

Breaking Down Friday Night Rivalries: Strengthening Regional Governance Structures to Facilitate Collaboration

KEVIN BYRD

Executive Director
New River Valley Regional Commission

The views expressed in this article are those of the individual author/authors and do not represent the views of or an endorsement by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, or the Federal Reserve System.

Across America most people have a home team, one they take great pride in and often have a personal connection with, largely because that home team is their community. People inherently harbor a deep connection to familiar people and places, those they understand. It is the community in which they are surrounded that shapes their views on issues and approaches to life. Community is also how families survive and can thrive in rural areas. However, as economies evolve, many rural communities are confronted with challenges that can make thriving more difficult, and sometimes the greatest prospect is simply surviving.

For many rural communities to shift toward thriving, resources that exist beyond the immediate community may be required. Resources such as funding for initiatives, human capital/capacity to execute and an ability to shift toward a proactive mindset may be needed. How those resources are introduced and utilized locally is paramount, perhaps more so than simply being made available. This chapter focuses on regional governance structures at the local level that foster mutually beneficial collaborations across jurisdictions and help communities see beyond the Friday night rivalries.

In the United States, there are hundreds of regional development organizations (RDOs) whose mission is to provide technical assistance to communities within a defined geographic area, typically composed of multiple counties. According to the National Association of Development Organizations:

“Regional Development Organization” is used generically to describe the national network of 540 multi-jurisdictional regional planning and development organizations. These public-based entities play an invaluable role in fostering intergovernmental collaboration among federal, state and local officials. They deliver and manage various federal and state programs. Most importantly, they work to solve areawide issues and to address the fundamental building blocks required for competitive and sustainable communities and economies.

RDOs are typically governed by a policy board with majority control of local elected officials, along with representatives from the business community, educational institutions, nonprofit sector and the general public. In most states, RDOs are authorized and recognized under state law or executive order, as well as hold various program designations from different federal agencies. Therefore, RDOs are often known by many different names.”

These groups could be called area development districts, associations of governments, councils of governments, economic development districts, planning district commissions, regional commissions, and other types of multi-jurisdictional development entities across the country.¹ Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs developed a map of regional intergovernmental organizations, which can be viewed on their website.²

The majority of RDOs were enabled by states and chartered in the mid- to late 1960s. With many RDOs having celebrated 50 years of service to their regions, the organizations have evolved extensively and have become quite complex, with a deep understanding of local issues and pathways to address challenges. How the local governments within the RDO service area utilize the organization is often what sets regions apart when it comes to addressing items of mutual interest.

Historically, RDOs have helped communities address infrastructure issues such as regional drinking water and wastewater systems, transportation networks, transit systems, jails, parks and solid-waste management. As a community needs change, so does the expertise and assistance provided by the RDO. Today, RDOs are actively involved with deploying broadband systems, building affordable housing solutions, supporting entrepreneurship and confronting disaster resilience. As an RDO board member once pointed out during a retreat focused on updating the mission statement of the organization: “We are honest chameleons. We change our colors to serve the most relevant and pressing issues of the region.” How communities choose to utilize the organizational structure presented by the RDO makes the difference in whether the organization is positioned to help communities navigate change.

For RDOs to successfully serve communities, trust and capacity to execute are key ingredients. Trust must be demonstrated over an extended

period of time, and RDOs often create the space for this trust to be developed by convening leaders. Capacity to execute starts with understanding that RDOs are knowledge-based businesses. The staff must have the technical skills, political understanding and knowledge about local, state and federal programs to navigate complex situations. Lastly, communities are best served by an RDO when the RDO has relatively stable funding with which to build a high-capacity team.

Having worked in the RDO profession for more than 15 years, I find it readily apparent that the key to success in fostering mutually beneficial collaborations is initially established and maintained through convening. By way of convening leaders consistently, information is shared, relationships are developed, and trust can be established in a low-stakes environment.

Someone unfamiliar with convening is likely asking these questions: What does convening mean? Who is convened? How often does it happen? Why is an RDO the appropriate convener? First, convening in the RDO sense means setting the figurative regional table for leaders to gather in a neutral setting. Essentially, the RDO performs all the tasks of calling the meeting, sending invitations, setting a broad agenda and facilitating the discussion. Second, who should be convened? From an RDO leader perspective, it is imperative to have strong relationships among the chief local elected officials (mayors, county board chairs), as well as the chief administrative officials, because the elected officials control the purse strings while the administrative officials have a deep understanding on specific needs and how to implement. Third, how often do RDOs convene? Drawing on the New River Valley Regional Commission in Radford, Virginia, as an example, we convene the mayors and county board chairs biannually and the chief administrative officials every other month. During normal circumstances, this frequency has enabled relationships to form and is not too frequent to become burdensome.

