Regional Approaches to Environmental Management

Milou Carolan

Regional cooperation historically has been a way in which communities have shared their burdens and tackled tough problems. Environmental management issues are particularly suited to regional planning and cooperation because they frequently cross political boundaries.

Why a Regional Approach?

Environmental problems often highlight how interconnected our communities are. A landfill closure in one community affects all neighboring communities that rely on that landfill for waste disposal; misuse or mismanagement of a water source in one community affects all other communities that rely on that water source. In order for many environmental management programs to be successful, some level of cooperation and coordination is necessary between individual communities. Approaching environmental management issues on a regional level has a number of advantages, including the following.

Consistency. One of the primary advantages of regional cooperation is the resulting consistency of local laws, regulations, policies, and practices. This is important whether or not state and federal governments have provided a common regulatory framework.

Efficient management of resources. Although regional coordination is time-consuming, its goal is to make the planning and implementation of environmental management strategies more efficient. Regional cooperation enables communities to share information, expertise, and resources to reach a workable environmental management strategy. The advantage of teamwork is that each player brings a different set of skills, strengths, and resources to the group. Communities can share resources such as personnel, facilities, and equipment. The ability to share the costs of environmental management is a strong argument for a regional approach.

Sharing liabilities. Sharing legal liabilities is another reason some communities opt for a regional approach to environmental management. Law suits and delay actions are inevitable, particularly when siting facilities such as treatment plants, incinerators, and landfills. It is useful for communities to be able to share costs and resources when responding to legal challenges.

> ***"Although regional coordination is time-consuming, its goal is to make the planning and implementation of environmental management strategies more efficient."***

Political power. An organized, cooperative effort by a number of communities may also help leverage support for a regional project from state and federal agencies and authorities. Multijurisdictional cooperation can also assist communities interested in working with the private sector. When trying to identify and develop markets for recyclables, for example, a cooperative multicommunity effort quite often is more successful than a single-community effort. A group of communities can offer a recycler a greater and more reliable volume of materials (see "Successful Recycling in Peterborough, New Hampshire").

Managing public opinion and public education. Coordinated public information and education campaigns are another advantage of regional cooperation. Again, communities can share resources and ideas, building a united front to assist in managing public opposition and building public support.

Consider the Setting

Several different types of regional agreements, both formal and informal, are available. Regional efforts may include preexisting, traditional regional groupings or may break from tradition and form a new group. When deciding whether to pursue a regional

Milou Carolan is project manager for ICMA's Environmental Peer Exchange Program.

approach and what communities should be included, participants should take into account a number of considerations. These include the following.

Geographic situation, historical associations. Logical regional groupings may not always fall neatly into the boundaries of existing regional groups, organizations, or agencies. Regions that are created voluntarily around a common need are often the most successful. Geography plays a major role in deciding which communities should and should not be included in a regional group, as do the historical relationships and associations built up over the years between individual communities. Size is another important consideration, but there really is no one ideal size for a regional project. Perhaps a group of counties that have traditionally cooperated with one another is a logical place to begin. Or perhaps a group of communities that have not worked together often will be brought together by the situation (i.e., closure of a landfill, mandated recycling, contamination of a joint water supply). Capitalize on existing linkages, but do not be afraid to break from tradition if logic or the situation warrants it.

Legal and regulatory framework. Know the legal framework that exists in your state for regional activities. Some states require that a single local government take the lead, allowing others to follow and contract with the leading community for services. Many states require that formal agreements between communities be based on "mutual authority," with all communities involved having equal authority to implement the service individually.[1] The legal authority of a regional body should be clearly defined from the start.

Political atmosphere, public sentiment. Any regional activity is obviously highly charged politically; it therefore is important to "read" the political climate and prepare for potential problems, obstacles, and other events before they occur. The political climate may vary from community to community as well; it may also vary from politician to politician. Knowing the basic values of key decision makers in the participating communities is key to success. It is equally important to gauge public attitudes (opposition and support). Public opinion can have a great influence on the key decision makers (and hence the political environment); it can also make or break a regional plan.

Available resources. Inventorying the resources available from participants or potential participants is another important step when designing a regional approach. Certain resources must be available in order for a regional approach to succeed. If they are not accessible, then perhaps the boundaries of the region need to be expanded to bring in additional players who can contribute the missing link or pieces.

