

METROPOLITAN COALITION-BUILDING STRATEGIES

**Margaret Weir
University of California, Berkeley
mweir@socrates.berkeley.edu**

Paper prepared for the Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety, Harvard University, December 6-7, 2001

Proclaiming that “we are all in it together,” urban advocates have for the past decade sought to promote city-suburban political coalitions.¹ Their call for concerted regional action to address urban social and economic problems reflects a new political reality: the sharp scaling back of federal urban aid since the 1980s, even as concentrated urban poverty continued to grow. As federal dollars grew more scarce and social policy devolution granted states more discretion over spending, the need to gain new allies and to build power in new arenas became increasingly evident to many urban advocates. The call for metropolitan alliances also reflects a long underappreciated economic reality: the economic fate of cities and suburbs are linked. A wealth of studies now documents the interdependence of cities and suburbs.² Many of these studies argue that all nonpoor suburbs have a long-term interest in reducing urban poverty because such poverty depresses regional economic growth. Others point to the shared

¹ See Larry C. Ledebur and William R. Barnes, All In It Together: Cities, Suburbs, and Local Economic Regions (Washington D.C.: National League of Cities, 1993).

² Paul D. Gottlieb, “The Effects of Poverty on Metropolitan Area Economic Performance,” Urban-Suburban Interdependencies Rosalind Greenstein and Wim Wiewel (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2000), pp.21-48.

economic interests of cities and particular suburbs, especially fiscally distressed suburbs.

Despite this outpouring of research, identifying the “we” and figuring out how to get them together has proven challenging. Efforts to build equity-oriented metropolitan alliances have faced a formidable array of obstacles. These include longstanding political animosities between cities and suburbs, bitter racial divisions, entrenched administrative practices, and the narrow and short-term perspective that dominates the thinking of politicians and civic organizations in cities as well as suburbs. Yet, in metropolitan regions across the country, urban advocates have been building new alliances of varying reach and durability. This paper evaluates what we can learn from these efforts, drawing particularly on case material related to improving infrastructure and investment in low-income communities.³

I highlight four factors that appear consistently in successful and durable collaborations for reducing metropolitan inequalities. The first is the central role of relationship building among coalition members. The second is the ability to reframe problems so that formerly disparate interests find some common ground for collaborative action. The third is access to information and the capacity to analyze often complex data. The fourth is the ability to operate effectively in the multiple political arenas that span the federal system. After illustrating these factors, I then show how each of them has mattered for the development of specific metropolitan alliances. Finally, effective influence at the state and federal levels is particularly important for most successful coalitions, the last part of the paper shows how some

³ Case material for this paper is drawn from the secondary literature as well as from my own research, including interviews in Chicago and Washington D.C. with state legislators, city officials, advocates in the areas of transportation and community reinvestment, and other individuals.

notable metropolitan alliances have won access to those arenas.

FOUR ELEMENTS OF DURABLE METROPOLITAN COLLABORATION

Relationship-Building. Relationship-building is key to durable and successful collaborations. It is not only the first step, it is the central ongoing task of coalition-building. In efforts to build coalitions that cross metropolitan political boundaries or that stretch across a state, advocates in the same broad field may not know one another. When coalitions seek to unite groups active in different issue areas, the problem is compounded. Most research on relationship-building emphasizes the importance of repeated interactions in building trust.⁴ Small steps that link different groups in common actions are an essential part of the process.

In addition to these close ties among direct cooperators, members of successful collaborations have knowledge of and access to more distant interests. Such “weak ties” can provide resources, knowledge or political support at critical moments. This suggests that it is well worth seeking out relationships with groups that have power or a reputation for power even if their immediate value to the coalition may not be evident. Organizations and coalitions use hiring decisions and member recruitment

⁴ See Ronald Ferguson “Conclusion,” Urban Problems and Community Development edited by Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens (Brookings Institution Press, 1999), pp.569-610.

to extend the range of relationships.

Defining Common Interests. Thinking about problems in regional terms does not come naturally to most metropolitan actors. Thinking in ways that link the interests of the urban poor to others in the metropolitan area is even more rare. Political boundaries promote narrow and local perspectives on regional problems. Many suburban residents look to their city boundaries as a form of protection from urban problems; for many localities, strengthening these boundaries has long been a central goal. Local politicians, driven by short-term electoral considerations and hot-button racial issues, often reinforce such narrow perspectives. Despite the continuing power of these barriers to collaboration, there are several processes through which groups within metropolitan areas can build common perspectives. The search for such areas of agreement does not imply complete overlap of agendas across groups or even similar motivations. Groups can begin to cooperate even around small areas of agreement.

One approach to defining common interests involves what sociologists call the “strategic framing” of issues. Frames can be defined as “the specific metaphors, symbolic representations and cognitive cues” that define the issue.⁵ What is the issue about and whose interests does it touch? Investigators who study social movements point to the importance of framing in determining the scope

⁵ Meyer N. Zald, “Culture, Ideology, and Strategic Framing,” Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Meyer N. Zald (eds.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.261-74.

and ultimately the success of social movements. Strategic framing can seek to redefine an issue so that groups who did not see their interests as intertwined find new bases of cooperation.

