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The path to regional competitiveness

Business-civic leadership and geoeconomics in metropolitan Philadelphia

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to present a case study of the Philadelphia region's efforts to implement a regional approach to economic development by relying on business-civic leadership to transcend governmental boundaries.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper examines the role of leadership in organizations representing business interests, and the competing and conflicting perspectives on the "right" scale to do so – local and/or regional, drawing on participatory insights into the relevant processes.

Findings – While *ad-hoc* partnerships and governance are often recognized as important elements of economic competitiveness for metropolitan areas by key civic and business leaders, established localist and institutional-organizational interests and strategies may counteract that. Overcoming long-established fragmentation requires a high level of attention to symbolism and the details of inclusiveness in organizational and spatial terms.

Originality/value – The recognition and study of city-regional governance is very topical. The contribution of this paper is timely and offers a rare insight into the practical side of city-regional governance, thus illuminating theoretical arguments.

Keywords Economic development, Leadership, Competitive advantage, United States of America, Urban regions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Geopolitical place is at the heart of the economic development enterprise. Economic development (defined here to include competitive advantage, business development, business attraction, and location assistance) is carried out by, on behalf of, or in partnership with geographically based state or municipal entities. By attracting businesses and jobs within their borders, governmental entities build up the tax base and ensure a steady stream of revenue. It goes without saying that governments never voluntarily relinquish any part of the base to competitors!

And yet, in a global economy the economic development enterprise is peculiarly challenged, because economic and geopolitical place no longer match. Key parts of the economic development enterprise – especially business attraction and building competitive advantage – are best accomplished on a cross-border, regional basis.

In Pennsylvania, for example, the borders of governmental entities were established over 200 years ago. "In every region, scores if not hundreds of horse-and-buggy-era boundaries artificially divide territories that otherwise represent single, interrelated social, economic and environmental communities. In every region, such divisions complicate efforts to carry out cross-boundary visioning, plan cooperatively, or coordinate economic development across large areas . . . " (The Brookings Institution

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Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, 2003, pp. 69-70). And Pennsylvania is not alone; neighboring New Jersey as well as many other states are described as "little box" states when it comes to their governance structures.

These "little boxes" present a big problem in a global economy. Washington Post columnist Neal Peirce has described regions as city-states – an urban core and its surrounding metropolitan area that compete as one in the global economy. Because regions are composed of multiple local governments whose mayors and other elected officials do not have the authority to make regional decisions, many putative regions are fragmented and weak (Alliance for Regional Stewardship, 2000).

This paper presents a case study of the Philadelphia region's efforts to implement a regional approach to economic development by relying on business-civic leadership to transcend governmental boundaries. The region is slowly working its way to an understanding of regionalism as a series of negotiated partnerships, but as in all partnerships, partners, interests and vehicles must first be aligned in common purpose for the partnership to work. This paper describes how, over a tumultuous four-year period, partners, interests and vehicles underwent a significant realignment, setting the stage for potentially powerful alliances to develop between the private and public sectors – regional business-civic leaders and their organizational vehicles, economic development practitioners, and the geopolitical entities of the region.

Location: between two major metropolises and across state borders

Philadelphia is about an hour from New York City and about 2 hours from Washington, DC by fast train. While the city itself is geographically situated within Pennsylvania, the region that it anchors is the four-state Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)[1]. In the heart of the Northeast Corridor, the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington MSA is the country's fourth largest, with 5,798,956 people in three Metropolitan Divisions – one in New Jersey, one in Pennsylvania, and one that includes parts of New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2006)[2] (see Figure 1).

Philadelphia is the primary city. While losing population for decades, it is still the nation's fifth largest, with a 2005 population of 1,463,281 million people. Two other significant, but smaller cities anchor their respective sub-regions – Camden, in southern New Jersey (population 80,010 in 2005) and Wilmington, in northern Delaware (population 72,786 in 2005) (US Census Bureau, 2006). As well, there are numerous towns, boroughs and townships within the MSA.