Lessons Learned

A wide variety of regional approaches to environmental management have been used by local governments around the nation. What follows are examples of how some of these attempts have succeeded and what lessons the key players involved learned through the process. Although these examples focus on solid waste management, regional approaches have been successful in other environmental areas as well, such as groundwater and surface water protection, wastewater treatment, stormwater management, and air quality control.

Western Fingerlakes Solid Waste Management Authority, New York[2]

The Western Fingerlakes Solid Waste Management Authority encompasses a four-county, 3,000-square-mile area with a population of 250,000. Since 1986, the authority has worked to plan and implement elements of a long-term solid waste system for the region.

The authority runs one of the largest recycling efforts in New York and has been instrumental in ensuring the consistency of local solid waste management laws in the region. It has begun regional curbside collection of recyclables and waste and has developed a regional system of transfer stations. Negotiations are currently underway for the siting of a landfill that may later be developed for disposal of ash; the authority is also planning to site a large-scale regional recycling center (120 tons per day) and a regional waste-to-energy plant (550 tons per day). The waste-to-energy facility is key to the financial success of the entire solid waste management system because its revenues are projected to pay for the rest of the system. However, siting this facility has become a major roadblock. Ontario County, which initially was the keystone and leader of the authority, dropped out of the group after a siting study deter-

[1]National Association of Counties Research Foundation, *Interlocal Service Delivery: A Practical Guide to Intergovernmental Agreements/Contracts for Local Officials*, Washington, D.C.: 1982.

[2]Adapted from remarks made by Robert Schwarting, executive director, Western Fingerlakes Solid Waste Management Authority, at the 1989 ICMA Annual Conference in Des Moines, Iowa. Schwarting is a member of ICMA's Environmental Roundtable, an advisory group for the Environmental Peer Exchange Program. He is also a peer advisor in the program.

mined that its jurisdiction is the optimum location for the resource recovery facility. While still a member, Ontario County currently opposes its earlier, progressive trendsetting policies.

Robert Schwarting, executive director of the authority, has identified the following as key to successful regional cooperative efforts.

A "strong and durable crisis." In Schwarting's experience, one key to regional planning success is the existence of a "strong and durable crisis" to galvanize support for the project. In the Western Fingerlakes area, the closing of landfills and the need to find solid waste management alternatives brought the neighboring counties together. In the absence of a crisis or regional cooperative traditions, a strong public information campaign is imperative.

Sparkplug. It is also important to have a "sparkplug," someone who carries the torch for the project. In the Western Fingerlakes case, Ontario County was the leader, primarily because it has a growing tax base. The other counties followed its lead. In Schwarting's experience, business leaders have tended to be better regional decision makers, but politicians are usually needed to supervise local funds. He also points out that any group organizing a regional cooperative effort has approximately 18 months (the nonpolitical season) to secure enabling legislation and sustaining funding.

Strong and unwavering state mandates. Strong and unwavering state mandates are another key to regional planning success, according to Schwarting. The existence of certain mandates (e.g., mandated recycling, landfill closure) can sometimes add to the sense of "crisis" and push communities to action.

Population, geography. In his opinion, a combined population of approximately 250,000 people is necessary to begin exploiting scales of economy. Compartmented geography or extremely low regional population densities can defeat a regional plan. In addition, urban and suburban areas tend to be more pro-recycling and can be more easily served. Rural waste collection practices are often inefficient, overlapping, competitive, and marginally profitable; reorganization through districting will increase efficiency, but it also decreases opportunities for small businesses.

Public education and information. Schwarting notes that public education and public information must be extensive, well-planned, and timely. This is particularly important because, in Schwarting's words, "the opposition is everywhere; it operates freely within the region and never disappears." He warns that the opposition should never be underestimated, even though it usually averages 6 to 10 percent of the overall population (newspaper reports often make it appear to be as large as 40 percent). According to Schwarting, $50,000 to $100,000 is not an outrageous amount to plan to spend annually on public information efforts.