The movement for “smart growth with equity” attempts such a redefinition of interests.⁶ The aim is to unite advocates for low-income communities with environmentalists and other potential allies, including business and labor. The interests of environmentalists and advocates for low-income communities have historically been difficult to reconcile.⁷ The anti-growth perspective of many environmental groups clashed with the support for jobs and growth on the part of urban advocates. More recently, advocates for low-income people and environmentalists have tangled directly over growth controls and affordable housing. The smart growth movement attempts to locate common ground among these groups. Environmentalists’ concerns about sprawl need to be addressed through revitalizing declining urban neighborhoods and providing affordable housing as part of revitalization. Portland, Oregon, which implemented state land use controls nearly 30 years ago, is widely acknowledged as the leader developing this kind of coalition. A similar logic is at work in recent efforts in Illinois to link environmental groups primarily concerned with stopping highway development with urban groups that support improved public transportation.

A second way in which common interests can be built is when antagonistic groups learn through experience that their interests are at least partly complementary. The role of the Community

⁶ See Don Chen, “Smart Growth with Equity,” in Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility Robert D. Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson (eds.) (Gabriola Island, BC and Stony Creek, CT: New Society Publishers, 1997).

⁷ Margaret Weir, “Planning, Environmentalism, and Urban Poverty: The Political Failure of National Land Use Planning Legislation, 1970-1975” in The American Planning Tradition: Culture and

Reinvestment Act (CRA) in making banks realize there was a profit to be made in lending to low and moderate income home buyers provides an example of this process. First enacted in 1977, the CRA is an anti-redlining measure that required banks to lend throughout the areas from which they draw deposits. Although many banks vigorously resisted the measure and regulators failed to enforce it, in cities where local community-based organizations were strong, the CRA sparked collaborations that proved profitable to banks.⁸ By the 1990s, most banks had established community affairs departments and had discovered that it was indeed in their interest to lend to low and moderate income communities. Some initial coercion or regulation may be necessary to promote this kind of learning. For example, Oregon's homebuilding industry initially opposed the state's land use regulations but once they were in place, some of the builders came to support the law.

A third way that low income advocates can win regional allies is by persuading regional

Policy Robert Fishman (ed.) (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000), pp.193-215.

⁸ Jean Pogge, "Reinvestment in Chicago Neighborhoods: A Twenty-Year Struggle," From Redlining to Reinvestment Gregory D. Squires (ed.) (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp.133-48.

organizations to extend their mission to encompass issues of highest concern to low-income communities. In many cases, this does not entail redefining interests, but rather broadening the action agenda. The American Lung Association's increased attention to the asthma of inner city children provides an example of this kind of mission extension. The advantage of this strategy is that it does not require creating new organizations but rather extending the capacities of existing organizations.

The emergence of new problems can provide an opportunity for redefining problems and identifying new allies. The past five years of economic growth have prompted business leaders in many regions to see sprawl, transportation, and the spatial mismatch between jobs and housing as problems that concern them. In some regions, such as Chicago, this has generated new business initiatives centrally concerned with promoting regional equity.⁹ In other settings, advocates have to press to ensure that equity considerations enter into business thinking about regionalism.

Information and Expertise. Information and expertise are essential components of regional coalition-building strategies. They are particularly important in launching new policy initiatives because data can help cast issues in a new light, either documenting the extent of a problem or highlighting common interests that may not be apparent on the surface. Data and expertise can show that some solutions are more feasible than previously thought. Data can also highlight patterns of public spending that fail to

⁹ Elmer W. Johnson, Chicago Metropolis 2020 (January 1999)

address or even exacerbate some problems.

The increase in home mortgage lending would not have been possible without the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) of 1975, which required banks to disclose the geographic location of their residential lending. The availability of that information, combined with new data disclosure requirements after 1989, was essential to showing patterns of noncompliance with the CRA. Disclosure requirements are not always sufficient to make data useful. Lending data was initially released in a form that made it difficult to use; only concerted pressure produced a more useable format. Although the Transportation Equity Act of 1998 (TEA-21) required the federal government to release data about public spending on transportation, local advocates have thus far found the data difficult to use to document unequal geographic patterns of spending. Even when data is available in a useful format, community organizations may not have the capacity to analyze it.

Because of these difficulties, intermediary organizations that specialize in analyzing data are often critical components of regional coalitions. These organizations can build the expertise and invest in the computer equipment and software needed to analyze often complex data. In the field of community reinvestment, organizations such as the Woodstock Institute, the National Training and Information Center, and the National Community Reinvestment Coalition have played an essential role by providing analyses of local bank lending patterns for community groups. Such analyses are necessary for any plausible challenge to lending practices. More recently, these intermediary groups have also played a key role in state campaigns to regulate the latest predatory lending practices.

