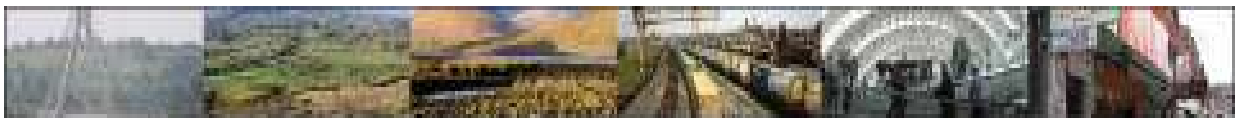




## **Evidence-Informed Spatial Planning: A Boston Metro Perspective**

---

**Holly St. Clair**



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR  
LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Promoting best practices in spatial planning and economic development.

## **Evidence-Informed Spatial Planning: A Boston Metro Perspective**

**Holly St. Clair** is the Director of Data Services at the Boston region Metropolitan Area Planning Council, overseeing the agency's activities in the fields of data management and analysis, research, and public access to data. Holly has pioneered the use of advanced decision support tools in Metropolitan Boston, managing a variety of projects that use scenarios modelling, 3-D environments, community indicators, and innovative meeting formats to engage stakeholders in dialogue about policy choices. She has spearheaded the creation of the MetroBoston DataCommon, an on-line data portal and interactive web-mapper that puts hundreds of data layers at the fingertips of residents, public officials and advocates who would not otherwise have access to such information. Holly can be contacted at [hstclair@mapc.org](mailto:hstclair@mapc.org)

May 2010

## **Introduction**

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) is regional planning agency in Metro Boston. A quasi-government organisation, the Council has ‘no teeth’; rather, it is a purely advisory body working with 101 cities and towns in the wider Boston region. So, unlike councils across the island of Ireland, the MAPC primarily provides technical assistance in areas such as spatial planning (still largely referred to as classic land-use planning in the U.S.), transportation, environment, etc. And similar to the local government structure in Northern Ireland, counties have been eliminated in Metro Boston; it was felt they didn’t matter particularly as they didn’t relate to emerging and strengthening functional territories<sup>1</sup>. As a result, Metro Boston has become characterised by these small little fiefdoms. The MAPC also engages in some things that are considered more innovative, for example, the Council recognises that its communities and the needs of its communities are not static – and so, in response, increasing emphasis is being placed on the coordination of activities, collective purchasing and joint procurement. More recently, the Council has actively engaged in legislative advocacy on Beacon Hill and building-up a strong GIS programme in the Data Services Department.

The MetroFuture plan, completed in 2002, is the first Regional Smart Growth Plan for Metro Boston containing real recommendations and strategies – about 235 strategies – on where and how the region should grow. Central to the working of the MAPC, therefore, is thinking about how the Council can help cities and towns collaborate because in Massachusetts, which is a Home Rule State, every city and town have their own powers, their own assessment processes, their own Health Boards, and their own school departments. They all have town meetings, mayors or town managers, a Board of Planning and so on; so it’s quite a complex governance system. The operational structures and processes at work in neighbouring cities and towns can convey a sense that they are not part of the same State or region; but in effect are two different countries. In this context, collaboration can be difficult – particularly where you have some towns that literally do not talk to each other at all.

This short paper highlights a number of different collaborations in which the MAPC have been engaged in the Metro Boston area.

## **The Metro Mayors Coalition**

The Metro Mayors Coalition is a ground breaking coalition involving Boston and the 12 cities and towns that surround it. It includes both mayors and city managers, and that 13 mayors and town managers collaborate on policies and discuss pretty candidly the challenges they are facing is ground-breaking as a collaborative initiative for the Boston region. The city of Boston itself was a ‘big elephant’ in the room when the coalition was being established, for it was recognised that if they didn’t participate, the coalition would have come to nothing. Yet, at the same time, some of the smaller cities and towns were frustrated that the initiative may automatically have been led by the Boston Mayor. As a result, a little orchestration was required to create this coalition; with one of the things really important to its

---

<sup>1</sup> Functional territories identify the distribution and density of functions across space and scales regardless of administrative borders. It highlights the degree of clustering or dispersal of urban activities across the landscape of mutating economic and urban networks.

success being that it was not headed up by Mayor Menino, the Mayor of Boston. Instead, the programme is being led by Dorothy Kelley Gay, the Mayor of Summerville.

The Coalition have now been working together for a number of years on addressing common issues and policies, and they have had very significant and concrete successes. For example, they secured \$150,000 from the State government for a feasibility study to determine the costs and benefits of regional emergency communications. And again, while this may sound straightforward, each of the towns and cities has their own emergency communication systems – the result of Home Rule. But, as a result of this funding, the 13 cities and towns within the Coalition are talking about how to coordinate emergency communication.

Another area in which the Mayors are collaborating is that of addressing the rising epidemic of gang and youth violence. The Shannon Grant for Community Safety programme, for example, works to find regional solutions for gang and youth violence. One of the main reasons that these cities and towns got involved in such an initiative is the growing realisation and recognition that violence doesn't pay attention to political boundaries; at least not in this region. Gang violence has been spreading out along the subway lines, with both the gangs and youth knowing that if they got on at one transit stop and got off at the next, the police couldn't touch them. This has been a really interesting area for the Mayors to start their collaborative programme; with key points of discussion being how to work with youth and drive forward a youth violence prevention programme.