It is important to point out that local government elected officials, particularly in rural areas, are often stretched to the max handling duties in their communities. Most elected leaders in rural areas receive very little to no compensation for their extra duties and do not have staff dedicated to help them perform their roles other than the local government administrative staff. Therefore, it is critical that the convening agenda be worthwhile for

the time they are taking out of their day, and they need to see progress on regional initiatives to remain committed to regional efforts.

Fourth, why should the RDO serve as the convener? Every region has organizations that serve the same geography, so why not look toward another organization to perform this task? The RDOs are well-positioned for a few reasons: (1) the board composition referenced earlier already has a direct connection to elected officials and local government administrative officials; (2) RDOs are not singularly focused regional organizations; the large majority have expertise in a wide range of service areas, whereas other regional organizations are likely focused on marketing, business development or specific service delivery; and (3) an RDO's breadth of program areas allows the convening topics to be broad and exploratory.

At the New River Valley Regional Commission, we have found value in convening local stakeholders—beyond the chief elected officials and administrative officials—to include local government planners and the local tourism marketing offices, as well as geographic information system (GIS) users. Each group finds distinct value in coming together and often discovers collaborative projects to initiate, such as establishing annual regional training for local government planning commissions, working with tourism marketing offices to develop a regional presence, or training GIS users on new technology resources. Ultimately, convening is not meeting for meeting's sake; it is a chance to give rise to issues of mutual interest and an opportunity to find and implement structures that make sense for the region.

While the RDO is often focused on convening local government leaders, the RDOs helping communities navigate challenges in a multifaceted approach are now becoming adept at partnering with other organizations to co-convene even more broadly. This has often led RDOs to find impactful partnerships with community foundations. Community foundations are valuable partners because they tend to be nonprofits with a mission to invest in local needs. In the New River Valley, the Regional Commission and the Community Foundation of the New River Valley developed a long-standing partnership through a 2010 federal planning grant to develop the New River Valley Livability Initiative, a sustainable communities grant award with the intention of building partnerships to address pressing issues on a regional basis.

At the onset of the planning process, both organizations were familiar with each other; however, neither had worked directly together on a project. As the three-year planning process was concluding, leaders around the project table began exploring ways to continue the good work, although there was no dedicated funding to support the effort going forward. What culminated was the Community Foundation's commitment to revise its grant-making programs to align with findings from the Livability Initiative. Further, the Community Foundation continued to foster the collaborative leadership model by hosting a monthly Livability Leadership meeting with the purpose of convening 10 to 12 cross-sectoral partners to dive deeper on challenging issues. This group continues to meet monthly more than five years after the planning process was complete.

Tailored

In the New River Valley, the Regional Commission and the Community Foundation of the New River Valley developed a long-standing partnership through a 2010 federal planning grant to develop the New River Valley Livability Initiative. ... What culminated was the Community Foundation's commitment to revise its grant-making programs to align with findings from the Livability Initiative.

As a further example of the power of collaboration and convening, the Livability Leadership group has demonstrated value in two purposes. First, it organizes a popular annual Livability Summit co-hosted by the Community Foundation and the Regional Commission, with registration numbers often exceeding meeting room capacity of 150. The primary purpose of the event is to elevate the awareness of the good work taking place across the region and help foster connections among organizations and communities. This happens during the well-received lightning round of 15 short presentations by partners across a wide segment of topics, from housing to economic development to trail development. The final portion of the event typically allows for a substantive panel discussion on a regionally relevant topic, so attendees can learn more and get a chance to meet the program funders and lead implementers.



A new apartment inside the former Price's Fork Elementary School. Credit: Jennifer Wilsie, New River Valley Regional Commission.

The second purpose of the Livability Leadership group is to evolve the cross-sectoral convening into developing significant projects. One such project, scheduled to be completed in 2021, is the redevelopment of a decommissioned elementary school in a rural area outside the region's largest town, Blacksburg. The classrooms are being converted to apartments, with several restricted for people 55 and over, as well as units reserved for those with low to moderate incomes. The kindergarten space was converted into two separate uses: a microbrewery and a commercial kitchen. The cafeteria and gymnasium spaces are currently being up-fitted to house a restaurant.

Soon after the school was decommissioned, the surrounding rural community expressed a strong desire for the school to remain a focal point of gathering. Fortunately, a local developer purchased the property and was well aware of the findings from the Livability Initiative, which in part called for senior housing, affordable housing and infrastructure for local food systems. The developer looked to the Livability Leadership team members to help with the visioning process for the site and relied upon their expertise to secure state and federal funds to assist with portions of the overall project. To date, the commercial kitchen—called Millstone Kitchen—is up and running, serving an important role with local food-based entrepreneurs, and



Outside the former Price's Fork School site. Credit: Jennifer Wilsie, New River Valley Regional Commission.

the microbrewery (Moon Hollow Brewing) is acting as a gathering place for those near and far seeking a unique gathering experience. The housing component is doing remarkably well. One-half of the 32 units are fully occupied, while the remaining 16 are scheduled for completion in 2021. The people on the waitlist for the remaining 16 units are seeking the opportunity to live in a vibrant community setting.



