

Leadership & Public Dialogues: Summary of Comments

Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth



Draft for Public Review | 06.17.04

INTRODUCTION

In March 2004 more than 150 citizens of Erie and Niagara Counties came together to learn more about the challenges of growth facing our region and share their knowledge and ideas with the Framework for Regional Growth planning team. This document is a very brief summary of more than 20 hours of such conversation.

During the dialogues we took notes as carefully and accurately as we could. We also collected comment sheets from many other participants. All of these were transcribed and then analyzed according to topic and intent. Inevitably, this process involves much interpretation, but the record of that work is available for anyone to see in the transcripts, analysis worksheets, and a topic by topic tabulation.

In any case, the results were surprisingly clear and strong with participants across the board affirming the research of the planning team on challenges involving growth and development and reiterating suggestions that, once implemented, may improve the current state of development within the counties. Participants called for a strong focus on economic development, redevelopment of the region's urban centers, protection of farm and rural land, and appropriate tax policies to implement the strategy. While the discussion does not yet represent any kind of consensus, participants did seem to agree that:

- **The description of “challenges” was on target.** The picture of declining center cities, at-risk first ring suburbs, disappearing farmland, overbuilt infrastructure, and threatened rural lands is one that most participants—elected officials and private citizens—recognized. But if the problems are well-known, the solutions are less obvious and require different actions to address different needs in urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- **Planning is a critical need.** Participants underscored that responding to the challenges of growth will require that we plan together. For many, that meant establishing (or re-establishing) a strong organizational framework for planning. Others emphasized the need to make implementation and enforcement of plans effective. Many endorsed a strategy to focus on reinforcing strong urban centers. The need for a regional two-county planning organization found significant support. A few others suggested a broader, bi-national focus. Much of the discussion recalled regional planning mistakes of the past and urged action to avoid new ones in the future. Several participants identified the need to base planning on strong public participation and education.

- **Infrastructure is key.** Participants across the board agreed that public decisions about investments in basic urban infrastructure are fundamental to shaping future growth. They also agreed that our overbuilt public infrastructure costs local government much more than it needs to. Sewer and water are especially powerful shapers of growth. So is road and highway spending. Others identified investments in public transit as another way to shape growth.
- **We must work together.** That means exploring the ways that local governments can consolidate, coordinate, or cooperate on basic functions. It also means learning to communicate better between governments and levels of government. Few participants suggested we challenge the home rule framework for planning in New York State; instead, most said we need to learn how to work better within it, sharing authority for planning between counties and municipalities. Working together will also mean maintaining a balanced partnership between Erie and Niagara Counties.
- **It's still the economy.** One of the strongest themes throughout the dialogues was that managing growth will mean little if we don't generate some growth and create new jobs. Discussion about economic development encompassed suggestions to coordinate or consolidate economic development agencies, control the cost of doing business, invest in education, training and technology, improve business retention, and prepare to compete globally. For all the bad news, participants were clear that the region has extraordinary assets to promote, not only water but also airport infrastructure, heritage resources, and more. Many emphasized that tourism should be part of our economic future. Still others said we need to invest in quality of life, improve our image and self-image, and control the cost of government.
- **Fix the central cities first.** Participants in most of the dialogues were emphatic that sprawling patterns of development are driven as much by "push" factors—the aversion of residents to the problems of the central cities in the region—as they are by "pull" factors on the suburban fringe. Likewise, many stressed that stemming migration to the metropolitan edge will require center cities to improve their appeal. Redevelopment of the region's waterfronts was identified as one promising strategy in that regard. Preserving older housing stock and broadening housing choices was seen as another. Improving the quality—and the perception of quality—of education in central cities was still another.
- **Take care of the land.** There was strong concern expressed about our stewardship of land resources, especially rural areas and farmland. Farm economics, residential location preferences, local tax policies, and local zoning and planning have all combined to push housing development on frontage lots and in exurban locations and threaten agricultural resources. Other participants emphasized the need to redevelop urban brownfields, protect natural systems, and invest in parks, trails and green space.
- **Adjust local tax policies to manage growth.** Participants across the board suggested that existing tax policies encourage inefficient patterns of development, by rewarding blight, promoting competition between towns, providing incentives for inefficient development, and pushing the sale of farmlands. Changes were urged. Meanwhile, some said local governments have yet to get the message that promoting development may be bad for municipal finances, not good.

- **Other comments.** Conversations at these sessions were open and wide-ranging. Many voices were heard. Some other issues raised included: facing the ever-present issue of race relations as part of the metropolitan development dynamic; finding better ways to make use of the knowledge resources of area colleges and universities; making sure that New York Power Authority re-licensing agreement serves these growth needs; and much more.