

Local→ Regional Community and Political Geography: A Proposed Scale for Regions

Thomas J. Christoffel, AICP

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Introduction

On February 8, 1998 the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) sponsored a National Regional Summit. As an attendee, I heard the collective opinion of the experts present that there was no significant regional cooperation in the U.S. and that regionalism had failed here. At this point, as a 25 year staffer for the Loud Fairfax Planning District Commission, a multi-County/Independent City voluntary membership chartered political subdivision of Virginia, I knew my region worked. Virginia encouraged organization of twenty-two Planning District Commissions in 1968 under the Virginia Area Development Act. ¹

Having volunteered for the follow-on Committee to do something about the “failure of regionalism,” I advocated for a national map which would display a single layer of Regional Councils in the U.S., state by state, as could be done with Virginia. The chief purpose was to make the Regional Councils visible as statewide networks with the potential to be a national network. This thought was rejected because not all states had complete networks of regional councils and further, the consensus thought was, even the boundaries of existing Regional Councils were wrong. The further impression I received from the other Committee participants, some of whom were academics, was that there was an ideal set of multi-county regional boundaries which could be drawn once and meet all needs for cooperation. No doubt a deeper thought was that local government boundaries themselves were wrong, not to mention those of the States, in addition to there being too many local governments.

Letting the Committee go its own way, later that year I created the Regions Work Initiative which was presented at the World Future Society Conference in Chicago on July 20, 1998. It contained a five point action plan for: (1) development of a national data set based on existing regions; (2) The ability to add or subtract individual counties or adjacent counties or regions to create the regional aggregation that fit the issue/market; (3) Make the existing regional councils and their networks visible to citizens, non-profits, business and industry; (4) To have state databases which aggregate to standard regional geographies; and (5) make these data sets available as a Regional Public Corporate Database. I had no particular resources to do this, but embarked on the task of understanding what made my region work as well as how that might be shared by other regions which were working.

The Work

Considering my region further, in time I identified three characteristics which enabled local governments to work together. First, the region – the Lord Fairfax Planning District – Virginia Planning District 7 - was defined by existing local governments, the Counties of Clarke, Frederick, Page, Shenandoah and Warren, the towns therein, and City of Winchester. Second, this territory had a common publicly used name – the Northern Shenandoah Valley in addition to the Lord Fairfax name, first used in the 1940's for the Soil and Water Conservation District. I had coined “Northern Shenandoah Valley” in 1983 because no one could get the Upper and Lower Valley relationships straight (the Shenandoah River flows north) and connected it to the Lord Fairfax name since that gave no clues to the region's location. Third and most important, was the alignment with other regional agency service territories – Health District, Area Agency on Aging, Community Services Board, EMS, etc. This was a consequence of the 1972 Executive Order 15 of Governor Linwood Holton which required Virginia agencies to use Planning Districts or their multiples if they created their own substate districts. They weren't required to work with the Planning District Commissions, but the parallel geographies made data collection and comparison relatively easy in Virginia and contribute significantly to the effectiveness of the State. Many have the same map in their head when speaking of Planning District 7, PD-7 or 10 or 18. This enabled alignment and has become an historic and ever present building block, a “State Standard Region” for Virginia, that now work continuously.

Analysis led to my recognition that in Planning District 7, the Northern Shenandoah Valley, where there had once been simply a chartered political subdivision, the Planning District Commission, encouraged by the Commonwealth, one which could have led to a directly elected service district commission modeled in part on Metropolitan Toronto of the late 60's, the sense of being a “community of communities” had become operational. The Planning District defined region was routinely used as another layer of community, though that term was not consciously applied. The notion in this terminology has been tested with hundreds of residents over the past fifteen years. No one has ever disagreed with the assertion that the Northern Shenandoah Valley was a “regional community of communities.” The fact that the geographic name was inclusive contributed to this acceptance of “Northern Shenandoah Valley” as a regional name to the extent that it is routinely used in advertising. Shorthand for what I found is: Define, Name, Align – thus its DNA the makes regions work.

