

# Building Regional Communities

by Robert E. Sokolowski, Executive Director  
National Association of Regional Councils

## *Background*

*What is a RC or COG\*? They are multi-service entities with state and locally-defined boundaries that deliver a variety of federal, state and local programs while continuing a function as a planning organization, technical assistance provider and "visionary" to its member local governments. As such, they are accountable to local units of government and effective partners for state and federal governments.*

*Conceived in the 1960s, RCs today are stable, broad-based organizations adept at consensus-building, creating partnerships, providing services, problem solving and fiscal management. The role of the RC has been shaped by the changing dynamics in federal, state and local government relations, and the growing recognition that the region is the arena in which local governments must work together to resolve social and environmental challenges. RCs have carved out a valuable niche for themselves as reliable agents and many operate more independent of federal funding. Comprehensive and transportation planning, economic development, workforce development, the environment, services for the elderly and clearinghouse functions are among the types of programs managed by RCs. Some states, such as Georgia, have legislated a role for RCs, relying heavily on them to deliver or assist the state with a variety of programs.*

*In this article, we will explore the many facets of setting up an RC, what it takes to keep one going, and review the significant role RCs play in assuring the competitiveness of rural and urban regions of the country.*

*Regional Councils are different and known by many names, but they are locally-created, flexible organizations that concentrate and take on the character of the communities and the region they serve."*

## *Where to Start*

Are you thinking of setting up a RC where none exists? If you are, welcome to a world of consensus challenges. The first step is to seek out the Pennsylvania Association of Councils of Governments or PACOG, as their staff can be a reliable guide and provide useful information. In addition, modeling is available through other RCs with a proven track record in or outside the state.

Concurrently, at the local and regional level, your job is to establish a dialogue that creates an environment of trust and agreement. To do so, it is important to dissipate perceptions that a RC competes with local government, chambers of commerce, business, academic institutions, and others.

Buy-in begins with local leaders, who are vested with making quality of life decisions on behalf of local residents. These individuals as with chambers of commerce become advocates for RCs when convinced that these organizations benefit local communities and are useful tools to help communities evolve because they provide a platform for leadership to work together on common goals. A RC is not an economic development agency, although it is involved in the process, but a center that assures a seamless system for solving local and regional problems.

A tried approach to get to your leaders is to establish a "quiet coalition" that represents a cross-section of local elected officials and community professionals brought together in a neutral location, such as a university, to explore the option. The selection of a point person, preferably a professional from city, county, or state government, is essential to the process. This person is responsible for facilitating the process and keeping the momentum going.

The coalition is responsible for:

- Defining the economic infrastructure;
- Assessing the social interaction of the region;
- Identifying parochial needs that the RC needs to address;
- Assuring the state is engaged in the process, especially as it relates to programs and

boundaries that make sense and are large enough to support a RC; and,

- Securing buy-in and financial support from participating jurisdictions.

## *Next Step: The Implementation Process*

Are you ready to go to work as a RC? Success is within your reach with a regional commitment to make this creature of local agreement work. Financial resources and a plan for continued funding are in hand; an inter-local agreement, executive order or legislation has created boundaries — a critical mass that makes sense is in place; and a mission has been defined with specific longer-term objectives that enhance the quality of life in the region. You've worked diligently, collaboratively and perhaps a year or more to get here and it's taken a great deal of patience, effort, and partnerships to get this far. So, the RC is ready for business, or is it?