In addition to analyzing data, intermediary organizations can produce new information. Using a variety of strategies, including surveys, new information is often a critical first step to documenting a

common problem. New technologies have made information more valuable in organizing new coalitions. The development of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping is a particularly valuable tool. In his book Metropolitics Myron Orfield stresses the key role that large colored maps played in visually displaying the common interests among the elements of the metropolitan coalition he sought to build in the Twin Cities.¹⁰ Visual evidence of the common tax burden that the cities and some suburbs bore for the development of “executive suburbs” was powerful way to show doubtful suburbs that they had common fiscal interests with the city. In some cities, local intermediary organizations, such as Chicago’s Metropolitan Chicago Information Center now can provide local organizations access to these tools.

Creating intermediaries that local organizations can access is itself a process requiring organization. The most successful uses of information occur when a supralocal network of organizations is built to address similar problems. Such networks facilitate sharing information as well as strategy.

Multi-level Political Action. The notion of “metropolitan collaboration” implies that action is confined to one level of government. The word “collaboration” implies a conflict-free process. Yet, successful

¹⁰ Myron Orfield, Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press/ Cambridge, Mass.: The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1997)

regional collaborations have the ability to influence policy at the federal and state levels; they also possess sufficient political power to deploy more conflict-oriented approaches when necessary.

Even in an era of significant policy devolution, federal regulations significantly affect the prospects for metropolitan collaborations. In many policy areas, federal regulations set the framework for metropolitan action. They can tilt the balance of power among local actors in ways that give weaker groups a foot in the door. For example, regulations regarding disclosure of information (as in the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act) and regulations requiring bank compliance (as in the Community Reinvestment Act) dramatically changed the balance of power between banks and community organizations. Federal actions can create new arenas of decision making that shake up existing power relationships, as in the 1992 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). ISTEA gave more authority and discretion over spending decisions to Metropolitan Planning Organizations in hopes of curbing the power of state highway departments. Federal provisions can provide new channels of funding as in TEA-21's Access to Jobs program, which gave community groups a direct stake in regional initiatives to insert equity concerns in transportation decisions.

Access to state politics is particularly important for creating and sustaining regional alliances. Because there are very few regional organizations with significant decision making power, most key regional decisions actually get made at the state level. The entrenched localism of much decision making in the states and the salience of partisan divisions has made this a particularly tough arena for promoting city-suburb coalitions. State-wide campaigns supported by a wide array of local groups – often united by only thin agreement, rather than deep common interest – may be the best strategy for prevailing in state politics.

VARIETIES OF METROPOLITAN ALLIANCES

The three instances of metropolitan alliances discussed below reveal the importance of building organizations that can sustain communication across diverse communities. In the case of Chicago's Green Line preservation, a city-suburb alliance successfully fought to rehabilitate a key transportation line linking city and suburb. However, collaboration declined after the immediate threat that linked them had passed. In the case of the Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee, a base of more than 200 advocates first came together, focused on building relationships and identifying common interests. The new organization then launched its work around a number of specific, smaller issues of common interest. The third case, the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, illustrated the process of building multi-level organizations. It showed how processes that heightened an awareness of the needs and viewpoints of a diverse membership could be brought to the organization as a whole.

Green Line Preservation: The Power of Direct Threat. A direct common threat can spark the coalescence of regional collaborations. In Chicago, the Chicago Transit Authority's suggestion in 1992 that it would dismantle the deteriorating hundred-year-old Green Line (also called the Lake Street El) posed such a common threat.¹¹ The Green Line runs from the Loop, the central business district, through the city's West Side, a poor African American neighborhood and into the western suburbs, a

¹¹ The following analysis draws on interviews conducted by the author. It also draws on Laura Olsen, Transit-Oriented Communities (Mobility Partners, Washington D.C., n.d.) and National Neighborhood Coalition, Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods: Communities Leading the Way (Washington D.C.: National Neighborhood Coalition, 2000), pp.91-100.

racially-mixed middle income community. The city-suburban coalition (the Lake Street El Coalition) that emerged was notable not only for its success in saving the Green Line but also for its links to an innovative transit-oriented development plan designed to help revitalize the West Side. In the words of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, the broad cooperative effort represented “a powerful step in working toward the metropolitan-wide goals of investment and revival of mature communities.”¹²

The common interest of the near west suburbs and adjoining low-income city neighborhoods was relatively clear. City residents relied on the line not only to commute downtown but also for a reverse commute to the near western suburbs. The Oak Park-River Forest Chamber of Commerce, representing suburban businesses who relied on these city workers, was an important part of the coalition, as were city residents and businesses located along the line. Although some suburban communities shun public transit that connects them with the city, the history of racial integration and tolerance in some of these suburbs meant that suburban officials were willing to engage in coalition-building. The coalition attracted six suburban mayors.

¹² David Ibata and Douglas Holt, “‘L’ Line Rehab Project Tied to Urban Revival,” Chicago Tribune (September 16, 1993), p.7.