Greater Portland Council of Governments, Maine[3]

The Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) is a voluntary association of 21 municipalities in Cumberland County, Maine, that represents a combined population of more than 200,000. Portland, the largest city in the GPCOG, has a population of 65,000. Since its inception, the GPCOG has assisted local governments in its region with environmental concerns. During the 1950s and 1960s, the GPCOG (then known as the Greater Portland Regional Planning Commission) developed the reputation as a trusted source in environmental matters. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the GPCOG's Regional Solid Waste Committee organized a regional balefill and formed Regional Waste Systems (RWS), a public intermunicipal solid waste authority. In the early and mid-1980s, GPCOG and RWS began work on a regional waste-to-energy facility to replace the balefill. In operation since mid-1988, the $72 million, 500-ton-per-day mass burn facility burns the waste of 25 towns.

Other recent activities include a landfill closure project in which a number of communities are contracting with a single engineering firm to close eight landfills. GPCOG has also implemented joint bidding programs for the removal and disposal of white goods and chemical wastes, as well as for water testing at landfill sites. Other regional activities include siting and development of a demolition debris disposal facility, again in association with RWS.

In his eight years as executive director of the GPCOG, John Walker has identified a number of items that he believes are key to local government support for regional cooperation.

Political will, strong staff. According to Walker, the secret to regional success is political will. The technology is available to solve our environmental problems—what is needed is political leadership, since politicians make the decisions, not consultants. In addi-

[3]Adapted from remarks made by John Walker, executive director, Greater Portland Council of Governments, at the 1989 ICMA Annual Conference in Des Moines, Iowa.

tion to strong political leadership, Walker believes that investment in strong staff support at the regional level is crucial. Regional staff must have expertise in order to assist local governments with their concerns, particularly when it comes to complex environmental issues.

Ongoing discussions based on trust. Walker points out that it is also important to maintain dynamic, action-oriented discussion between participating communities. Successful regional relationships are based on trust that is built up over many years of cooperation. If such trust exists, hammering out the details of future cooperative efforts is much easier to accomplish. Because of the sense of partnership and trust that exists between the GPCOG communities, NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard) did not subvert regional plans. Long before a site for the waste-to-energy facility was selected, each participating community agreed to bend over backwards to help the host community. They agreed that they would share the burden and assist the host community as much as possible; each community had a stake in guaranteeing this cooperation, since no one at the beginning of the project could foresee which community would be chosen as the site for the facility.

Cost containment. Cost containment is a compelling reason to look for regional solutions to environmental management problems. Communities must realize that they can either pay now or pay *much* more later.

Local government control. Finally, Walker recommends that local governments maintain control of environmental facilities, because the private sector does not always have a long-term commitment to the community or the project. Municipalities are ultimately responsible for the provision of basic services such as waste disposal. Walker recognizes the importance and necessity of public-private partnerships, but stresses that the public sector must be the stronger partner of the two.

RESOURCES—Regional Cooperation

National Association of Counties, *Interlocal Service Delivery: A Practical Guide to Intergovernmental Agreements/Contracts for Local Officials* ($8.35), (202) 393-6226.

National Association of Regional Councils, (202) 457-0710; the following reports are $1 each for NARC members, $2 each for nonmembers.

- *Solid Waste Management: Exploring Regional Roles* (Special Report #143, 6/88)
- *Regional Approaches to Hazardous Waste and Materials Management* (Special Report #135, 6/87)
- *Forging Regional Partnerships—Part I: Tapping Private Sector Leadership for Regional Concerns* (Special Report #133, 5/87)

The City and County of Spokane, Washington[4]

The city and county of Spokane are collaborating on a regional solid waste management plan. The county has a population of approximately 350,000, of which slightly more than half live within the city of Spokane; the remainder are spread around in unincorporated areas and a series of small unincorporated communities. Once the plan is completely implemented, area refuse will proceed to recycling centers or through transfer stations to an 800-ton-per-day waste-to-energy plant (expandable to 1,200 tons per day), with the ash and unburnables deposited in landfills. The project includes the closing of a large municipal landfill and a large county landfill, as well as possible closure of a privately owned landfill. It is the largest public works project in the history of the Inland Northwest; the resource recovery facility, which is currently under construction, is the first publicly owned resource recovery plant north of California and west of Minnesota.

