Sub-State Regions for National Analysis –
A National Infrastructure for Community Statistics Proposal
Tom Christoffel, AICP
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What is the American region? Analysts from other nations consider the American state a semi-autonomous region. Those countries which establish regions have as a goal some regional autonomy to balance central authority. If our 50 states are regions, what are the current COGs, regional councils, or other multi-county regions in the U.S.? They are sub-state districts, some of which utilize state compacts to coordinate across state lines. .

The "county" or a variant was the common sub-state district or the first region since colonial times. Delegates to the state assembly were elected based on county geography. This enabled rural domination of legislatures until "one person, one vote" took hold. Counties may have contained both incorporated and unincorporated areas. The county seat was normally near the geographic center. The County is a stable geographic unit around which all Census data is collected.

As metropolitan areas emerged, Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) were developed in the 20th century to aggregate regional data based on central cities and their regional labor pool draw. MSA boundaries expand based on economic factors from decade to decade. MSAs cover 80% of the population, but only about 20% of the land area. Conversely, non-metro jurisdictions cover 80% of the U.S. land area and 20% of the population. Metropolitan regions don't give complete U.S. coverage. Non-metro counties stand alone as statistical orphans, invisible as a consequence.

Existing state networks of regional council based regions, as exists in Virginia as Planning District Commissions, can easily be brought to visibility to provide border-to-border geographic coverage for analysis, planning, management and response. To compile all FIPS county data into regions, a simple two-digit code is required to permit geographic sorting. Virginia data is easily available by region, because the planning district number serves as the data processing code.

The majority of the sub-state geographic regions delineated in the late 60's have staffed Regional Councils (RC) that include local elected officials. RCs have been the framework for regional conversation and collaboration for over 30 years. RCs don't eliminate boundaries, but they do provide the basis for regionally intelligent conversation and coordinated action across boundaries in a regional community when necessary. RCs are communications networks. Networking region to region in alliances is an emerging approach to complex issues.

Existing MSAs can encompass several sub-state regional councils. A multi-state RC like Wash COG provides coordination at a higher level in parts of the MSA. Large localities simultaneously are part of and participate in a number of regional community alignments. This is not duplication, but a reflection of complexity.

The network of RCs has to be data-coded to be complied. State gaps would have to be identified and dealt with. Once mapped, these geographies can be tapped. RCs are emerging government service regional communities with strategic regional intelligence. There are other regional alignments to which each locality belongs. That's why there is no single perfect map of regions. Community precedes cooperation. When a group of neighboring jurisdictions recognizes their community as a region, they can cooperate in response to any opportunity or threat.

First proposed in 1998 as the Regions Work Initiative and as Homeland Security strategy in 2002, this simple concept has wide use if it can be made visible. The search for a perfect map of regions always gets in the way.