The existence of expert intermediary organizations and experienced community development corporations was essential to the innovative plan to link transit preservation and neighborhood economic revitalization. The Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (NCBG), a city-wide coalition of 200 neighborhood organizations, became directly involved in organizing the Lake Street El Coalition. Together with the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), a non-profit technical assistance organization and Bethel New Life, a faith-based community development corporation on the West Side, the NCBG and the Lake Street El Coalition proposed the idea of transit-oriented development. Through such development, the “Community Green Line Initiative” proposed to redensify the West Side, revitalizing the community and addressing declining ridership, one of the CTA’s major rationales for closing the line. After the CTA agreed to rehabilitate the Green Line, the transit-oriented development component was fleshed out further in a report by the Urban Land Institute.¹³ The project eventually was narrowed to a single El stop, with a plan for housing, commercial development, a child day care center and a health center other services to surround the station. Bethel New Life and the Center for Neighborhood Technology took the lead in developing and implementing the plan.

The coalition built power at multiple levels. Counted among the official coalition members were two members of Chicago’s congressional delegation and one state senator. Power at the state and, particularly the federal level, was essential to getting the CTA to make the \$300 million commitment to preserve the Green Line. The transit-oriented development part of the project was well-positioned to

¹³ Urban Land Institute, “The New Green Line, Chicago Ill.: Recommendations for the Transit-Oriented Redevelopment of Neighborhoods along Chicago’s Rehabilitated Green Line “L”, (Washington D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1995).

access funds and technical assistance from a variety of sources because it encompassed multiple objectives—economic development, housing, public transit and clean air. The “smart growth” framing of the neighborhood revitalization project allowed Bethel New Life to attract partners not usually associated with urban redevelopment, such as Argonne National Laboratory. Despite these advantages, the transit-oriented project has taken a long time to get off the ground. Assembling the land and securing funding from a range of sources have both been time-consuming processes. Nonetheless, elements of the project have been completed and other components are underway.

Reflecting on the experience of building a city-suburban coalition, Mary Nelson, president of Bethel New Life noted that “The toughest challenge is developing the mechanisms for mutuality between the city and suburbs.”¹⁴ Although these groups shared a common interest in preserving the Green Line and successfully united in pursuit of that goal, communication across city-suburb lines remained difficult. Differences in neighborhood styles -- with urban groups used to a more confrontational style than suburban neighborhood organizations -- made ongoing cooperation a challenge. Once the immediate common goal surrounding the preservation of the Green Line had been achieved, sustained city-suburban contact declined.

This pattern is a familiar one for issue-oriented alliances. Once the initial issue that united them is resolved, the disparate parts of a coalition go their separate ways. Even though revitalization of the West Side is in the long-term interest of the adjoining suburbs, it was difficult to sustain significant cooperation without a direct focal point of common engagement.

¹⁴ National Neighborhood Coalition, Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods, p.100.

The Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee: Organization Building. In contrast to the Lake Street El Coalition, the Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee did not form around a single issue. In 1994 it brought together under a single umbrella more than 200 activists, union members, elected officials, and religious organizations concerned about the deterioration of the inner city, the decline of good jobs, and the role of public policy in subsidizing these trends. Particularly striking is the participation of unions and community organizations, two groups with a history of racial tension and only sporadic cooperation. This is a significant alliance because organized labor -- despite its decline -- still commands substantial resources. In many urban areas it continues to have a substantial membership base as well.

The Campaign's first efforts centered on intensive meetings among members to identify specific concerns. This period of building relationships and learning about common issues allowed the campaign to target its program and policy initiatives in ways that strengthened the alliance. Some of its key efforts have focused on wages and jobs and link the interests of organized labor and nonunionized workers in low wage jobs. The first was a living wage campaign, which resulted in the passage of living wage ordinances in the city of Milwaukee, the school board and the county. The Campaign has also forged relationships with the Building Trades unions.¹⁵ In 1995, it created a "Jobs Access Task Force" to challenge the state's decision to build a new convention center with no affirmative action guarantees or a labor agreement. The Campaign effectively seized upon the state's neglect of unions and minorities to create a common cause between these two groups. Direct protest and targeting the bond underwriters

¹⁵ See the discussion in "The Inner-city Worker's Center: Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee," *Organizing* (The Center for Community Change) #10 (June-July 1998).

ultimately pressured the convention board to agree to a contract that benefitted union members and communities of color. This action also paved the way for the Campaign's creation of a Central City Workers' Center, which connects central city residents to high paying construction jobs.

The Campaign's efforts to address transit issues have been less successful. Recognizing that poor transportation links to suburban jobs posed a significant barrier to inner city employment, the Campaign launched an initiative for a new light rail system in the Milwaukee area. The plan would effectively alter the highway-oriented bias in state policy. Although it won support of a wide range of metropolitan interests, the effort stalled because it could not win approval in the state legislature.¹⁶ In the legislature, the issue divided along partisan lines as Republican legislators blocked the light rail. The racial dimension of this conflict was never far from the surface: Two discrimination complaints charged that the state was biased in favor of highways that serve white suburbanites and against transit options that would better serve minorities. Despite settlement of the complaints that required the state to consider the light rail option, the future of the initiative is doubtful given the Republican Assembly's strong opposition.