Recent history: responding to economic change through competitive non-cooperation

Like many former industrial areas, the decline in manufacturing employment and federal policies that adversely affected cities and industrial regions hit the tri-state Philadelphia area hard. Plant closings, job losses, corporate mergers and relocation, population losses, and low job creation rates began in the 1960s and continued through the 1970s and 1980s. The de-industrialization of all three of the region's cities, plus the continued decimation of Camden and an increasingly uncompetitive tax structure in Philadelphia compounded macro-level trends by driving jobs and people into the suburbs, promoting sprawl.

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Source: http://www.selectgreaterphiladelphia.com

Figure 1.
Administrative divisions in the Greater Philadelphia region

Policy makers in two of the three states that host the region were slow to appreciate post-industrial realities and respond to emerging high-tech opportunities (O'Mara, 2002)[3]. In all three states, political considerations dictated responses to the macro-level trends – competition was defined as internal rather than external and pitted city against suburb and state against state. High profile "poaching" between the states, lower profile but significant attempts to lure major employers across county lines within states (especially to and from Philadelphia), mistrust stemming from lack of knowledge, and a consequent failure to focus on real issues of competitive advantage were the result (fiscal arrangements, especially the local tax base, play a crucial role in the willingness and/or "affordability" of finding cooperative arrangements, because, effectively, non-cooperation is financially rewarding. Berlin is one such example of fiscally induced reluctance to cooperate.

Not surprisingly, taking their cue from the broader political environment, a plethora of business and economic development organizations on all sides of the many borders each claimed their own mandate. County based economic development organizations promoted their counties; electric companies marketed their service areas. States promoted states, not regions. The Philadelphia area developed a poor reputation among site location consultants and the business media (Greater Philadelphia First, 2002), did not share proportionately in the robust growth of the 1990s, and did not believe that anything could change.

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Identity and economic competitiveness

By the late 1990s, the Philadelphia area was seen as a second-tier business location, fragmented and internally divided, with first-tier assets (ibid.) There was no sense of shared identity as a region – not even a name or a consensus on boundaries. For example, Greater CITY NAME normally refers to the broad, functionally integrated, metropolitan area surrounding a major city. But, "Greater Philadelphia" often refers to southeastern Pennsylvania only – in other words, Philadelphia and its Pennsylvania suburbs. Citizens of southern New Jersey and northern Delaware, while acknowledging that Philadelphia is the primary urban center, feel excluded by "Greater Philadelphia" and hence prefer the neutral (but geographically invisible) "Delaware Valley", named after the river separating the states. For outsiders, this name has much less geographical meaning than the name Philadelphia. To complicate things further, this part-regional thinking works reciprocally. When people living in southern New Jersey talk about their region, they really mean South Jersey – a cultural and territorial entity that includes the southern third of the land mass of the state stretching from the Delaware River to the Atlantic Ocean – not Philadelphia. And finally, the third sub-region – the state of Delaware with its mere three counties – is so small that most business-civic affairs are conducted state-wide in partnership with the state government, even though there are clear and long-standing cultural, economic and industrial differences between Delaware's northernmost county and its two southern counties.

This lack of identity as one metropolitan region has important consequences for regional competitiveness. It is true that state and municipal laws and regulations governing economic development, land use, and taxation are different in the three states. The fact that neither of the three urban centers of the metropolitan area, Philadelphia, Wilmington and Camden, are state capitals means that the political center of gravity lies outside of the region. Governmental entities do prefer to capture the full business tax ratable, not just the personal taxes that workers pay. In addition, "winning" a company pays political dividends with voters. However, other bi- and tri-state regions (Greater Washington, Charlotte (USA, as they brand themselves)), faced with similar internal divisions, have managed their political "fault lines" and prospered *as regions* through strong business-civic leadership. In Philadelphia, decades of weak business-civic leadership allowed political leaders and near-term political considerations to hold sway. And given the importance of business leaders as drivers of effective regionalization (see papers by Herrschel and Newman in this volume), the consequences for the Philadelphia area of this approach to economic development are not surprising.