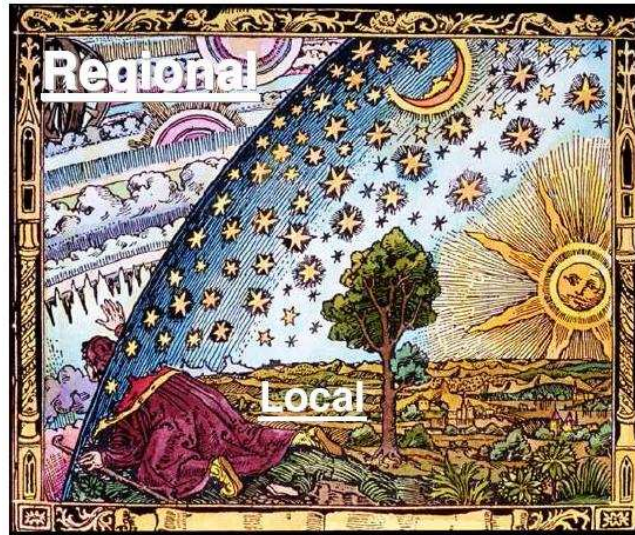
While I understood better why my region worked and I could see these relationships in other Virginia Planning Districts, this did not get me to the nation-wide single layer regional map, the third objective of the Initiative. I began a search of geography texts to learn about “regional geography” to

find the criteria for that map of perfect regions. Prior to mapping its substate planning districts in 1968, Virginia officials met with every County, City and Town over 3,500 persons to determine which grouping of counties they wished to be associated with. While the goal was to have 20 regions, they started with 22. The OMB A-95 Review Process instituted by the Federal government required regional review of applications for grants within States. This was an impetus for multi-jurisdictional substate districts in most States. The method by which localities were assigned to regions varied as did State funding incentives and backing. Regionalism was, after all, a tool used by Stalin and the Communists. A 1968 effort of the Nixon administration to have Federal regions for the coordination of agency programs quickly broke-up when States protested this regionalism.

As to the point of what was in fact regional cooperation between local governments, I came to define it as the minimum case - two or more local governments working across a political boundary. This was the situation where I live, Front Royal, Virginia. As a Town citizen I vote for the Council members and as a resident of Warren County, where the Town is located, I vote for a County Supervisor. When the County and Town sit down at the table to negotiate an agreement for extension of services or division of program costs, I find that I'm represented on both sides of the table.

With that perspective, the entire nature of regional cooperation took a shift in my mind to accommodate the fact that I cooperate with myself at different geographic scales of governance. This applies to the election district regions of State Delegates and State Senators which, over time, have moved away from alignment to County boundaries to now often stretching over parts of several counties. Congressman and Senators also have larger territories, the State for example, each of which would be regionally cooperative across boundaries for territories like the Chesapeake Bay watershed, or within the Federal system, cooperating for transport, trade and law enforcement. The average taxpayer might think that all the officials elected at each level cooperate up and down the geographic hierarchy to maximize the benefit of the taxes paid to each level, but of course they would be wrong. Its not that it is impossible, just that working across boundaries requires a greater perspective, if not regional intelligence on the part of all parties.

Simultaneously I am served and represented within many political boundaries. When crossed, the rules change, so they are boundaries of consequence. They are regions in that they are beyond Front Royal and Warren County. I'm well informed as I drive along roads as to which locality or State I am entering or leaving and maps show these relationship to a scale. In between there are many combinations of governing units in regions of convenience. Even if governmental, their boundaries are generally not marked, but even administrative regions can become communities. Crossing these boundaries can be envisioned as the situation of the Universe Man:



Since it is the nature of local government to be constrained by State laws as to what they may or may not do and how responsibilities are assigned and funded. This also brought to mind another rule I was taught about governmental actions, that being “you can only do what is in the Code.” The Dillon Rule sets a higher bar in Virginia, but this is generally true for any system of governance.

Looking to geography, there were many criteria for regions – watershed, economy, culture, geology, soils, crops, etc. Many texts acted like political boundaries were mistakes. My thinking was expanded when I read the first line of W.G. East’s Editorial Preface to “Regional Geography: Theory and Practice.” East writes: “There is only one region-the surface of the earth-on which mankind finds its home.”³ Published in 1967 and authored by Roger Minshull, this book solved for me the political boundary problem by making every entity a sub-region, the same being true for natural boundary systems. It is a conflict for many that the natural system boundaries rarely match political boundaries. The river may be the boundary, but that divides the watershed. Such was a recognizable and even defensible boundary through out human history. Only recently have governments come to recognize they must come together to manage impacts on the watershed regionally in order to restore or protect the resource.

As I looked to see how other countries handled what were sub-state districts, another term for regional councils in the 1960’s, I found Gwilliam Law’s “Administrative Subdivisions of Countries.” It begins: “The land area of the earth is entirely divided into countries, without overlap. Likewise, each country is entirely divided into units variously designated as states, provinces, governorates, regions, and so on. A comprehensive phrase for them all is “major administrative divisions.” This information is maintained on-line as Statoids at <http://www.statoids.com/>.