Faith-Based Coalitions: Sustaining a Common Vision and Recognizing Difference. Faith-based networks can find it easier to sustain a common mission across contentious city-suburban boundaries than issue-based groups. As one Columbus, Ohio organizer put it, "As a faith-based organization, we

¹⁶ Larry Sandler, "Light Rail Debate," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel September 7, 2001, p.B3. On the legal strategy in Los Angeles, see Eric Mann, "Confronting Transit Racism in Los Angeles" in Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility Robert D. Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson (eds.) (Gabriola Island, BC and Stony Creek, CT: New Society Publishers, 1997), pp.68-83.

don't draw the line at political subdivision boundaries."¹⁷ With an institutional base in religious institutions, city groups have a ready-made set of possible counterparts in the suburbs. Moreover, common religious values ease communication and make it easier for these groups to sustain cooperation over multiple issues.

¹⁷National Neighborhood Coalition, Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods p.110.

In his study of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, the oldest and most successful faith-based network in the country, Mark Warren stresses the role of religious values in helping to forge initial alliances and perceptions of common interest.¹⁸ Yet, the Texas network has also relied on organizational strategy and carefully tailored issue campaigns as tools for sustaining its broad-based activities. Two features stand out. The first is the emphasis on building a strong base in the member churches. The organization espouses the principle of subsidiarity: do not let a higher level organization take charge of an activity that a local group could do. This principle helps to build a broad reservoir of local leaders, even as the organization stretches beyond the local community. When local leaders are confident of their own capabilities and interests, they can more easily engage in broader coalitions.

This is especially true of coalitions that encompass class and race differences. Initially founded as a community-based organization (Communities Organized for Public Service or COPS) in San Antonio's Hispanic community, the organization initially did not confront the challenges of cross-race and class organizing. On its own, COPS won significant victories, securing a substantial share of the city's Community Development Block Grant allocation for basic neighborhood infrastructure. But to build on these successes, COPS realized it would have to reach into other communities. It did so by establishing separate organizations in the white and African American neighborhoods and only over time

¹⁸Mark R. Warren, Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

did the organizations come to link their activities closely together. As Warren notes, “The IAF’s broad-based organizations are federated forms that respect the integrity of community traditions and institutions, while also creating forums for cooperative action.”¹⁹

The second feature of the Texas IAF’s strategy that facilitates broad-based coalition building is its direct efforts to address race and class divisions. When the organization established an affiliate in Dallas, a city with sharp racial divisions and a bitter history of racism, it launched a series of seminars for leaders and organizers to discuss race. But true to its emphasis on realizing common interests through action, the organization was at the same time engaged in a campaign to get after-school programs that would benefit Hispanic and African American communities. Finding issues that benefit both middle and lower-income members has often been difficult. But the Dallas organization deliberately developed a job training program that would appeal to both middle and lower income members because it did not want middle income participation to be driven by mainly altruistic motives.

The Texas IAF has also relied extensively on outside expertise to support its programs in a variety of ways. Direct support from outside experts on education and workforce development have helped to bestow legitimacy on the organization’s policy proposals. Seminars with a range of authors have broadened the thinking of organizers and leaders. The Texas IAF has obtained substantial foundation support to fund ongoing access to such expertise.

¹⁹Ibid. p.122.

Perhaps most striking is the Texas IAF's success in building multi-level power. COPS's early political success stemmed from its deep roots in the politically unmobilized large Hispanic communities. Once organized, these communities could constitute a significant electoral force. Although the IAF does not directly endorse candidates, through the use of "accountability sessions" with candidates, it presents politicians with an implicit electoral threat if they refuse to support the organization's agenda. In 1990, the local affiliates across Texas came together to create a federated state-wide organization. Strong local organization and the ability to press issues at the state level are a powerful combination. The IAF has used its access to the statehouse to win funding for its local programs, such as its Alliance Schools project and its workforce development programs.²⁰ Power in the state is used to reinforce and support local initiatives, not to supplant them.

Faith-based organizations in other metropolitan areas and states have likewise found that shared religious values and an institutional base in churches facilitate city-suburban cooperation. Nonetheless few other faith-based efforts have had as much success as the Texas IAF. Part of the reason stems from the distinctive features of Texas political organization. When COPS started to organize in San Antonio, the Hispanic vote was a large untapped political resource. A tradition of extremely low political participation in many Texas cities meant that politicians took note of any new organized political force. The potential that Hispanics would become a critical swing vote made their activities particularly potent. The lack of a tradition of political organization also meant that there were few competitors for the

²⁰ Warren, Dry Bones Rattling ch. 6.

loyalties of the groups that the IAF was organizing. Competition from local political organizations or turf battles with other organizing groups did not hamper the growth of the IAF.

In other metropolitan areas with stronger traditions of political organization, competition among faith-based organizations has limited the reach of any one group. In Chicago, for example, multiple faith-based networks have begun to carve up the region among themselves. Competition for turf means that there is little cooperation among these groups. While there is certainly room for different kinds of metropolitan alliances and much of the work to date has involved critical base-building activities, cooperation across groups will ultimately be necessary. This is especially true for action at the state level where community-based organizations have to compete with other highly organized interests. Faith-based networks also have a poor history of cooperating with other types of political organizations. In Texas, the strength of the IAF has allowed the organization to win benefits at both the state and local levels on its own. Elsewhere, cooperation among different kinds of groups is likely to be needed.

