

75 YEARS AGO

RPC'S HISTORICAL ROOTS

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Seventy-five years ago, thirteen communities joined with the county commissioners of Hamilton County to form the Regional Planning Commission (RPC). The group came together to create a structure for cooperation on multi-jurisdictional issues of subdivision and thoroughfare control, water supply, sewage and garbage disposal, development quality and other common issues and opportunities. They agreed to work together in achieving countywide goals while protecting the American tradition of local autonomy.

The thirteen planning commissions recognized that the “metropolis” was composed of separate but interdependent political subdivisions where cooperation would be essential to the solution of common problems. The new Regional Planning Commission institutionalized a “cooperative method” of working together within a region. This structure was the brainchild of Alfred Bettman, a graduate of Harvard Law School and one of the most influential leaders locally and in the national metropolitan planning movement.

Other prime movers in the regional planning movement in Hamilton County were Hamilton County Commissioner Charles Urban, Cincinnati Mayor Murray Seasongood, who also sat on the city planning commission, Cincinnati City Manager Clarence O. Sherrill, Norwood Mayor Harry Baker, and George Melville, executive secretary of the United City Planning Committee.

The Regional Planning Commission’s Initial Report published in 1931 states: “The need for regional planning arises from the unorganized, unrelated growth of regional areas due to the lack of any general plan and to the lack of cooperation among various political subdivisions in the solution of common problems.”

Regional planning fervor in the 1920s reflected the metropolitan mode of thought that took the welfare of the metropolis, not the city or the neighborhood as the basic element of concern in the planning and regulation of public works and private developments. According to this view the city and its surrounding region, the metropolis, was an economic and social unit composed of separate but interdependent parts. The metropolis, in short, transcended arbitrary political lines. However arbitrary, the reality of those political boundaries presented city planners with a serious dilemma: how to provide for the orderly development of the entire metropolitan region when it consisted of various political subdivisions, each with a “right” to its own autonomy.

As a remedy, comprehensive metropolitan planning advocates in Cincinnati created a regional planning commission, consisting of representatives from all existing planning commissions to institutionalize the “cooperative method” of solving the problem. The cooperating municipalities and the county commissioners, empowered by 1923 state law amendments, determined for themselves the boundaries of the region, the number of members on the commission, the method of appointing members, and how to distribute the operating costs.

The initial purpose of establishing the Regional Planning Commission was to create an agency that would coordinate the physical improvements undertaken by the numerous local subdivisions in accordance with comprehensive plans to be prepared by such commission for the entire region, thus to promote the harmonious and integrated development thereof.

Historical records show consensus by RPC’s charter members that the solution of problems and the carrying out of improvements in which several political subdivisions had a common interest would be very difficult, and that there would be no way of preventing the repetition of mistakes and misfits in community building,

unless the development of the unspoiled, urbanizing or rural areas be guided by carefully prepared, comprehensive plans for the entire Region.

The “cooperative method” represented a pluralistic solution to a pluralistic problem: the existence of divided political control within the region. Creating a regional planning commission and making it work required the various political subdivisions in the region to cooperate among themselves in order to overcome the problem of division. In other words, the problem would be solved not by eliminating the divisions but by establishing a structure to facilitate their cooperation.

The regional planning commission movement sought to reconcile the American tradition of local autonomy with the desire for coordinated growth. The regional planning commission provided a method for various political subdivisions to participate in the planning process through their chosen representatives.

County Commissioner Charles Urban (the first chairman of the Regional Planning Commission) concludes in the 1931 Initial Report: “The Regional Planning Commission is fully aware of the fact that the success of its work will not be measured so much by the quality of the plans it is preparing, as by the extent of the application of these plans. Also that the success of its work, aside from well-conceived, practical plans, will depend largely on the interest and support of an enlightened and forward-looking citizenry. It will rest with the citizens of Hamilton County whether they are to allow the unregulated growth of the past to continue with its dangers to the economic and social wellbeing of present and future generations, or whether they are ready to lend their support to the laying of the foundation of a healthier, happier, more prosperous community life by planning systematically for the future.”

In recent years the Regional Planning Commission has renewed its commitment to intergovernmental cooperation, local autonomy, and involvement of forward-looking citizenry – ideals of its charter members – through creation and growth of the Planning Partnership. The Planning Partnership is a collaborative initiative of the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission. The Partnership is an advisory board that works to harness the collective energy and vision of its members to effectively plan for the future of our county. Rather than engaging in the Planning Commission’s short-range functions such as zoning review, the Planning Partnership takes a long-range, comprehensive approach to planning, working to build a community that works for families, for businesses and for the region.

During the past 75 years, the RPC, its jurisdiction members and participating citizenry have built a legacy of cooperative planning. In the process, together we have built a better Hamilton County. Through cooperation, RPC has been instrumental in developing our system of parks, libraries and roads; thoroughfare and land use plans; subdivision and zoning regulations; the property addressing system and geographic information system; guidelines for hillside development and open space; storm drainage regulations and the flood insurance program; planning commissioners’ training and many other initiatives that have improved the quality of life here in our county.

We are proud of the legacy of the past 75 years, and we are excited about the opportunity that lies ahead. In recent years, the Regional Planning Commission has renewed its commitment to intergovernmental cooperation and local autonomy – ideals of its charter members – through the creation of the Planning Partnership. This new alliance of public, private and civic sector organizations works to harness the collective energy and vision of its members to effectively plan for the future of our county. We believe that future is bright, and we are confident that collaborative county planning makes a positive difference.

*Prepared by [Ron Miller, AICP](#) – Executive Director, Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission. This article is based on, and includes excerpts from, the [“Initial Report of the Regional Planning Commission, Hamilton County, Ohio \(1931\)”](#) and [“The Divided Metropolis: Subdivision Control and the Demise of Comprehensive Metropolitan Planning in Hamilton County, Ohio, 1929-1953”](#), by Robert A Burnham, *Planning Perspectives* (1991).*