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A Research Agenda for Assessing the Impact of Fragmented Governance on Southwestern Pennsylvania

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Summary

The large number of municipal governments in Allegheny County is a derivative of Pennsylvania’s governance structure and history. This structure provides for strong representation at the local government level. The anticipated benefit of this is a greater sense of local “ownership,” encouraging local government to be responsive to constituent demands. The flipside of local representation is government fragmentation, with potential costs in the form of inefficiency and conflicting intercommunity goals.

The RAND Corporation was asked to begin to explore and create a framework for studying the effects of Pennsylvania’s locally dominated governance structure on regional performance and to identify potential lessons for Allegheny County from the experiences of other regions.

Drawing from the literature, case studies, and local economic data sets, we investigated the empirical validity of two questions to understand whether they were worth pursuing in greater depth: Does multiplicity of local governance create inefficiencies in the cost, coverage, and quality of delivered services? And, does this multiplicity inhibit timely and comprehensive decisionmaking for regional economic development?

The arguments for increased regionalism are intuitively appealing yet also difficult to prove quantitatively. The historic pattern of local governance has generated frictions between suburban and urban entities, as well as racial, income, and resource imbalances among communities; inefficiencies in service provision; increased power by the private sector in shaping development patterns; and a lack of rational regional planning. On the other hand, local governance provides representation and accountability for local preferences. Finding a balance point between regional and local approaches to governance rests on knowing what the attributes of a region currently are (e.g., through performance measurement and benchmarking of services), knowing what it wants to become (e.g., through regional visioning of future development), and having an informed understanding of the likely benefits and costs of various routes of getting there.

Our preliminary analysis and literature review provide insights into the links between government structure and quality (effectiveness and efficiency) of local governance. Fragmentation can affect the cost and quality of government
services, the level and perceived fairness of tax structures, and the alignment of public- and private-sector decisionmaking with regional goals.

Several models of government cooperation and coordination are available to address inadequacies in each of these areas. These models vary in their benefits, pitfalls, and level of effort required to institute and manage them, and none offers a “silver bullet” that will solve the multifaceted issues faced in this or other regions.

Recent budgetary pressures have motivated new discussions of the quality of local governance in Allegheny County and alternatives to improve it. Meaningful discussions of governance in Allegheny County need to begin by engaging municipalities in discussions about local governance and potential cooperation or consolidation options.

Careful performance assessment of the costs, utilization, and quality of municipal services will help leaders understand where Allegheny County stands, which functions are largely consolidated and which are highly fragmented, and how much citizens of the county pay in taxes. Understanding the costs and benefits to various regional interests provides the foundation to meaningfully discuss the future development of the county and to assess whether (and in what way) alternative policies will make a difference.

Even though discussions of governance have begun in Allegheny County, there are significant barriers to agreement on a model for local or regional governance. The examples presented in this preliminary report provide an overview of the important characteristics of local government and examples from other regions of achievements gained through restructuring. More definitive information, along the lines discussed in the report, can provide a foundation to move forward and, if potential benefits are apparent, to define a unified vision and set of goals for governance and economic development in Allegheny County.