In Chicago the Metropolitan Alliance of Congregations (MAC) was formed in 1997 with an explicitly metropolitan agenda and a base in the city and the south suburbs.²¹ It has worked with some technical assistance groups and civic organizations on plans to improve regional transportation planning and investment. This action has taken place in the Chicago metropolitan area with pressure focused on the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization. On another key issue, tax-base sharing, MAC initially joined with experts from research and advocacy organizations to frame the issue and gather data to

²¹This paragraph draws on Joshua S. Sevin, "The Role of Catalyst Organizations in the Formation of Metropolitan Coalitions: Metropolitics in Baltimore and Chicago," MA Thesis, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 18, 2000. MAC is affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation, a faith-based organizing network.

enhance its credibility. When it approached the state legislature, however, it found it did not have enough power in that arena to get serious consideration of the issue. MAC has begun to partner on smart growth issues with Metropolis 2020, an elite business initiative that called for a range of regional measures, including tax base sharing.²² Such collaboration is likely to be a prerequisite for action in the state legislature.

BUILDING STATEWIDE CAMPAIGNS

States are Difficult Political Arenas. As the cases above indicate, building power and winning policy benefits at the state level is often critical to achieving the aims of city-suburban coalitions. Yet states can be an inhospitable political arena for urban interests. Cities have lost power in state legislatures over the past thirty years as their populations have declined. In 37 states, the largest city has declined as a share of the state population. The decline was particularly precipitous in some states. Chicago, for example, declined from 35.2% of Illinois' population in 1960 to 23.3% in 2000, Baltimore from 30.3% of Maryland's population to 12.3%, Detroit from 21.3% of Michigan's population to 9.6%, and Denver from 28.2% of Colorado's population to 12.9%. Even though cities rarely constituted a majority in state

²²Remarks of MAC leader, Kathy Kaiser at the "Remaking Chicago Conference," University of Illinois, Chicago, November 30, 2000.

legislatures, in many cases, the city delegation dominated the Democratic caucus; when Democrats were in control of a state house, it was often relatively easy to create majority coalitions on behalf of a city's interest simply through party control exerted through the Democratic caucus. However, the reduction in city representation has made this strategy more difficult today, even when there is Democratic control of the state legislature.

Other developments compound these population shifts. In some states rising suburban power has been accompanied by strong anti-tax sentiment that discourages any new spending initiatives. In other states, term limits have hurt cities in state legislatures. Cities particularly need long-term relationships that are built on trust and reciprocal favors, not just narrow definitions of district interest. The case of Detroit is instructive. Prior to term limits, Detroit representatives in the Michigan legislature had seniority and long-term relationships with representatives from other areas in Michigan House. Since term limits, the advantages of seniority have disappeared and the trust among representatives, who do not have time to build strong ties, has declined. As a consequence, representatives from Detroit have found it much harder to get support for city needs in the legislature.

Moreover, cities often do not put redistributive issues at the top of their legislative agendas. In a series of interviews with city lobbyists in state legislatures, my colleagues and I found that, with the exception of education issues, city lobbyists did not rank redistributive policies among their top priorities.²³ Instead, they highlighted such matters as preserving home rule autonomy, fighting off state-

²³ Margaret Weir, Hal Wolman and Todd Swanstrom, "Metropolitan Coalition-building in the States" A Report to the Brookings Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, forthcoming. Interviews were conducted in Illinois, Michigan, New York, and Ohio.

mandated increases in city workers' pensions, and securing state support for major development projects such as convention centers and stadia.

The Search for Strong Allies: Business and Labor. All of these factors suggest that campaigns to secure benefits for low-income urban communities have to reach out far beyond their close networks to build power in state political arenas. Such campaigns must be the product of long-term careful planning. Two types of strategy – not mutually exclusive – appear most successful. The first is to secure the support of a powerful interest with a history of exercising power in state politics: in most states this means the business community and, in some states, it can also mean organized labor. There are reasons that each of these interests may be available for joining advocates for low-income communities.

In the case of business, the tight labor markets of the last decade have made businesses see inner city residents as potential workers. Throughout the 1980s, business groups expressed interest in school reform and the need for a qualified workforce. But only in few states did their actions go beyond largely symbolic gestures. When education reformers called for tax increases, business support was little more than tepid. The recent scarcity of labor galvanized much more genuine business interest in supporting initiatives that could create a qualified workforce. Similarly, businesses in many areas became more interested addressing the spatial mismatch between workers and jobs. They also began to speak

out against sprawl as a factor that creates regional problems, such as traffic and congestion.²⁴

²⁴ See the discussion of some of these business initiatives and organizations in David Rusk, Inside Game Outside Game (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, Century Foundation, 1999), pp.290-299; Pastor, see also Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in Reflections on Regionalism Bruce Katz (ed.) (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), pp.