The role of business-civic leadership in economic competitiveness

American businesses create nonprofit organizations to advocate (lobby) for laws and policies that favor business interests, to improve business conditions or practices, or to promote, or become involved in, civic affairs. Chambers of commerce is a long-standing and widely recognized form of nonprofit business association to advance the interests of businesses within a defined community through political advocacy and business improvement services (health insurance, joint purchasing, networking, etc.). They are widely recognized as "the business voice" in public policy discussions, giving them, as

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well, a seat at the table in discussions on region building and general inter-local cooperation.

Chamber membership is voluntary, not mandatory as in many European countries, and chambers are dependent upon dues and other member-related sources of revenue. They demonstrate "value" to their members through their access to relevant government leaders, successful lobbying for members' needs (business-political leadership), and providing services to members. Naturally, larger companies pay more in dues and sponsorships. However, small businesses constitute the bulk of most chambers' membership, and chambers are the historic voice for small business.

In many areas of the country, economic development and other activities benefiting civil society are not part of the core chamber mission. Instead, these activities are carried out by separate, "business-civic" nonprofit organizations, formed to address civic problems. With their different missions, these organizations often attract different types of business people with different interests. For example, small business people usually are less interested in civic improvement since there is no immediate and direct top line benefit. Frequently, therefore, it is executives from larger and big business, not small businesses, which carry forward the business-civic mission.

An interesting development over the past decade or so is that many larger regional chambers have assumed business-civic missions in response to previously discussed macro-economic forces and in a search for new members, especially knowledge-based companies, revenue and relevance. Knowledge-based companies depend upon strong and reliable sources of intellectual capital and intellectual property, and they are intensely interested in promoting conditions for such growth. These same knowledge companies often do not join chambers, or merely join at a token level, because the traditional advocacy and services provided are not seen as relevant to their particular concerns. Therefore, many larger, metropolitan area chambers have become involved in some form of regional growth initiative to attract these new members and also reinforce their historic role as the leading voice for business. This, of course, strengthens their voice *vis-à-vis* local government and other public policy and economic development organizations as well.

However, the addition of the business-civic/economic development mission can pose a challenge to chambers, because business-civic interests are different from business interests, and business-civic leadership is different from business leadership and even from business-political leadership. Business activism for civic benefit requires different skills and expertise, experience, mind-set and outlook. It is much easier to be a business leader, or a business-political leader than a business-civic leader! Challenging the status quo, effecting socio-cultural change, and pushing entrenched interests to implement cross-border economic development requires a longer-term, pragmatic and bi-partisan view that transcends short-term, group-specific interests. It also requires an aligned business association that shares and reflects the vision. Without this broader, outward-looking perspective and organizational support, the great catalytic value of the business voice is diminished and the business association can too easily succumb to parochial interests, be they of political or business expediency.

From parochialism to a "virtual" region: a case study

In the Philadelphia area, with its already described strong tradition of local control and many levels of government, there are also many levels of chambers – town and

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multi-town chambers, township chambers, sub-county chambers, county-level chambers, several regional chambers (in southeastern Pennsylvania and South Jersey) and two of the three state chambers (New Jersey and Delaware's). This plethora of area- and group-specific interests adds to the complexity of finding a shared regional agenda.

The largest of the area's many chambers is the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce (GPCC) which adopted a regional growth mission in 2003, much later than other large, metro area chambers (e.g. Washington, DC, Atlanta, Chicago). Founded in 1800, GPCC was steeped in Pennsylvania localism and almost completely Philadelphia oriented, reflected in its board of directors, staff leadership, and membership. Additionally, because the city and county of Philadelphia have been coterminous since 1854, there had seemed little obvious need to engage in city-county relationship building. Finally, the many existing chambers in southeastern Pennsylvania, South Jersey and Delaware, all part of the notional Philadelphia region, meant that infrequent but cordial interactions sufficed to signal "togetherness" both to each other and to everyone else. Occasional collaborations did not dispel the fact that GPCC remained distinctly Philadelphia focused long past the time when Philadelphia's economy dominated the region.