Inside the foyer of Millstone Kitchen, with listing of private donors. Credit: Jennifer Wilsie, New River Valley Regional Commission.

Caterer with HazelBea Catering preparing meals for distribution by local food security organizations. Credit: Jennifer Wilsie, New River Valley Regional Commission.



Inside Moon Hollow Brewing, which occupies the former kindergarten space in Price's Fork Elementary School. Credit: Jennifer Wilsie, New River Valley Regional Commission.

Let's explore an example of how convening leaders over an extended period of time developed trust and allowed for an RDO to provide a critical implementation role during an urgent time of need—the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, during the annual Livability Summit, the pandemic was on the verge of drastically changing lives. At noon on March 12, the Regional Commission was hosting the regular bimonthly convening of local government administrators. During that meeting, the group recognized the need to begin meeting much more frequently as the pandemic was ramping

up. From that day forward, the group has met two times weekly via conference call with the regional health district director, so everyone could stay apprised of the situation and make significant governmental decisions with the same level of information. As of this writing in July 2021, the pandemic has reached 17 months in duration, and the group continues to meet weekly, largely because members have observed several benefits of their collaboration. Initially, the RDO role was minimal: set up the conference call line and send calendar invites to the group of 15 attendees.

As the pandemic was emerging, the New River Valley Public Health Task Force was established and co-chaired by the New River Health District director, Dr. Noelle Bissell, and the Town of Blacksburg police chief, Anthony Wilson. The task force is composed of leaders in health care, law enforcement, higher education, K-12 schools and state emergency preparedness, as well as first responders, local government leaders, and others. This group has been highly effective in identifying public health needs and then tapping existing organizations to assist in addressing them. One such initiative exemplifies the use of this regional structure presented by RDOs—the New River Valley Business Continuity Team (BCT).

Collaborative

As the pandemic was emerging, the New River Valley Public Health Task Force was established. ... The task force is composed of leaders in health care, law enforcement, higher education, K-12 schools and state emergency preparedness, as well as first responders, local government leaders, and others. This group has been highly effective in identifying public health needs and then tapping existing organizations to assist in addressing them.

The BCT is a resource available to any employer, whether it is a private business, nonprofit, religious entity or government, with the sole purpose of keeping employees safe during the pandemic, while ensuring people remain employed and earn wages. The services provided by the BCT can take many forms, including: over-the-phone advice for operations when an employee has been exposed to the virus or tests positive; access to a pool of funds to pay for on-site environmental cleaning; public relations services to assist

with messaging to employees, customers or business contacts; and legal services to advise employers on navigating the complex human resource issues the pandemic presents. The BCT is staffed with three people: a public health director, a public health schools liaison and a program manager. After six months of operating, the BCT has advised hundreds of businesses, which helped keep more than 14,000 employees in the region working safely with minimal downtime during the pandemic.

The RDO's role in the BCT has been to chart a course to launch the program, identify funding, hire staff and operate the program. This resource is being paid for by CARES Act funds invested by the local governments in the region to use as matching funds for grants secured by the RDO. In total, the BCT program has seven different sources of revenue, which also points to the strength of RDOs in their ability to manage complex financial scenarios for project implementation. In this model, the RDO had established trusted relationships with the local governments. The government leaders felt confident in the RDO's ability to implement a vital service at a critical time.

Resilient

The [New River Valley Business Continuity Team] is a resource available to any employer ... with the sole purpose of keeping employees safe during the pandemic, while ensuring people remain employed and earn wages. ... After six months of operating, the BCT has advised hundreds of businesses, which helped keep more than 14,000 employees in the region working safely with minimal downtime during the pandemic. ... In total, the BCT program has seven different sources of revenue, which also points to the strength of RDOs in their ability to manage complex financial scenarios.

For rural communities to move beyond Friday night rivalries, they first need to seek opportunities to convene. Through convening, mutual interests are discovered, and RDOs as problem-solvers can step up to offer structure to address challenges. When the dialogue shifts from “my” issue to “our” issue, the RDO clearly has a role to play in offering solutions that can move rural communities from surviving toward thriving.

References

National Association of Development Organizations. "About NADO." See nado.org/about.
University of Pittsburgh. The Regional Intergovernmental Organizations (RIGOs) Project. Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. See rigos.pitt.edu/data-visualizations/interactive-rigo-map.

Endnotes

- ¹ See National Association of Development Organizations.
- ² See University of Pittsburgh.