A caveat is in order, however. On its own, the business approach to regionalism and business concern about the labor market may not translate into support for initiatives that advocates for low-income communities define as priorities. A process of relationship building -- at times prolonged -- is needed to translate business concerns into support for new equity-oriented initiatives. Policy research and evidence of the effectiveness of proposed initiatives are all elements in the effort to build business support. Without such prodding, business groups may be more attracted to regional strategies that aim to spur economic growth but do little to promote equity.²⁵ And indeed research has shown that initiatives focused on regional economic growth have had little impact on income inequality.²⁶ The test of business engagement may come soon. With rising unemployment, less pressing labor force needs, and an economic slump, business may become less available as a partner.

Organized labor is the other powerful interest that can be a useful ally in some states. Historically, labor has taken fairly narrow approaches in state politics, sticking close to the specific interests of unions. On policy issues related to sprawl, unions have more often been on the side of homebuilders and highway builders who have resisted efforts to direct investment in cities. In the past decade however, new national leadership and innovative approaches to local organizing have made labor more available to partner with urban community-based interests. Labor efforts to build community alliances have engaged unions in a range of new policy efforts. These include the living wage campaigns that swept across the country in the 1990s. Labor's new efforts to organize immigrants, especially

²⁵ On regions that do "work" see Manuel Pastor Jr., Peter Dreier, J. Eugene Grigsby III, and Mart Lopez-Garcia, Regions that Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), chapter 6.

evident in Los Angeles, have engaged them much more closely with low-income communities than in the past. In other states, such as Illinois, labor (in the form of the transit unions) has sought to build community alliances as part of a statewide campaign to increase spending on public transportation. Labor has also supported campaigns in a variety of states to provide paid family leave. In states where labor is strong, union resources and their clout in state legislatures can be a powerful ally.

The Importance of Building Statewide Support. Because the policies sought by metropolitan coalitions are based on regional bargains among cities, suburbs, and “outstate, upstate or downstate” areas, winning in the legislature usually requires building support across the state. This is especially true of new initiatives, which require more than horse trading among elites. Reaching out and building grassroots support across the state requires a long lead time and events that bring together supporters in different regions. It also requires framing the issue in ways that can generate broad appeal, linking the needs of low income families and communities with those of moderate income families and communities. The Coalition to Build Illinois Transit, a community-labor effort to increase state spending on public transportation, has found broad support across the state, in cities and in suburbs. Likewise its strategy of holding extensive public hearings in different locales across the state has unearthed new sources of support for transit, such as community colleges. Although few of the groups involved identified transit as

²⁶. Kathryn Foster, “Regional A. Capital,” in Urban-Suburban Interdependencies, p.99.

a top priority, the discovery of broad common concerns through the organizing process has helped to build support. A similar strategy of combining state level advocacy with broad-based local organizing around transportation is also underway in Texas.

NATIONAL NETWORKS FOR LOCAL LEVERAGE

In the past thirty years, national advocacy organizations have proliferated in Washington.²⁷

Relying on political strategies that include media contacts, sophisticated policy studies, and congressional connections, these organizations have injected new voices into national policymaking.²⁸

But, by themselves, such “inside the beltway” strategies are less productive in an era of policy devolution. As categorical grant streams are replaced by block grants that give states broad discretion over spending decisions, power in state and local arenas has become critical. This does not mean that national strategies should be abandoned. Rather, they should be linked to state and local networks so that actions at each level of government reinforce efforts to build power in the others.

The development of transportation policy over the past ten years reveals some of the dynamics among federal, state and local actions. In 1991 an effort to shift the terms of transportation policy came from above, largely inspired by a Washington-based group called the Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP). Hoping to curb the power of highway builders in transportation policy decisions, this

²⁷Theda Skocpol, “Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life,” in Civic Engagement in American Democracy edited by Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina (Brookings and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), pp.

²⁸ Jeffrey Berry, The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen Groups (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999).

group of environmentalists supported ISTEA legislation. The new law opened opportunities for local groups to alter transportation priorities by creating new categories of spending not dedicated to highways. It also gave new spending authority to Metropolitan Planning Organizations, which were assumed to be less tied to road building interests than state highway departments. Essentially, STPP hoped to create a “boomerang effect” in which changes in federal policy would empower local groups that could use their new power to enter state policy arenas that had been closed to them.²⁹

²⁹ The boomerang strategy is discussed in Margaret E. Keck and Katheryn Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics (Cornell University Press, 1998) in the context of international relations.

After ten years, the STTP has been disappointed with the degree of change in transportation practices and priorities at the state level. Even though ISTEA supporters successfully defended—and even extended—the new approach to policy in the 1998 reauthorization legislation, their successes were not matched at the state level. The problem was a weak organized base in local communities. STTP is now aiming to address the problem by launching a “New Directions Initiative” that will spark local and state organizing and eventually create a “networked advocacy” approach. This work complements the activities of the Transportation Equity Network formed in 1998 under the auspices of the Center for Community Change to share strategies and information among community-based organizations engaged in transportation organizing.³⁰ These initiatives not only seek to link national, state and local strategies, they also strive to build broad coalitions among community-based organizations representing low income areas and environmentalists.