But as previously noted, companies, jobs, people and power started leaving Philadelphia in the 1960s, a trend that accelerated through the 1970s and 1980s. In response, in 1983, GPCC created Greater Philadelphia First (GPF) to focus on civic improvement and economic growth issues. GPF, smaller and comprised solely of the corporate business elite – chairmen, presidents, and chief executives who joined for reasons of civic betterment (and CEO networking) – became the voice for regional growth, and for the first time brought the (Pennsylvania) suburbs and city together in a cooperative economic development partnership. In 2000, with charismatic new staff leadership and a reinvigorated (southeastern Pennsylvania) regional board of directors, including, significantly given their earlier reservations about engagement with conventional business organizations, many knowledge company executives, GPF's mission was refined: to provide leadership in transforming Greater Philadelphia into one of the nation's leading centers of knowledge, where knowledge industries and their workers can prosper.

Between 2001-2002, backed by the "clout" of its CEO board, GPF changed the terms of the economic development debate in southeastern Pennsylvania. A national reconnaissance identified best practices from eight other regions with strong know-ledge-based, high technology sectors in their regional economies. As a business leadership organization, GPF was particularly interested in the role played by business-civic leaders in bringing about such change. The result of this research effort was Six for Success, a strategy to achieve knowledge region status by focusing development efforts in six areas: university research, science and technology commercialization, entrepreneurship, business marketing, quality of life, and collaboration.

GPF designed and published the first brochure marketing southeastern Pennsylvania's knowledge-economy assets, incorporating quality of life as a defining feature of a knowledge region. Simultaneously, recognizing the Philadelphia region's unique combination of academic research centers, biopharmaceutical companies, and superb location, GPF initiated a partnership with

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Pennsylvania BIO specifically to promote southeastern Pennsylvania's life sciences assets. Through this partnership, GPF coordinated and submitted with BIO affiliates in Pennsylvania and New Jersey what turned out to be the winning proposal to host the international biotechnology convention and trade show, BIO 2005, in Philadelphia. Significantly, this first step toward becoming a policy-based "virtual" region did not involve administrative or institutional changes. Instead, a history of joint symposia among the PA and NJ BIO affiliates and an understanding of the economic space of Greater Philadelphia as the *de facto* region among the "new" bioscience corporate representatives allowed this development to occur. Finally, GPF created the strategic plan for a regional business marketing initiative designed to promote southeastern Pennsylvania to business executives and location advisers and assist in the business location process.

By late 2002, demonstrating the importance of personalities in such non-institutionalized spatial economic strategizing, GPF's staff leader had departed as had GPCC's. The GPF board, which had resisted previous overtures from the GPCC board, agreed to merge in early 2003 to promote a "unified business voice". Prior to the merger, GPCC hired the retiring governor of Pennsylvania to become the merged organization's new president and CEO. It was as a result of this merger that GPCC acquired an economic development mission and following the merger, created the regional growth strategies (RGS) business unit to carry out the growth agenda. The GPF board of directors, that used its clout to spearhead the GPF knowledge region agenda became the CEO council for growth (CEO council), a committee of the GPCC board of directors and supported by the RGS unit. The regional agenda had thus lost its highly visible stand-alone champion and had become part of an existing, much more conventionally thinking institution.

Of the inherited GPF initiatives, GPCC focused most on regional business marketing. It was something that other metro chambers had taken on, and it fit the new president and CEO's interests. But what region? The merger provided the opportunity to redefine metro Philadelphia as a tri-state region, encompassing southeastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and northern Delaware. However, given GPCC's historic Philadelphia orientation and the broader community parochialism, it was necessary to build internal as well as external scaffolding to support this re-orientation.