What I found interesting in Mr. Law’s work was that for the U.S. was that only States listed, not counties. Why? State boundaries had been stable in the U.S. since 1960, but that was not the case with

Counties, which had been changing in the 1970's, Virginia in particular being responsible for many consolidations.

Another perspective I gained from the European view of the U.S. was that our States themselves were semi-autonomous regions. The Federal government had powers, many of which were reserved to the States. Within a State, many powers were local, such as land use planning, so each level of government had its own powers, its own ability to manage affairs and be whole in those matters. "All politics are local," according to Tip O'Neal, so each geography is local at some sense. The names or logos fit equally on a hat or shirt, be it Town, County, State or Nation.

If the State is a region, the County is a substate district or region. The U.S., my country, is referred to as a regional power in addition to being a global power, still a region itself as a bounded nation. These relationships of governance boundaries, geo-political as they are, also without overlap as set out as the case with Mr. Law's view of countries. This led to my visualizing a scale approach where the world was local/whole and subdivisions of the whole were regions.

Before finding Mr. East's perspective, I'd used the idea of Local Planet with people by suggesting that, if we were to imagine ourselves in the bar scene from Star Wars, aliens there might telepath the question, "Where are you guys from?" and we answer perhaps with our solar system coordinates or say Earth was our local planet. There is where the local region is the earth and everything else is a sub-region, regardless of the criterion.

While there are also sorts of physical features which can be used as the basis of geography, the real way we deal with each other is through the governance geographies. If we want to utilize, protect or restore something within a geography, we will have to deal with the governance powers of that territory, be it nation, state, county or municipality. We tend to call the in between combinations of formal governance territory areas, whole or in part regions, while these components themselves are regions themselves, only named.

One advantage of a discrete governance unit, be it county, state or nation, is that it has a one to many relationship with all other governing units of its type, as well as all with other types for that matter. This has to do with its wholeness as defined, its locality as bounded. When it comes to regions, compilations of other units into aggregations, there can quickly become many regions. A county may be in one or more watersheds, commutersheds, workforce training regions, airsheds, etc. This is particularly the case when it comes to administrative regions.

For the locality, county or state, each is in many regions and there are many other alignments for the region by criterion. This world is many to many and gets confusing fast. That's why I have

argued for a state standard region in the U.S. While the other topical geographies maybe valid, having a single purpose governance unit for each one is isolating and inefficient. General purpose units which can aggregate to the issues are an effective way of dealing with issues and opportunities.

The benefit of a scale is that it would allow the categorization of types of multi-jurisdictions regions based on their function, without looking to have perfect regions. There can be specialized and integrating units that can network through the scale so that the political geography covers the geography of the issue.

The Scale

The whole table is presented first. Recognizing that earth is both our local planet and the region, it is 7.0 on the scale.

Local-Regional Scale – A Proposal



Thought: “Local is whole. All politics are local. When a regional geography is whole, it becomes local, the local region”



From the citizen taxpayer viewpoint at the local level, the nested cups are inverted.

If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region	Region Scale
unincorporated area, township & municipal corporations → e.g. Towns of Middletown and Stephens City, City of Winchester	County - e.g. – Frederick County, Virginia	County	1.0
County →	Defined multi-county/independent city regional council (s); e.g. – Planning District 7 – served by Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission; Winchester Airport Authority	Regional Council	2.0
Regional Council →	Region to region cooperation – e.g. I-81 Corridor; Shenandoah Valley water and air; Mid-Atlantic Roundtable; crossing State lines or inclusive of an entire State - e.g. – Virginia Association of PDCs; San Diego-Tijuana Border Region;	Regional Council(s) +/- Counties up to State or beyond	3.0
State →	Multi-State – e.g. – ICPRB Compact, Quad State Legislators MD-PA-VA-WV; Chesapeake Bay; Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority; Cascadia, Atlantica;	Multi-State up to Nation or beyond	4.0
Multi-State →	Nation - e.g. – United States	Nation	5.0
Nation →	Multi-national continental/oceanic – e.g. The Americas, North, Central and South - e.g. – NAFTA – Canada, Mexico, U.S.; ...	Multi-national	6.0
Multi-national →	Planet/globe/world – e.g. – United Nations, WTO, ...	Planet	7.0
Planet →	Solar system – galaxy – universe – e.g. – a Galactic Federation ?	Solar System	8.0

Individual tables with maps follow:

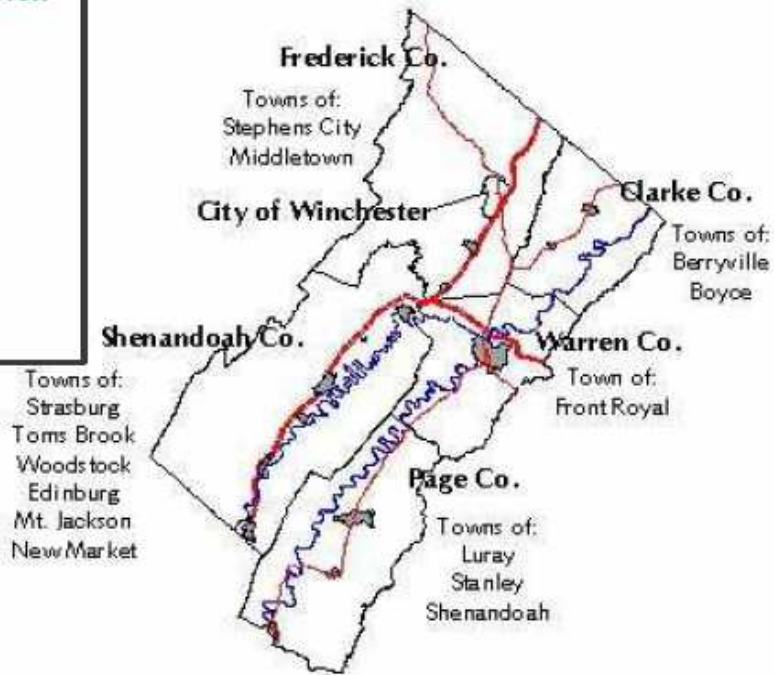
1.0 Scale - County

If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region
unincorporated area, township & municipal corporations → e.g. Towns of Middletown and Stephens City, City of Winchester	County - e.g. – Frederick County, Virginia	County



2.0 Scale – Multi-County Regional Council

If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region
County →	Defined multi-county/independent city regional council (s); e.g. – Planning District 7 – served by Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission ; Winchester Airport Authority	Regional Council



3.0 Scale – Region to Region

If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region
Regional Council →	Region to region cooperation – e.g. I-81 Corridor; Shenandoah Valley water and air; Mid-Atlantic Roundtable; crossing State lines or inclusive of an entire State - e.g. – Virginia Association of PDCs; San Diego-Tijuana Border Region;	Regional Council(s) +/- Counties up to State or beyond



3.0 Scale - Region to Region



4.0 Scale – Multi-State

If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region
State →	Multi-State – e.g. – ICPRB Compact, Quad State Legislators MD-PA-VA-WV; Chesapeake Bay; Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority; Cascadia, Atlantica;	Multi-State up to Nation or beyond



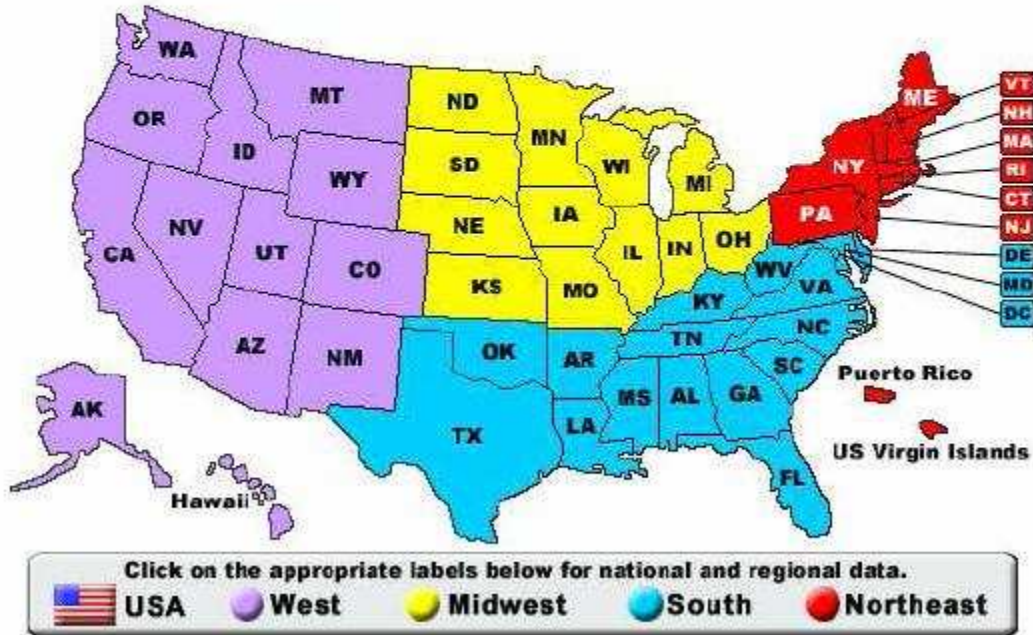
ICPRB – Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin



5.0 Scale – Nation

If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region
Multi-State →	Nation - e.g. – United States	Nation

U.S. Bureau of
Labor Statistics
Regions - bls.gov



6.0 Scale – Multi-National

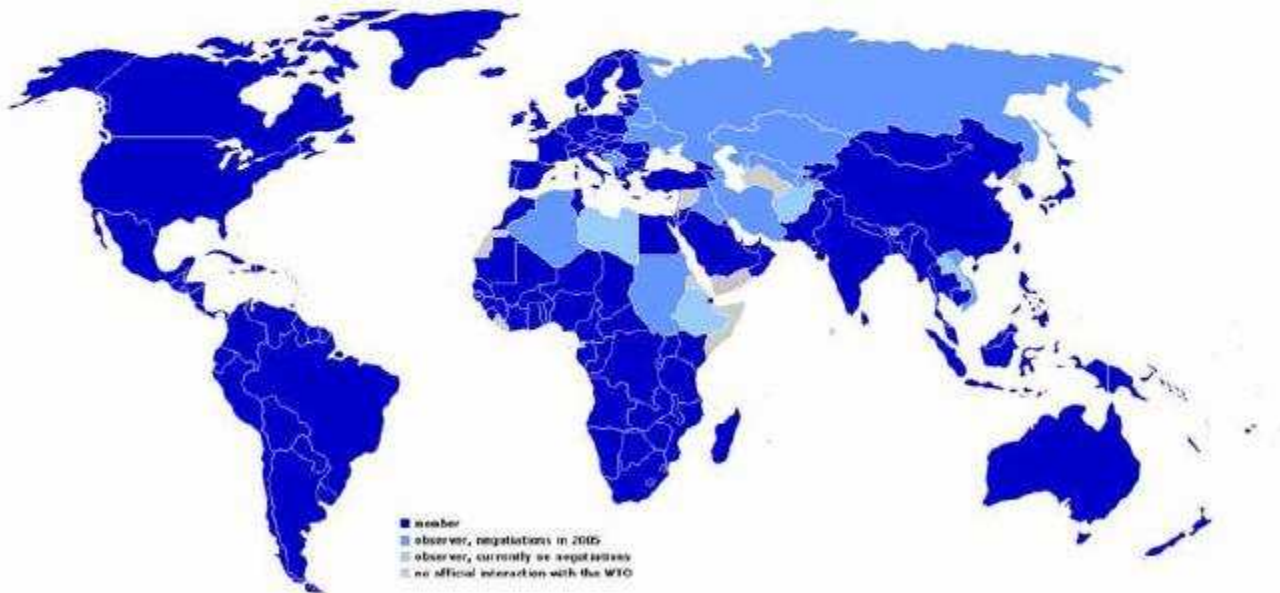
If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region
Nation→	Multi-national continental/oceanic – e.g. The Americas, North, Central and South - e.g. – NAFTA – Canada, Mexico, U.S.; ...	Multi-national



North American
Free Trade Agreement
NAFTA – Map - ers.usda.gov

7.0 Scale – Planet

If this is “Local”	Then this is “Regional”	Region
Multi-national →	Planet/globe/world – e.g. – United Nations, WTO, ...	Planet



World Trade Organization – wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons

8.0 Solar System

If this is "Local"	Then this is "Regional"	Region
Planet→	Solar system – galaxy – universe – e.g. – a Galactic Federation ?	Solar System



Solar System - commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:NovaSlunecniSoustava.

Notes

¹ Code of Virginia - § 15.2-4200. "Area Development Act" 1968 renamed "Regional Cooperation Act" 1995.

² Commonwealth of Virginia – Office of the Governor – Richmond - Executive Order Number Fifteen – Linwood Holton, Governor – January 27, 1972.

³ Minshull, Roger. "Regional Geography: Theory and Practice." Hutchinson University Library, London, 1967.



Local Planet Contact Information “Think Local Planet, Act Regionally.”

Tom Christoffel, AICP, Editor, Regional Community Development News
Regional Intelligence – Regional Communities, LLC

Box 1444

Front Royal, Virginia (VA), USA 22630

E-mail: Tom.Christoffel@gmail.com

Phone: 1- 540-635-8582

Blog: <http://regional-communities.blogspot.com/>

Web: <http://regionalintelligence.com/>

Regional Community Networkers & RCDNews:

http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/regions_work

Regional Community Development News – Google Groups

<http://groups.google.com/group/regional-community-development-news?lnk=iggc>