Aside from finding a permanent home with the best administrative and financial management support, it is important to hire an executive director. Traditionally, executive directors are selected through a competitive process and have a professional background in local government, public administration or community and economic development planning. This person is key to the success of a RC and must possess a set of diverse skills that complement the council's goals and objectives. Among the most important skills are negotiating ability, strategic and visionary thinking, and resilience. Typically, a RC starts out with a small staff, one to three, that might include:

- an experienced technician to help plan the future of the region, provide focus, and make adjustments to goals and priorities that meet local or regional needs;
- a professional with automated and geographic information systems know-how to help develop and deploy technology;
- a functional specialist with expertise in areas

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## The Ten Staying Power Attributes of RCs

- ↪ **Perpetuate buy-in and kinship at all levels;**
- ↪ **Balance the interests of participating governments, large or small, suburban, urban, or rural;**
- ↪ **Devote its agenda to regional issues and to solving future problems;**
- ↪ **Provide a neutral platform for decision making;**
- ↪ **Engage in partnerships;**
- ↪ **Maintain their relevance;**
- ↪ **Adhere to sound financial management practices;**
- ↪ **Share information;**
- ↪ **Have a network of committees and effective planning processes; and**
- ↪ **Adjusts its boundaries to accommodate shifts in local economies.**

identified as a focus for the RC, such as an environmentalist to deal with air quality, a transportation systems analyst to deal with congestion and access to the region, or an economist to keep pace with economic fluctuations and population trends; and

- a grants expert to identify and submit applications for state and federal funding that support the RC's goals and objectives.

On the operations side, a RC needs to have a set of by-laws usually established by the council, a multi-state agreement, or through the state-legislature. The by-laws provide for the composition of the Board for the RC, a dues structure, and voting guidelines. Generally, "one government, one vote" applies and accommodations may be warranted for "weighted voting" that is frequently based on population and geography.

With all of these things in place, the RC is fully implemented and shifts its focus to:

- finding solutions to problems that yield an improved quality of life for the area's citizens;
- shifting priorities as needed to achieve locally and regionally identified goals;

- fostering regional and local partnerships by providing a neutral platform for collaboration;
- providing technical assistance and program and services management for state and federal initiatives;
- identifying long-life projects, those with a 30 to 35 year cycles; and
- supporting local and regional leaders as they make decisions for the communities they were elected to represent.

### *Staying Power*

How long can one expect a RC to operate? The best response is that since RCs take on the character of the communities and the region they serve; their life expectancy is contingent upon local and regional needs and how well the RC has managed and met its goals and objectives. For this and other sections of this article, I visited with two executive directors, David Warm, Executive Director for the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City, Missouri and Paul Tait, Executive Director for Southeast Michigan Council of Governments in Detroit, Michigan. They provided some insightful observations on the longevity of RCs, which are found in the chart above.

### *Conclusion*

RCs are flexible organizations that work

collaboratively at the local and regional level to identify and address a variety of problems in a collaborative, inclusive fashion. They reflect a region's economic market, forge alliances and partnerships, and work with local leadership to close gaps that enhance the decision-making process. These organizations work to create a neutral environment in which local governments work interdependently to produce opportunities and enhance the quality of the region as well as the living environment for their residents. RCs are visionary instruments of local agreement and strategic planners for the future. They are here to stay! ☐

*\* Editor's Note: In Pennsylvania, Regional Councils are known as Councils of Governments or COGS and were instituted through legislation entitled The Intergovernmental Law of 1972 (revised as Act 177 in 1996). The PA State Association of COGS or PACOG is the state organization of COGS and its Executive Director, Linda Costa, may be reached at 1-800-232.7722 x28.*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Mr. Sokolowski has been Executive Director of NARC for more than two years following a career of almost thirty years with the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). NARC is a federal-state partnership agency that takes a holistic approach to the transition of historically and economically needy areas in a 13-state region. A proponent of regionalism and comprehensive planning, Mr. Sokolowski has advanced the advocacy agenda for NARC, enhanced the public profile of the association, and continues to increase membership through an effective outreach plan – all components of the NARC strategic plan.*

### *Intergovernmental Resources*

**National Association of Regional Councils  
(NARC) Web: [www.narc.org](http://www.narc.org) Phone: 202/986-1032**

**PA State Association of Councils of Governments  
(PACOG) Web: [www.pacog.org](http://www.pacog.org) Phone: 800-232-7722 x28**

**Governor's Center for Local Government Services  
(DCED) Web: [www.inventpa.com](http://www.inventpa.com) Phone: 888-223-6837**