

Expert urges fractured region to change

Analyst warns that current municipal structures are an impediment to development and efficiency

By George Pyle NEWS BUSINESS REPORTER
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David Rusk talks about the advantages of consolidated communities Friday at the 'No More Business as Usual' forum. Robert Kirkham / Buffalo News

Urban areas that are fractured into dozens of municipal governments lag far behind unified regional governments in everything from economic development and affordable tax rates to racial disparity and sustainable growth, according to a urban planning expert who spoke to a group of activists, businessmen and politicians Friday in Amherst.

And, said consultant and former mayor of Albuquerque David Rusk, New York State laws designed for a different age are a major barrier to modern governance in the Buffalo area.

It's not that the New York Legislature has never done anything to help the cause of regional government among its many municipalities, Rusk said. It's just that it was clear across the state. And it happened in 1897.

As Rusk explained, that was when state lawmakers had the vision to dissolve what was then the largest city in the nation—New York City — and what was then the seventh largest city in the nation — Brooklyn — add the then largely rural areas of Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island and create the modern metropolis that soon became the capital of the world.

“If they were still a bunch of little boxes, do you think their subway would have gotten into Queens?” Rusk asked. “Yours didn't get into Amherst.”

“Little boxes” is the term Rusk uses to refer to large communities that labor under the governance of fractured municipal authorities. Only when they are merged, or at least cooperate enough, to form “big boxes” do the communities stand a chance of providing modern services at affordable tax rates and attracting and controlling the kind of economic growth that is sustainable and beneficial to all.

Rusk was the main speaker at a forum entitled “No More Business As Usual.” It was sponsored by the activist groups VOICE-Buffalo, the Niagara Organizing Alliance for Hope and the Western New York Jobs Alliance.

Rusk, NOAH and VOICE-Buffalo are all affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation, a network of faith-based organizations that once counted a young organizer named Barack Obama among its membership.

The “real city of Buffalo,” Rusk said, is not the official municipality of some 273,000 people that covers 40 square miles. It is an urbanized area of 927,000 people, spread over more than 360 square miles, where people and things easily cross all political subdivisions but good government often slams

up against the walls that separate it into 38 different cities, towns and villages.

The real Buffalo, he said, is comparable in size to such municipalities as Indianapolis, Charlotte, Columbus, Austin and Jacksonville. But it seriously lags all of those communities in economic health and government efficiency, mostly because each of those other communities is governed as a single entity.

“Town government may have been a wonderful plan for settling the wild frontier,” Rusk said. “It is not so good for governing a modern metropolitan area.”

Fractured government costs more, Rusk said, because it also means a fractured tax base. Development in one town drains vitality from its neighbors, increases the cost of providing public services and exacerbates class and racial separations.

Merged, or at least cooperative, local governments share resources, spread both the burdens and the prizes of development and have the means to make their own decisions and pay for their own needs without seeking aid from state or federal governments.

Looking at the restrictive laws that have existed in New York state for more than a century and the political inertia caused, in part, by the fact that so few residents of Buffalo have ever lived anywhere else, Rusk said any New York-Brooklyn style merger is not a viable option for Erie County, Buffalo and any or all of its suburbs.

He did cite as useful tools the New York laws that allow municipalities to sign contracts to either share services or engage in joint planning and zoning efforts. And Rusk supported the drive by New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo to pass new laws that would allow citizen initiatives forcing the merger or dissolution of local governments.

A more regionalized approach to home rule, Rusk said, would be what he called communities of common interest. If allowed by state law, counties could designate collections of local governments that would create, by voter referendum, joint provision of services, land use planning or other perceived common need. No municipality within the designated area would be allowed to opt-out.

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