As this case illustrates, the ability to influence national policymaking is important even in an era of devolution. Federal regulations stipulating categories of funding, mandating citizen participation in local decisionmaking, and requiring data disclosure can provide the handles that groups need to be effective in state and local arenas. National networks that connect local groups to each other and to an organized presence in Washington can devise complementary strategies so that actions at different levels of the federal system reinforce one another.

REFLECTIONS ON TWO CENTRAL TENSIONS IN COALITION-BUILDING

³⁰ Mike Kruglick and Rich Stolz, “National Collaboration Drives Transportation Policy,” *Shelterforce* (January-February 1999).

New Allies/New Issues/New Arenas. A persistent problem in local advocacy is the tendency for groups to take a narrow focus. Steven Rathgeb Smith's research on voluntary advocacy associations in substance abuse policy highlighted this problem. He found, for example, that methadone providers formed their own associations in the 1980s rather than join with similar organizations already operating.³¹ Separate policy silos, with distinct funding streams, made this narrow approach the norm in many broad areas of policy.

³¹Steven Rathgeb Smith, "New Forms of Representation: Rethinking Voluntary Association Advocacy," Project for Aspen Institute Nonprofit Sector Research Fund.

The key to coalition-building is to break down the silos and find grounds for cooperation across groups. This may be difficult when groups do not have existing connections and are skeptical about whether they share common interests. Transportation advocates in Chicago's Latino community have few points of contact with environmental organizations, which are all located in a different part of town. Initial points of contact in such cases require the initiative of a convener group. In some regions, foundations play this role. For example, in Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation has sought to connect diverse groups that share an interest in regionalism.³² Business groups can also play such a convening role but community-based organizations cannot count on being invited into these arenas.

³²See Sevin, "The Role of Catalyst Organizations," p.85.

This points to some of the hurdles that groups face if they hope to influence broad patterns of metropolitan development. They may have to enter unfamiliar policy arenas and work with agencies with whom they have no previous experience. In Columbus, Ohio, the faith-based organization BREAD launched an Access to Jobs campaign that brought it into close cooperation with the Central Ohio Transit Authority. Although neither BREAD nor the transit agency had history of working together, the collaboration was fruitful for both groups.³³ In many cases, there are no ready-made arenas for connecting with like-minded groups or for influencing policy. An analysis of Baltimore's Campaign for Regional Solutions noted that "Organizations need to do some digging to start identifying the "tables" they need to sit at."³⁴ The table metaphor is a common one but, as the quote suggests, they may not be easy to identify: "tables" move, they may disappear, they may be purposely invisible or they may not exist at all.

The Tensions Among Political Powers, Expert Advocacy, and Administration A second persistent challenge for coalition-building is the tensions between building political power, engaging in policy advocacy and administering programs. Few organizations do all these things nor should we expect a single organization to do them all. But within a field of organizations working on broadly similar policy areas, it is important that all three elements exist. Much of the success of the community reinvestment movement is a consequence of these multiple complementary capabilities.

³³ See the case study in the National Neighborhood Coalition, Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods pp.101-112.

³⁴National Neighborhood Coalition, Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods p.27.

Coalitions can provide a setting for considering strengths and weaknesses along any of these dimensions. Out of such discussions efforts may arise to create new capacities that make the coalition more effective. In many cases, the grassroots political power building element is the weakest link. Coalitions can provide a setting for considering how particular policy objectives or activities will build or detract from efforts to build strong grassroots engagement. Such discussions may be highly charged because groups differ in their assessments of the role of conflict in fostering collaboration. Although conflict and collaboration sound like polar opposites, conflict strategies may be necessary to bring powerful parties to the table. The experience of the Texas IAF shows that conflict and collaboration can be used in complementary ways. The importance of the implicit electoral threat to the political power of the IAF provides a lesson for all community-based organizations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE COALITION-BUILDING

The analysis of coalition-building presented in this paper can be distilled into several lessons for future coalition-building efforts:

- ◆ Relationships come first. Both strong ties and weak ties matter. Coalitions need to join with like-minded groups to develop common goals and strategies. They also need to make time to develop relationships with groups who may seem outside their immediate area of concern. Ties with labor and business organizations may be particularly fruitful.
- ◆ Race and class differences cannot be ignored. Understanding the different experiences of coalition members is central to any coalition. At the same time, a framework of action that recognizes common concerns is necessary to sustain a coalition of diverse members and organizations.
- ◆ Build power and capacities at multiple levels of the political system. Even in an era of

devolution, federal action can make all the difference in successful local coalition-building. Winning at the state level will often require statewide organizing that brings new groups together. Such strategies take time and new connections must be nurtured.

- ◆ Recognize that collaboration may first require conflict strategies to get all parties to the table. Conflict may be needed to create a “table” where none exists. Politicians respond to electoral threats.

While these broad lessons cannot guarantee success in every case, the most effective coalitions have regularly used these principles and increasingly built them into their ongoing strategies for reducing metropolitan inequalities.

