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A new Cleveland without borders?

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Plain Dealer Reporter

Welcome to the city of Metro Cleveland. We're new, but we suspect you've heard of us. We're the largest city in Ohio, by far. With 1.3 million residents, we're the sixth-largest city in America. Right back in the Top 10.

Our freshly consolidated city covers 459 square miles on the Lake Erie shore. Our economic development authority, enriched through regional cooperation, wields the power to borrow a whopping \$500 million.

So, yes, America, we have a few plans.

How do you like us now?

Merging Cleveland and Cuyahoga County into a single super-city is only one example of "new regionalism" being discussed across the country. In fact, it illustrates one of the most aggressive and seldom-used strategies to revive a metropolitan area by eliminating duplicated services, sharing tax dollars across political boundaries and planning with a regional view.

At the other end of the spectrum stand places like present-day Cleveland, a tired city with rigid boundaries watching helplessly as its wealth and jobs drain away.

In between are dozens of regions where city and suburbs agreed to plan new industries, or began sharing taxes, or staked out "green lines" to slow sprawl and encourage investment in urban areas—cooperative strategies aimed at lifting the whole region.

Some dreams came true and others did not. Regional government does not solve every problem or achieve overnight success, experts caution. But the evidence suggests it allows cities like Cleveland to do something not dared here in a long time. It allows them to dream.

Dream big.

"Regional government would let Cleveland compete in the new economy," said Bruce Katz, a specialist in metropolitan planning for the Brookings Institution.

"Overnight, we'd become a national player," said Mark Rosentraub, dean of the College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University.

"These ideas are not crazy," insists Myron Orfield, a Minnesota state senator and one of the nation's best-known proponents of regional planning. "Regionalism is centrist. It's happening. Ohio is one of the few industrialized states that has not done anything."

Orfield is often credited with popularizing new regionalism through his 1997 book, "Metropolitics." It details regional partnerships he fostered in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, strategies like tax sharing.

In 1969, the seven counties surrounding the Twin Cities began sharing taxes from new business and industry, pooling the money and giving it to the communities that needed it most.

Designed to revive the cities, the plan worked so well that Minneapolis now sends taxes to its suburbs.

These days, a newer model of regionalism is drawing policy planners and mayors to northern Kentucky. Louisville merged with its home county last year to form the Louisville/ Jefferson County Metro Government, becoming America's 23rd-largest city as Cleveland slipped to 34th.

Much of the messy work of merging city and county departments remains, but Louisville Mayor Jerry E. Abramson said his community is already enjoying cost savings and something more—rising self-esteem.

Louisville residents had brooded as civic rivals Nashville and Indianapolis used regional cooperation to lure jobs, people and major-league sports teams. Fearful of being left forever behind, voters approved a dramatic merger that had been rejected twice before.

"I think people saw that those cities were moving ahead more quickly," Abramson said. "We decided we would do better speaking with one voice for economic growth."

History suggests such unity would not come easy to Northeast Ohio. Look at a detailed map of Ohio's most populous county, Cuyahoga, and you'll see a kaleidoscope of governments: one county, 38 cities, 19 villages, two townships, 33 school districts, and dozens of single-minded taxing authorities.

The idea of huddling them behind a single quarterback is not new. At least six times since 1917, voters rejected plans for regional government, spurning the most recent reform plan in 1980.

"You know why? People like small-town atmosphere," said Faith Corrigan, a Willoughby historian who raised her family in Cleveland Heights. "It's been said Cleveland is the largest collection of small towns in the world."

Any effort at civic consensus in Northeast Ohio also means bridging a racial divide, which helped to defeat the last three reform efforts. Black civic leaders suspected a

larger, whiter city would dilute their hard-won influence and political power. Those sentiments remain.

"Yes, we're fearful of less representation," said Sabra Pierce Scott, a Cleveland City councilwoman who represents the Glenville neighborhood, which is mostly black. "It's taken us a long time to get here."

Meanwhile, residents of wealthy suburbs may see little to gain by sharing taxes with Cleveland, let alone giving up the village council.

"I think it's almost a fool's dream to think you could even accomplish it," said Medina County Commissioner Steve Hambley.

Yet opposition to regional government is softening. Recently, Urban League director Myron Robinson told his board members that regional cooperation could give black children access to better schools and should be discussed.

Mayors of older suburbs, facing their own budget woes, are questioning the wisdom of paying for services that might be efficiently shared, like fire protection and trash collection.

And Cleveland business leaders, many of whom live in the suburbs, are emerging as some of the strongest supporters of regional sharing and planning. They say a strong city is essential to the region's prosperity and that Cleveland cannot rise alone.

For models of what might work, they look to any one of a dozen metropolitan areas that forged regional partnerships in recent decades and to a few impassioned local believers.

"If I were God for a day," CSU's Rosentraub declares, he would simply merge the city and county bonding powers behind a planning agency with teeth. He would create a \$500 million revolving development fund, big enough to launch the kinds of projects that change skylines.

That kind of cooperation, Rosentraub said, would also send a message across the land. We're big. We're regional. We're working together.

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