

THE CONNECTOR

The Cities that Work Series: Regional collaboration, local action needed in tri-state planning



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*On Wednesday, July 25, MPC is hosting our **2012 Annual Luncheon: The Cities That Work**, featuring an insightful and provocative dialogue between the mayors of Chicago, Gary and Milwaukee. Follow our blog over the next few weeks as we feature posts from guest authors and members of our staff on issues that unite the tri-state region.*

For more details or to purchase tables or individual tickets for the July 25 event, visit [MPC's web calendar](#).

Public officials, policymakers, and academics love to meet, confer, and discuss—but will action follow? As a member of the latter group, I was a contributor to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) recent territorial review of the Chicago Tri-State region ([discussed in an earlier post](#)) and panelist at this week's conference on "Milwaukee's Future in the Chicago Megacity" sponsored by Marquette University Law School's Lubar Fund for Public Policy Research and the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel*. Most participants at [Marquette's conference](#) agreed, at least conceptually, that Milwaukee's best interests—and Chicago's—would be served by greater coordination and collaboration, especially in

the areas of transportation and workforce development. But how should the region move forward, and how can we avoid letting on-again, off-again interstate competition for businesses, residents, and economic development derail these efforts?

Work within existing institutions and begin with smaller projects

No one is suggesting that the region should establish yet another layer of government or agency, but surely our existing organizations can communicate more regularly and develop some shared work agendas, perhaps building on existing relationships between the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, and the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission. Policymakers could identify perhaps smaller projects on which is it easier to find common ground, to build trust and relationships, and to deliver some early “wins” to build public consensus and will for future projects.

Respect the differences between urban centers and the need for city leaders to “act local”

Chicago is not Milwaukee, nor is Gary Chicago. Each of these three cities has unique features, dynamics, assets and concerns. And don't deny the size differences between these cities: they matter. While regional partnerships may benefit all, some projects may be particularly valuable in more localized areas. The key is to realize that any given project may not generate benefits for each and every regional stakeholder, but, taken as a whole, a regional and collaborative approach will ultimately create value enjoyed by all. Further, we must recognize that the mayors of Gary, Chicago, and Milwaukee have been elected by their residents in large part to provide the “basics” of big city governance: the efficient provision of public safety, public education, and other core services, with an adequate tax base to support service delivery. Mayors must devote scarce political and financial capital to meet their residents' needs, even though they know that longer-term economic development strategies and investments will decisively shape their cities'—and the region's—futures. Thus, while our mayors need to be part of this project, they can't be all alone in the front lines on it.

For my money, transportation and transit are the areas I'd love to see getting the attention they deserve with this new, regional approach. My trip from Chicago to Milwaukee yesterday began on Chicago's south side and took me to Union Station, where I used Amtrak's Hiawatha rail service to Milwaukee's intermodal center, neatly illustrating some of my themes here: The two train stations differ considerably in age, facilities, signage, and amenities, but the real disappointment was a two hour wait for a return train, which left on time but arrived one hour late in Chicago. Frequency of service and on-time performance are key: When area residents can count on reliable, high quality transport within our region, we will have done much to make the Chicago tri-state region the attractive, vibrant, and competitive region we all want to see.