### **The Metro Boston DataCommon**

The MAPC spends, therefore, a lot of time trying to think about how to break down those barriers, and working with communities to identify their similarities and the differences. One of the tools that the Council uses to achieve this is the Metro Boston DataCommon. Working closely with the Boston Indicators Projects, this tool assists people in accessing information data – regardless of the geographies (in fact, the toll can sometimes completely disregard political geographies). For example, the Council brings data into a watershed context; this helps break through some of the different barriers and, following this, the tool start to bring the environment in.

So how does Metro Boston DataCommon work? This is a website that is similar to some of the websites practitioners and policy makers across the island of Ireland are starting to set up. In parallel to this toolkit, a new resource – the Open Indicators Consortium – will soon be launched; and this will be followed later in the year by an online mapping service of commercial and industrial sites to help increase business development. While such developments seem pretty logical, the reality is that cities and towns, maybe much like here, compete against each other to get businesses – and this has implications for the sharing (or not) of data. This competition between towns and cities translates into who can give the biggest tax break, who can lay the most sewer pipe, who can give them the best roads, and so on. In reality, however, is this what towns and cities really should be doing? Undercutting themselves? Or do they need to figure out where is the best place for particular companies to locate within their wider region; recognising that the answer may not be in their own settlement but rather in the next town over. Such

collaboration around economic development is essential to the strategic development of the region. In this respect, Metro Boston has been engaging widely and speaking with the legislature on municipal relief, improving opportunities for raising local option taxes and reforming municipal health insurance reform.

### **A Shared Services Agenda**

The reasons why the cities and towns in the Boston Region are getting together and starting to talk about efficiencies and economies of scale in the delivery of services are very similar to the emerging debate across the island of Ireland. There is the economic downturn, decreasing State revenues – which in turn are resulting in decreasing State aid – and, at the same time, local revenue streams are shrinking. Simultaneously, across the United States, budget increases in the areas of employee health insurance and pension payments, for example, have resulted in a swelling of local budgets. Economic forecasts indicate the situation is not going to get any better any time soon. One recent figure forecasts a \$22 billion deficit in the Boston State in the next year. As a result, cities and towns are being forced to think strategically about what they are doing and / or propose to do. When cities and towns in the United States – and elsewhere – start cutting the numbers of policemen, firemen and teachers at work, it becomes very clear that the Board of Public Health and some other functions, including back room functions, are suffering.

There is an existing history of regional efforts in shared services, covering public highway and supplies, office supplies, municipal fleets. In effect, this is collective procurement – our cities and towns couldn't be asked to collaborate on public policy, housing policy, public safety policy. Rather, it was recognised that public agencies needed to start small and slow. As such, it was sometimes the case that the shared services agenda equated with how to jointly procure office paper and determining how much money such a collaboration saved. Such small scale interactions also had the added-value of building up trust between the municipalities.

More recently, the municipal fleets have become really dynamic. The Boston Region is currently issuing the first RFP for fire trucks. Each fire truck that's been ordered in the United States has, to date, been done on a custom order and, as such, its very expensive. Moving away from this traditional approach, Boston Metro is putting out the first RFP for fire trucks saying: this is how they will be built, give us a price. And needless to say, the cities and towns involved are very excited about that.

The MAPC is also active in a range of other municipal services; again similar to the scenario in the Republic of Ireland – and in the near future, Northern Ireland (i.e. public health, human resources, back-end / back-office services, public safety (including E991 despatch), fire inspection, fire prevention, and sharing of public safety equipment). When there's a natural disaster, for example, all these cities and towns had no way to communicate with each other and they had no way to coordinate how to get from here to there, how to get enough fire houses and things like that. And while mutual aid in such instances seems so logical, it simply did not exist. However, through previously referenced initiatives and a programme of strategic planning, this 'isolationist' practice is now changing.

One example of this is the Melrose and Wakefield Health Consolidation. In Melrose and Wakefield MAPC, staff assisted in reaching agreement on a contract for services for the delivery of the Health Department services in the town of Wakefield and the city of Melrose. Agreement on this regionalisation project was quickly reached because of a number of factors:

- Both of the communities have a long history of collaboration;
- They are contiguous to each other; and
- They both agreed that they would maintain independent Boards of Health.

These were important criteria, together with strong political support in both communities, for the success of this consolidation. Wakefield pays \$83,000 per year to Melrose; that's an estimated savings of \$34,000. This is not specifically a merger of two departments but a contract of services that was supported by the State Department; an important point as the procedure in the next example is somewhat different – thus recognising that there is 'no one size fits all' approach but rather, there are different forms of collaboration.

