, New Urbanism's accommodation of an instant critical mass and reinforced detachment from the urban core makes the movement appear to be not far from sprawl. Similarly, planning for "better regional connectivity" could fuel

more projects that actually encourage urban sprawl and out-migration, such as widening highways to control congestion in Cleveland's exurbs, a circumstance that environmental advocate David Beach has said is considered to be "like letting out your belt to control obesity."¹⁵ *Voices and Choices* has done little to address the Northeast Ohio's massive, uncontrolled sprawl, a tendency that generates an immensely wasteful, costly, and time-consuming reliance on the automobile, in addition to contributing to the decay of the urban core.¹⁶

Loosely tied connections between governments based on a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" dialogue won't work. But as it appears that the most feasible means of regional cooperation will be this tax sharing and service consolidation approach, I think that the chief collaborative agenda of governments, non-profits and the private sector should be a "save Cleveland" regionalist agenda. That is, the region must end competition for the spotlight and instead work together, pool resources and return its focus to revitalizing the city of Cleveland in order to spur economic growth. Why? Because the city of Cleveland's existing amenities make it the most promising place to start. Simply put, Cleveland is the attraction. As developer Scott Wolstein, University Circle Inc. President Chris Ronayne and Ken Silliman said at this year's symposium, the key to creating a more livable region is by selling Cleveland's many assets.

From the "Mistake by the Lake" to the "Most Livable City," Cleveland has assumed several taglines over the years, some of which have made the city a hard sell. But experts like Brookings senior research associate Jennifer S. Vey note, the building around the many cultural amenities that characterize a region's livability jump-starts revitalization¹⁷ "Livable cities," as described in the enlightening accounts of urban and suburban renewal, *Toward the Livable City*, incorporate the economic opportunities of commercial and industrial hubs and the conveniences

of short-range access between home, work and play; they are safe, walkable, affordable, environmentally conscientious, intellectual and cultural hubs and celebrations of diversity.¹⁸ Cleveland's square-mile patchwork of notable amenities meets this description, but like the rest of Cleveland, lacks the high-paying jobs as well as retail. Accordingly, Cleveland's thriving University Circle is "expanding physically, developing real estate and forming partnerships to reconnect to surrounding neighborhoods that they might have turned their backs on." Indeed, as Chris Ronayne said for the New York Times, this district is "on the verge of a major transformation," with renovations underway at practically every institution, and thousands of more jobs planned for the district.¹⁹ In addition, a recent *Plain Dealer* article described a proposal for development along the Euclid Corridor that could make Cleveland the "Milan of the Midwest"—a center for design, music, fashion, restoration, shopping—an epithet would surely allow Northeast Ohio to reap the benefits of a "world class destination."²⁰ As Ms. Vey pointed out, "The ability to turn these cities around takes a concerted effort on the part of everyone throughout the entire metropolitan area. But this is exactly the right approach, to focus on existing areas."²¹

Voices and Choices has taken up a worthwhile project to gauge public opinion and has made large first strides toward establishing a more livable region. However, it is too widespread to keep the city of Cleveland as the focus of its efforts. The city of Cleveland must be the focus. While individual voters may look beyond their own backyard, cities tend not to, a fact attested by suburbs' unwillingness to cooperate with each other or lend a helping hand to poverty-stricken areas like East Cleveland. Despite its many flaws, Cleveland's many notable assets and strong collaborations beacon hope and confidence for the region. In this year's Western Reserve Studies Symposium entitled "Transformation of a Region: The Western Reserve and the 'Livable City,'"

prominent scholars, political leaders, philanthropists, entrepreneurs and concerned citizens forecasted a bright future for Cleveland and Northeast Ohio—and people are beginning to listen.

¹ Scott, Michael. “Which side of town has the worst drivers?” *The Plain Dealer*. 6 December 2006.

² Chamberlain, Lisa. “Square Feet; A Resurgence in Cleveland.” *The New York Times*. 8 November 2006.