First, RGS defined the region as an 11-county area surrounding Philadelphia as the central city. This 11-county area does not correspond to the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD MSA and does not encompass the entire cultural entity that is South Jersey. It does approximate the on-the-ground economic marketplace in several industry clusters (including bioscience) and in commercial real estate. It was thus essentially a functional entity irrespective of administrative jurisdictions. Economic justification for cross-border collaboration within this 11-county region came from a journey-to-work analysis that used the simple act of commuting to work (as captured in the 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses) to demonstrate cross-county flows of people and wages. To the surprise of many, the analysis revealed that over 210,000 trips and in excess of $8 billion dollars in wages flowed across state lines within the 11-county tri-state region in 2000. This was but a subset of the nearly 820,000 trips and nearly $32.5 billion in wages that flowed across all county lines within the 11-county region. The journey-to-work analysis proved Greater Philadelphia's economic interdependence – a real expression of a *de facto*

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regionalization. This finding of a region received good media coverage and was quite effective in opening doors for a regional dialogue.

But as social scientists know, it takes more than data to effect behavioral and cultural change within organizations and in the larger community. Within GPCC, it was necessary to convince board leaders and senior staff of the necessity and wisdom of this new, tri-state direction, which conflicted with its core competencies and historical, territorially based identity. It was also necessary to strengthen the CEO Council as the voice for tri-state regional growth. Created as a committee of GPCC chaired by the GPCC president, the CEO Council was organizationally subordinate to the GPCC board of directors and its executive committee. Membership rules were not designed to promote a regional CEO community focused on economic growth. For example, bringing staff and board leaders from chambers in South Jersey and northern Delaware onto the CEO council as a first step towards regional leadership required a series of bylaw changes. However, these were accomplished, thus setting the stage for the CEO council to recruit members, take independent positions, and begin the process of transforming itself into a regional CEO leadership body, advocating economic interests at the regional level.

External to GPCC, it was necessary to engage and convince many constituencies that GPCC was committed to this new direction. These constituencies included the tri-state region's other large chambers, the economic development community, the rest of the business community, the mayor of Philadelphia, county executives around the region, governors of the three states, and the media. To do so, GPCC staked its reputation on the regional business marketing initiative and its ability to raise $16 million for the four-year effort, named Select Greater Philadelphia (Select). And through this effort, a tentative regional understanding began to emerge.

The new Select organization and its staff employees were part of GPCC, resulting in two separate but related economic development "units" that needed to be connected and integrated even as Select fundraising and advertising proceeded. Therefore, RGS undertook a strategic planning process through the CEO council to identify regional strengths and weaknesses and set goals and objectives. This strategic plan provided Select with a value proposition for its marketing and the CEO council/RGS with an agenda and clear targets. All the while, the traditional GPCC enterprise continued. Its need to benefit financially from the new economic development activities and legitimate its new engagement towards its more traditionally minded members led to the first annual State of the Region event in December 2004, held in New Jersey and featuring the region's three governors and representatives from the CEO council.

By early 2005, RGS had been integrated into the Select organization, thus (re)aligning mission and organization. By May, the $16 million fundraising goal had been met. By June 2005, Select had its own President & CEO – a business marketing, economic development veteran with tri-state experience, and its own board of directors – the CEO council for growth. A memorandum of understanding signed by all 11 county-based economic development agencies pledged to create a new atmosphere of intra-regional cooperation to attract companies, and to look beyond the region for potential new tenants. A Greater Philadelphia region, albeit essentially "virtual", had been established.

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Discussion: region building through combining and aligning "conventional" and "new" institutional understandings of regionalization

In multi-jurisdictional environments characterized by mistrust and parochialism, credible economic development requires focused, aligned leadership. Despite the merger, in 2003 Philadelphia's business leadership was neither focused nor aligned. There were different traditions and outlooks on "natural" territorial associations within the business interests. The effort to simultaneously reconcile the missions and the cultural differences between the "new" agenda of GPF and the conventional parameters of GPCC, launch a new business-civic initiative challenging GPCC's traditional Philadelphia focus while redefining wider regional relationships, and satisfy the requirements of leadership and funding for both organizations led to significant growing pains.