The Arlington, Belmont and Lexington Regionalisation Project involved a merger between the health directors from these three communities. As of January 2010, they have been meeting for the past 8 months with MAPC staff in order to develop a plan for regionalising health services across these three communities. This project is not yet complete but is well-developed. The agreement, when completed, is likely to result in a new regional board of health, with representation of these three communities. There's a proposed structure for a budget for the new regional Health Department, as well as a set of draft MOUs, or Memorandums of Understandings, that talk about the legal and functionalisation of the new authority. Importantly, there are no planned job losses in this regionalisation – although one of town's health directors is planning to retire and that position will not be filled in this new regional department. The idea behind this project is to ensure continued quality and a standard of service (rather than to find a huge cost savings for the three towns). And it is in respect of this that the shared services agenda in the Irish border region may differ! For Boston Metro, the emphasis is on better service and continuation of service because what's happened to many back-end services, albeit often by default, is that they get cut more and more and more; the end result of which is more and more work being piled on to fewer individuals.

Through this coordination of services, the emerging message is that you're not necessarily going to save a ton of money but rather that the range of services to the community – and the quality for the employees (i.e. work / life balance) – is much better. Now, when someone goes on vacation they don't have this huge backlog of 2 weeks of work to catch-up with upon their return; instead, there's someone else that can pick it up in the other town.

The importance of highlighting these two different proposals is to make it clear that regionalisation is not a 'one size fits all' solution; it is not a panacea for tough financial times. With all of these projects that the MAPC has taken on, the organisation has first tried to look at what the needs of the participating communities are and, from there, to move forward into discussion. And when making changes to

the structure, it is essential that the existing culture and operations are taken into consideration and discussed.

The Metro Boston DataCommon will play a role in future collaborations and the shared services programme as it comes into play across a wider range of sectors. In the Boston Region for example, one council representative has recently contacted the MAPC to discuss their capital improvements scheme around fire stations. Firstly, the MAPC were asked to provide a map of where the various fire stations are located in neighbouring counties. Using Metro Boston DataCommon, and WebMapper, the MAPC and the council representative jointly produced this map; with the representative then bringing it to City Hall and a Town Meeting. As a result of this, the towns of Ashland and Huckington are looking to collaborate on some of the capital investments proposed for their respective fire services. This project is not focused on completely regionalising the fire departments; rather the emphasis is on looking at the opportunities that exist to cross-utilise personnel in an efficient and economically viable way. Again, there is a history of willing town leadership. There is local population growth in both communities that the financial budgets available are unable to support. There is an assessment of future needs process that they're all going through right now; the conclusion of which is that none of them can meet all the identified needs.

The final case study relates to the North Shore; the MAPC are doing a number of things with groups in this area around education, health, E911 and, increasingly, back-end functions. The emphasis here is on achieving cost savings through holding recruitment and hiring fairs for the multiple school departments at the same time, and considering what opportunities exist for joint procurement and collaborative services.

### **Emerging Lessons**

So what are some of the lessons learnt to date? The emphasis of any evidence-based planning must be on responding to an identified need, being flexible to adapt to changing circumstances and being action focused; that is, creating a plan for implementation. The focus of a shared services agenda must be on service delivery and quality – and not savings. There are a number of sectors which are more directly suited to a shared services programme than others; for example, cross-border ambulance services and fire response teams; the ability to respond being determined by distance and calculated response times. In the current economic climate, it makes no sense to build a fire station when one is located less than a mile away across the border. There is also the issue (logic) of sharing specialised equipment which has a significant price-tag attached.

A critical step to the shared services agenda, which was undertaken in 2008, was the decision by the Legislature in Boston Metro to introduce the *Intermunicipal Agreements Law*. Prior to this, the Region had very strong procurement laws (known as 30B whereby an agency would have to advertise a service or posting for 30 days, consider a number of RFPs) which were important for transparency reasons but made collaboration between cities and towns very difficult – and slow. The introduction of this new legal mandate, which clarifies the need of the Statutes around how to collaborate, is extremely important. Such municipal agreements provide not only the

councils with a collaborate structure covering share services and fees but also now permit cooperation between the councils and the MAPC.

Adopting a shared services programme must be not only based on an assessment of current operations but must also consider what currently exists in terms of cross-border / inter-jurisdictional collaboration (whether formal or informal in nature) and build on these strengths.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to recognise that change is difficult, and that someone will always get upset about what is being proposed. But that's alright because sometimes change is hard. There can be a loss of jobs, but not always. But where they is such loss of employment, this will generally entail entering into negotiations and working with the unions. For some municipalities in the United States, the economy is so bad that an evidence-based shared services agenda is not understood in terms of loss of jobs but rather, in trying to save jobs! This change is perspective reflects the growing realisation that in the current global economic downturn without shared services agenda, jobs will be completely cut if savings cannot be found across the public sectors. Looking at back office functions versus front of office functions, there is a clear picture emerging in terms of shared services programmes – if the public face of the organisation doesn't change, it is easier to regionalise.

Finally, it is important to reiterate the importance of an open process and public discussions when introducing shared services. In the shared services agenda, there is an ongoing debate between local control versus improved efficiency; and while this is a healthy tension, it is one that can't be underestimated.

For further information on the Metropolitan Area Planning Council covering 22 cities, 79 towns and over 3million people in Boston, see <http://www.mapc.org/>