³ “What is Voices and Choices.” Voices & Choices. 2006. Case Western Reserve University. 30 October 2006. <<http://www.voiceschoices.org/>>

⁴ Abbot, David T. “What’s Next? Regional Cooperation: Public Opinion and the Private Sector.” 20th Annual Western Reserve Studies Symposium. Transformation of a Region: The Western Reserve and ‘The Livable City.’ Case Western Reserve University. Dively Building. 11240 Bellflower Road, Cleveland. 3 November 2006.

⁵ Breckenridge, Tom. “No poaching’ policy getting a closer look Cities concerned about losing businesses “ *The Plain Dealer*. 2 July 2006

⁶ Perkins, Olivera. “No poaching’ plan dries up in suburbs Cities won’t raid Cleveland won’t raid Cleveland Business in exchange for waterline help; off with each other.” *The Plain Dealer*. 29 September 2006.

⁷ Perkins, Olivera.

⁸ Silliman, Ken. “Regional Cooperation: Politics and Government.” 20th Annual Western Reserve Studies Symposium. Transformation of a Region: The Western Reserve and ‘The Livable City.’ Case Western Reserve University. Dively Building. 11240 Bellflower Road, Cleveland. 3 November 2006.

⁹ Preliminary Report. Voices and Choices. 16 September 2006. Case Western Reserve University. 30 October 2006. <<http://www.voiceschoices.org/node/194>>

¹⁰ Fingerhut, Eric D. “Regional Cooperation: Politics and Government.” 20th Annual Western Reserve Studies Symposium. Transformation of a Region: The Western Reserve and ‘The Livable City.’ Case Western Reserve University. Dively Building. 11240 Bellflower Road, Cleveland. 3 November 2006.

¹¹ Lukensmeyer, Dr. Carolyn J. “Voices and Choices.” The City Club of Cleveland. The City Club Building 850 Euclid Ave. 2 December 2005. Podcast: <<http://www.cityclub.org/content/podcasts/index/Podcasts.aspx>>

¹² Preliminary Report. Voices and Choices. 16 September 2006. Case Western Reserve University. 30 October 2006. <<http://www.voiceschoices.org/node/194>>

¹³ Barber, Kathleen L. “Response to Regional Cooperation: Public Opinion and the Private Sector.” 20th Annual Western Reserve Studies Symposium. Transformation of a Region: The Western Reserve and ‘The Livable City.’ Case Western Reserve University. Dively Building. 11240 Bellflower Road, Cleveland. 3 November 2006.

¹⁴ Buchwald Emily, Ed. “Charter of the New Urbanism.” Toward the Livable City. USA: Milkweed Editions. 2003. Pp. 227

¹⁵ Zapinski, Ken. "Agency Give Blessing to Much Debated I-90 Widening." *The Plain Dealer*. 14 December 1996.

¹⁶ Avidor, Ken. Emily Buchwald, Ed. "Between City and Suburbia: Automania." Toward the Livable City. USA: Milkweed Editions. 2003. Pp. 41

¹⁷ Chamberlain, Lisa. "Square Feet; A Resurgence in Cleveland." *The New York Times*. 8 November 2006.

¹⁸ Buchwald Emily, Ed. "Finding Common Ground." Toward the Livable City. USA: Milkweed Editions. 2003. Pp. IX

¹⁹ Chamberlain, Lisa. "Square Feet; A Resurgence in Cleveland." *The New York Times*. 8 November 2006.

²⁰ Breckinridge, Tom. "Experts Designing a Plan for Downtown Cleveland." *The Plain Dealer*. 22 October 2006.; "World-class destination" from Chamberlain, Lisa. "Square Feet; A Resurgence in Cleveland." *The New York Times*. 8 November 2006.

²¹ Chamberlain, Lisa. "Square Feet; A Resurgence in Cleveland." *The New York Times*. 8 November 2006.