The CEO Council, with its hefty membership fee, participatory style and elitist membership limited to the most senior business leaders, was seen as the reincarnation of GPF, effectively reinforcing pre-merger divisions in policy agendas, and detracting from the unity of the business voice. But creation of the CEO council was a condition of the merger, and meant to ensure that a leadership vehicle continued to exist for the growth agenda which was very much a "child" of the "new" knowledge companies' leadership. The result was confusion and misalignment between mission, leadership and organizational purpose, to the detriment of a genuine regional agenda.

GPF had envisioned the business marketing effort as a stand-alone organization, but GPCC created Select as a wholly owned and very closely held subsidiary. The decision to create and develop Select inside and as part of GPCC, while understandable from the GPCC perspective as a way to confer legitimacy and bolster standing in the new "regional" mission, had the effect of limiting Select's autonomy, slowing its trajectory, and confusing responsibility for the economic development mission. From an outsider's perspective, the conflicting messages about the Philadelphia region remained confusing, undermining the region's competitiveness and the credibility of its policies.

Fortunately, the merger coincided with the arrival in Philadelphia of a new kind of business-civic leader. Coming from outside the region, these CEOs were experienced in economic development, having participated in similar business-led efforts elsewhere. They also took leadership roles within GPCC, establishing their credentials with key issues such as business tax cuts in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania (evergreen business priorities). The presence of these newcomers galvanized the CEO Council. Several similarly inclined local CEOs immediately joined them to form a core group, with the stature, visibility, loyalty and experience to build believability and understanding within GPCC for the viability of the tri-state economic development mission and the need for Select to carry it forward.

Without the backing, active participation and organizational guidance of this core group, Select could not have accomplished its fundraising goal. And raising $16 million, primarily from the business community, more than anything cemented Select/CEO council's credibility with GPCC leaders and staff, the broader business community, and very importantly, the economic development and political communities. The fundraising success allowed these business-civic leaders to push for the organizational maturity of Select, including a president, a board, consolidation of the economic development units, and full control over the growth agenda.

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Some concluding comments

Overcoming centuries of fragmentation requires a high level of attention to symbolism and the details of inclusiveness. With the initial organizational alignment accomplished, economic growth through the chamber of commerce vehicle requires on-going attention to relationships between the regionally-oriented policy body Select/CEO council, participating chambers, and other economic development partners. For example, the initial Philadelphia-centric decision to include only half of South Jersey in the Select Greater Philadelphia territory, the presence of the state chamber in northern Delaware in addition to Select/CEO council's county chamber partner, and the delivery of location assistance through county-based economic developers with differing organizational arrangements, will all continue to require attention and dialogue in the interest of shaping a consistent, coherent and thus credible regional agenda.

Select/CEO council's dollars, prestigious board, and dedicated staff can easily give the appearance of independence, of agenda setting without the involvement of the (necessary) partners. Careful and on-going negotiation of roles and responsibilities, "listening" and constructive communication with partners is the *sine qua non* of continued progress in shaping and projecting a regional policy agenda that reflects economic geographic (geoeconomic) realities on the ground. Fortunately, as the first effort in years to bridge the geopolitical divide, Select/CEO council is now better situated than any previous to bring about cross-border regional economic development.

Notes

1. The United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines metropolitan areas according to published standards that are applied to Census Bureau data. The general concept of a metropolitan area is that of a core area containing a large population nucleus, together with adjacent communities having a high degree of economic and social integration with that core (www.bea.gov/bea/regional/definitions/nextpage.cfm?key = metropolitan% 20areas).
2. Camden, NJ Metropolitan Division with three counties in southern New Jersey; PA Metropolitan Division with five counties in southeastern Pennsylvania; and, Wilmington, DE-MD-NJ Metropolitan Division with one county in northern Delaware, one county in northeastern Maryland, and one county in southern New Jersey.
3. Delaware adopted several laws in the 1980s that made the state a favored location for banking, finance and insurance companies (www.ci.wilmington.de.us/history.htm).

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