One key to successful cooperation between the city and the county was that they found themselves in a political and environmental situation in which they complemented one another. The city had no site for a future waste-to-energy plant or a landfill within its limits, but the county did. The city, however, had a 60-year history of a municipally owned solid waste collection and disposal system and thus had the ability to present a financing package on Wall Street. The county has the ability under state law to control the flow of refuse beyond the city limits through a flow control ordinance; the city has control of its own refuse by virtue of being the monopoly collector. And finally, both the city and the county were under pressure from the Washington State Department of Ecology (DOE) and the Environmental Protection Agency because their landfills had been selected for the Superfund national priority list. DOE joined the team both as a source of funds and because of its permitting authority. DOE has been a participant throughout the process despite challenges by anti-mass-burn activists in the western part of the state.

The city and county of Spokane have a

[4]Adapted from remarks made by Terry Novak, Ph.D., city manager of Spokane, Washington, at the Third Annual National Symposium on Municipal Solid Waste Disposal and Energy Production, January 1989. Novak is also Chairman of the State and Local Programs Committee of EPA's National Council on Technology Transfer.

long history of cooperation and have 27 different joint contracts, ranging from sewage treatment to jails, computers, employment, and training. Few metropolitan areas in the western states have had the success with city-county cooperation that the city and county of Spokane have had, and their cooperative environmental programs have built upon this history. Terry Novak, city manager of Spokane, has learned a number of lessons from his experience with these regional cooperative efforts. These lessons include the following.

Base regional cooperation on mutual gain. Although the city and county had a history of regional cooperation, this history alone was not enough to withstand legal and political pressure. Both the city and the county had considerable tangible items to gain from working together to come up with a workable solution to the region's solid waste problems. In order for regional cooperation to work and for participants to make an investment in the project, the partnership must be based on mutual gain.

Build a strong project team. Novak also stresses the importance of building a strong "team" to work on the project, including municipal staffers and outside consultants. Spokane strove to bring the best and brightest to their team, expecting to pay for their services, and expecting high quality and enthusiastic work in return.

Learn from the past. Before embarking on the cooperative project, Novak examined a previous regional electric generation effort in eastern Washington that had failed. He extracted a number of lessons from that experience which he then presented to the city council and the county commission. This enabled them to avoid some of the problems that beset the earlier effort.

Publicize the entire program. As for public education, Novak recommends publicizing all elements of the solid waste management plan from the beginning. Spokane erred by focusing only on the waste-to-energy facility at first, which caused some difficulties politically. If they had it to do all over again, they would have pushed recycling early on as a companion to the waste-to-energy plant, worked the local speaker circuit, and increased involvement of advisory committees that represented citizens and industry.

Ensure local democracy. Finally, Novak maintains that local democracy is crucial to the success of any project. While citizens don't share the values of the scientists and industry, they do have pride in their community and expect their government will take their views into account. In the end, citizens assume that if a decision has been properly made procedurally, the substantive outcome will be proper. It is, therefore, all-important that the local government make every effort to keep citizens informed and allow them to participate throughout the planning process.

Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County, Illinois[5]

Confronted with the need to develop solid waste management alternatives by the mid-1990s, officials from 28 communities in the Northwest Municipal Conference with a combined population of 800,000, came together to form the Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County (SWANCC). SWANCC is a joint action agency, with authority from the Illinois Intergovernmental Cooperation Act. SWANCC is responsible for implementing a balanced solution to the solid waste problem. In addition to an ambitious recycling and composting program, SWANCC officials have designed a complete, environmentally sound, and cost-effective disposal system, which includes baling facilities and a balefill that will be located on an unreclaimed strip mine in a sparsely developed area of northwest Cook County.

SWANCC activities are coordinated by a board of directors from each of the participating communities. Each community appoints representatives who are either mayors, village presidents, other elected officials, or chief administrative officers (CAOs). Most of the towns in the area are managed by council-manager governments, and the CAOs are involved in the project as either delegates or alternates. According to Bill Balling, village manager of Buffalo Grove, Illinois, the inclusion of municipal managers on the board is key to SWANCC's success. He believes that management input at the policy level has been crucial for a number of reasons. Among the managers' many contributions to the project, he cites the following as having the greatest impact.

