

Title: **Debating Tall: Regional Governments for Megacities?**

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Regional Governments for Megacities?

The 2016 CTBUH Conference, “Cities to Megacities,” explores the phenomenon of already large cities merging together to form megacities, in parallel with many cities and their suburbs becoming increasingly polycentric. This creates myriad issues, especially around coordination of region-wide services and infrastructure. Some regions have anticipated this by forming regional authorities, and in some cases, regional governments that more accurately reflect the scope of urbanization. We asked two urban design experts to debate the question, “Should megacities have metropolitan or regional governments, to replace individual municipalities?”

NO

James Parakh, *Urban Design Manager,
City of Toronto Planning Department*

The City of Toronto comprises four formerly independent cities of Toronto, Etobicoke, North York, and Scarborough, which were amalgamated 15 years ago to form the larger metropolis of 2.5 million people. The tax savings and promised efficiencies of a centralized government have not materialized as they were envisioned. Instead, the aspirations of those who live in the former City of Toronto (represented by 11 councilors), are often thwarted by a voting population that lives in the surrounding suburbs (represented by 33 councilors).

In an amalgamated City, the urban agenda of creating affordable housing, new parks, bike lanes, and a vibrant downtown often compete with a mindset of keeping taxes low and focusing on “essential” services like snow removal and garbage collection. The factors that make Toronto great get lower priority than the more mundane issues that any city faces. Toronto’s property taxes remain a fraction of those of its surrounding neighbors outside of the amalgamated city, so this further limits the regional government’s effectiveness.

Having said this, while government works best at the smaller municipal level, there is a role for a larger metropolitan authority, such as an integrated transit system that connects cities within the broader megacity. Another aspect that works well is

regional growth guidelines, such as those in the City of Toronto Official Plan, which guide growth to four high-density centers outside the CBD, thus allowing 75% of the city to maintain the low-rise, family-friendly character that earns it high marks in quality-of-life surveys. We refer to this as “intensification.”

Tall buildings that are well-designed, integrate well at grade with their surrounding contexts, and are adequately spaced apart to offer light and privacy can offer better access to the amenities found in these central areas. Having stronger municipal governments is the best way to achieve these goals and offer a better quality of life for those who live, work in, and visit these urban areas.

YES

Thomas Wright, *President, Regional Plan Association (RPA), New York*

Most of the growth in the United States in the first half of the 21st century will occur in eight emerging megaregions that are linked by economic systems, shared natural resources and ecosystems, and transportation networks. A research collaboration led by RPA 10 years ago concluded that, as megacities and megaregions grow, it will become all the more vital to make decisions and coordinate policy at the regional scale. The megaregional lens is even more relevant today.

Stretching from metro Boston to metro Washington, D.C., the Northeast megaregion

represents 20% of the nation’s economic output, spans more than 1,000 kilometers of coastline, and accounts for more than 50% of all US public transit riders.

With its immense scale comes large challenges: aging infrastructure throughout the megaregion is inadequate and congested. The preservation of open space and resilience of the megaregion’s coastlines remain in peril, with no single municipality capable of warding off climate threats on its own. And the megaregion’s economic competitiveness is being tested by global competitors that aren’t afraid to tackle these problems at a large scale.

Increased regional coordination for financing and planning strategies to address these challenges is vital for the future of our urban and suburban spaces. Instead of each transit operator using different fare cards or technology, transit providers in a region could coordinate to offer multi-agency passes. A regional body focused on climate resiliency could pool resources and strategize about the policies that will protect the region as a whole from sea-level rise, flooding, and extreme storms. Indeed, New York City’s new office of regional planning puts the value of regional coordination into practice by taking a metro-wide look at the housing landscape.

Some problems will still be best solved at the municipal level, but some of our toughest shared challenges can be more efficiently and effectively tackled together.

