

# The weakness of Regional Planning and a Possible Approach to Solve It

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**Research shows regional planning does not work very well. This article reports on the latest research on this topic that shows regional planning, when it has no binding effect for local governments –the way it is in Michigan—, does not work very well. This proposes one solution, an approach they may make regional planning more effective and retain local control in planning.**

## The Proposed System in More Detail

The approach offered here is not even a “middle ground,” because it is still a system that leans heavily on the side of local government control and very little, or no, regional authority. In other words it is a system with some “light direction” from a regional coordination level –but more than a regional plan that depends on voluntary adherence which is often easily ignored– with a strong element of local control and self-determination.

The article is simply to start the discussion about this; there is no expectation this would be the final outcome, or even that it would happen. It is a system where regional planning organizations develop “goals”. Those “goals” are formed with direct influence and participation from counties within the region. County planning commissions would develop “objectives” for the region’s “goals” and county “goals” and “objectives” in addition to the region’s. Those “goals” and “objectives” are formed with direct influence and participation from municipalities in the county. Municipal (city, village, and township) planning commissions would develop “strategies” for the county’s “goals” and “objectives;” region’s “goals;” and municipal “goals,” “objectives,” and “strategies” in addition.

There is currently discussion about a third phase (regional board) for Prosperity Regions in Michigan. The discussion about the idea in this article may figure into the thought process for development of that legislation. Or the system proposed here may be adopted by a region as part of the implementation of regional prosperity plans – so there is a more formal method of how the regional plan is coordinated with county and local plans.

In more detail:

### I. Region.

- A. The regional planning organization develops two types of goals.
  - i. Region’s Goals:
    1. Goals that are exclusively about things internal to the regional organization (those things the region-organization has direct control over).
  - ii. Region-wide Goals:
    1. Goals that would apply to county and municipal governments within the geography of the region.

- B. Goal development and appeals process.
  - i. Both types of “goals” are formed with direct influence and participation from counties within the region.
  - ii. After a “bottom-up” process to propose both types of Goals in the form of a draft plan, but before the regional plan adoption, a county or municipality within the region would have an appeal process to challenge any of the Region’s Goals and Region-wide Goals.
- C. Objectives and Strategies.
  - i. Region’s Objectives and Strategies:
    - 1. The region would develop Region’s Objectives for each Region’s Goals in the regional plan.
    - 2. The region would develop Region’s Strategies for each Region’s Objective in the regional Plan.
  - ii. Region-wide Objectives and Strategies:
    - 1. The region may suggest several varieties of Region-wide Objectives for each Region-wide Goal in the regional plan.
    - 2. The region may suggest several varieties of Region-wide Strategies for each Region-wide Objective in the regional plan.
    - 3. This suggests to county and municipal governments a variety of Region-wide Objectives and Region-wide Strategies for consideration by counties and municipalities in the region.

**Definitions:**  
**GOAL:** An expression of an end state, or utopia. It is to provide very broad direction which is likely to have many different objectives and strategies which could be chosen for purposes of implementation. An example would be “have pure water everywhere.”

**OBJECTIVE:** Is an achievable point to describe what is aimed for. It is often measurable which is likely to have many different strategies that could be chosen for purposes of implementation. An example would be “maintain water quality of X standard.”

**STRATEGY:** Is a policy, method, adoption of an ordinance, procedure, or other strategic measure to implement an objective(s). An example would be “adopt surface water buffer and setback requirements in local zoning.”

**Prefixes:**  
**REGION’S, COUNTY’S, MUNICIPALITY’S (possessive):** A goal, objective, or strategy that is only about those things that a region, county, or municipality has direct control over (e.g., its own employees, departments, property).

**REGION-WIDE, COUNTY-WIDE MUNICIPALITY-WIDE:** A goal, objective, or strategy that is about those things beyond a region’s county’s, or municipality’s direct control (e.g., regulation of private property, influence of another entity, etc.).

2. **County:**

- A. Goals
  - i. Region-Wide Goals:
    - 1. A county planning commission would have to incorporate the adopted Region-wide Goals into the county master plan.
  - ii. County’s Goals:
    - 1. The county planning commission may also create additional County’s Goals (exclusive to the county government) in the county master plan.