Improved communication, accountability, and investment in project success. By having the managers participate actively in the project, communication between the agency and the municipalities is improved. It also improves the accountability of the agency to the managers. It is critical that such accountability exists, because the success of the SWANCC financial plan is based on the members' being guarantors of the debt that is issued. Active participation by municipal managers also enables the managers to make

"In order for regional cooperation to work and for participants to make an investment in the project, the partnership must be based on mutual gain."

[5]Adapted from remarks made by Bill Balling, village manager, Buffalo Grove, Illinois, at the 1989 ICMA Annual Conference in Des Moines, Iowa.

"Don't underestimate public opposition to siting facilities."

a strong personal investment in the project and its success.

Enhanced ability to mobilize municipal resources. By building strong commitment by CAOs to the SWANCC project, the agency has enhanced its linkages with the members. This has enabled SWANCC to tap into resources from a number of participating municipalities.

Strong management policy orientation. CAO participation has increased the management orientation of the agency's policy making. This has been particularly helpful in two areas: defining operational plans and guiding consultants.

Increased public perception of competence. The visibility of CAOs in the project has improved public perception of the agency's competence. Credibility is crucial when dealing with sensitive environmental issues and regulatory agencies.

Enhanced timeliness, decision making. Finally, because the agency has a management orientation, it is respectful of timelines, financial planning requirements, etc. Meetings are short and well controlled. By drawing on resources of management talent, the agency has been able to make tough business decisions efficiently and effectively.

The balefill will not be operational until 1991, but SWANCC has acquired 533 acres in unincorporated Cook County and has received zoning approval from the county. The facility is the first new landfill siting in the county for more than 12 years. ILEPA development permitting requirements have been met and the permit is in hand. The group has also received siting approval for one of the transfer station sites in the city of Rolling Meadows. The members have negotiated their first project use agreements and had them executed by all 28 members.

The agreements are the same for each participating municipality, except for the form of financial guarantee. SWANCC has also sold and spent the first $5.5 million interim bond issue; a second $2 million bond issue was closed in December 1989. The group currently is working on permanent project use agreements that will provide the foundation for the financing of the construction itself, which is estimated to be $48-55 million, depending on the number of transfer stations that ultimately are constructed.

Although the project to date has been a success, the cooperative process has had its difficulties. Balling has the following observations and recommendations.

Don't underestimate local opposition to siting facilities. The public can be very hostile to any type of facility. One structural mistake that SWANCC made in the planning process was to develop a plan requiring three or four transfer stations sites, because each of these sitings goes through the same agonizing process as a landfill siting.

Beware of the conservative nature of regulatory bodies. According to Balling, SWANCC is designing its program "with belts and suspenders." He suggests that communities plan on overdesigning in order to stay ahead of regulatory agencies. This is particularly important when dealing with environmentally sensitive issues and projects that place liability on all participating municipalities.

Control the media. The media can be a powerful and useful tool for damage control as well as for promoting positive public opinion. SWANCC hired a consultant to help them work with the media. The project received endorsements and editorial support from the Chicago newspapers and most of the regional newspapers. The more support that can be generated, the better.

Nurture political support. Maintaining direct and indirect contact with political allies and potential opponents at all levels of government is a priority in the SWANCC project. SWANCC members maintain contact with the governor's office and with state legislators on a regular basis. In addition, Balling stresses the importance of keeping the mayors interested in the project—it must remain a top priority for them. Maintaining momentum, visibility, and support at all levels of government is key to program success.

Plan for the long term. In addition to developing short-term plans, any regional project should work on long-range plans and should articulate these plans to the public. This is particularly helpful in the public hearing process. From the start, SWANCC discussed a plan that begins with land disposal (balefilling), incorporates recycling, and ultimately will include incineration. This openness and vision for the future resulted in a plan that was generally well received by the public.

Prepare to spend a lot of money on consultants. The technical and legal expertise required for regional environmental management demands well-qualified (and therefore well-paid) consultants. Balling warns communities to be prepared not only to pay for quality advice, but also to monitor the activity of the consultants closely.

Build a quality staff. Finally, Balling stresses the importance of quality staff to coordinate the regional effort. SWANCC hired a top-notch executive director early on, and the project has benefited greatly from his expertise. **PM**