- iii. County-Wide Goals:
    - 1. The county planning commission may also create additional County-wide Goals (applicable throughout the county's geography) for the county master plan.
  - B. Objectives.
    - i. Region-wide Objectives.
      - 1. From the set of alternative Region-wide Objectives in the regional plan the county planning commission may select some, all, or none of them and may adopt different Objectives of its own for each Region-wide Goal in the county master plan.
    - ii. County's Objectives.
      - 1. The county planning commission may also create County's Objectives for each County's Goal in the county master plan.
    - iii. County-wide Objectives.
      - 1. The county planning commission may also create County-wide Objectives for each County-wide Goal in the county master plan.
  - C. Objective development, goal selection and development, and appeals process.
    - i. Creation of "objectives," and County-wide Goals are formed with direct influence and participation from municipalities within the county.
    - ii. After a "bottom-up" process to propose Objectives and Goals in the form of a draft Master Plan produced after the public hearing on the master plan, but before the county master plan adoption, a municipality within the county would have an appeal process to challenge any of the County-wide Goals, County-wide Objectives, and selected (or not selected) Region-wide Objectives.
  - D. Strategies
    - i. County's strategies.
      - 1. The county planning commission would develop County's Strategies for each County's Objective in the county master plan.
    - ii. County-wide strategies.
      - 1. The county planning commission may suggest several varieties of County-wide Strategies for each county-wide Objective and each selected Region-wide Objective in the county master plan.
      - 2. This suggests to municipal governments a variety of County-wide strategies, Region-wide Strategies for consideration by municipalities in the county.
3. Municipality.
- A. Goals.
    - i. Region- and County-Wide Goals:
      - 1. A municipal planning commission would have to incorporate the adopted Region-wide Goals (which were carried into the county master plan, or regional plan if no county master plan) into the municipal master plan.
      - 2. A municipal planning commission would have to incorporate the adopted County-wide Goals into the municipal master plan.

3. The municipal planning commission may also create additional Municipality-wide Goals in the municipal master plan.
  - ii. Municipality's Goals:
    1. The municipal planning commission may also create additional Municipality's Goals in the municipal master plan.
- B. Objectives.
- i. Region- and County-Wide Objectives:
    1. A municipal planning commission would have to incorporate the adopted Region-wide Objectives (which were carried into the county master plan, or regional plan if no county master plan) for each Region-wide Goal in the municipal master plan.
    2. A municipal planning commission would have to incorporate the adopted County-wide Objectives for each County-Wide Goal in the municipal master plan.
    3. A municipal planning commission may also create additional Municipality-wide Objectives for each Goal in the municipal master plan.
  - ii. Municipality's Objectives:
    1. The municipal planning commission may also create additional Municipality's Objectives for each Municipality's Goal in the municipal master plan.
- C. Strategies. A municipal planning commission develops Strategies. These would be Strategies which are both exclusively about things that is internal to the municipal government (those things the municipal government has direct control over) and Strategies that would apply to the entire geography of the municipality.
- i. Region- and County-Wide Strategies.
    1. From the alternative Region-wide Strategies in the Regional Plan (which were carried into the county master plan, or regional plan if no county master plan) a municipal planning commission may select some, all, or none of them and may adopt different Strategies for each Region-wide Objective in the municipal master plan.
    2. From the alternative County-wide Strategies in the county master plan (or regional plan if no county master plan) a municipal planning commission may select some, all, or none of them and may adopt different Strategies for each County-wide Objective in the municipal master plan.
  - ii. Municipality's Strategies.
    1. The municipal planning commission may also create additional Municipality's Strategies for each Municipality's Objective in the municipal master plan.
- D. Strategies development, Objective selection and development, and Goal selection and development.
- i. The "Strategies," selection (or not selecting) of County-wide and Region-wide Objectives, County-wide and Region-wide Goals is done with direct influence and participation from residents within the municipality and others.

So while the region sets region-wide goals, county and local government have a great deal of flexibility and discretion in how those goals are pursued. It is the county and local government that have complete freedom to choose the objectives and strategies for the region-wide goals. They can adopt objectives and strategies which are aggressive, or not, they can adopt strategies which are regulation focused, incentive focused, or benign, or other approaches to the issue. The municipal and county government also have a direct role in formulating the region-wide goals. Even with all this flexibility and role in formulating region-wide goals municipal and county governments also have an additional opportunity to challenge or change region-wide goals.

With this proposal the same system also exists with municipal governments' selection of strategies for county-wide objectives, has a direct role in formulating the county-wide objectives and goals, and have an additional opportunity to challenge or change county-wide objectives and goals.

At the same time there is a formal consideration by the counties and municipalities to use and acknowledge regional Goals and county Goals and Objectives with a public, in a master plan, dispensation of those Goals and Objectives.

Result is some "light direction" from a regional coordination level –but more than a regional plan that is easily ignored– with a strong element of local control and self-determination.

A Michigan State University<sup>1</sup> Extension<sup>2</sup> Educator<sup>3</sup> can provide training on this and other topics which focus on land use<sup>4</sup> issues.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.msu.edu/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://msue.anr.msu.edu/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://msue.anr.msu.edu/uploads/235/21111/FirstPointOfContact\\_GovernmentPublicPolicy.pdf](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/uploads/235/21111/FirstPointOfContact_GovernmentPublicPolicy.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://msue.anr.msu.edu/program/info/land\\_use\\_education\\_services](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/program/info/land_use_education_services)