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## A Regional Planning Primer

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

The Upper Valley constitutes both a geographic region, and a state of mind, which is why most residents of the area, when asked where they live, are just as likely to answer “in the Upper Valley,” versus the name of a town.

Dartmouth College and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center may be the employment hubs for the region, but a significant number of their employees live in Vermont. West Lebanon, with large national stores such as The Home Depot, Borders and Wal-Mart, is arguably the shopping hub for the region, but draws a significant number of its customers from the Vermont side of the border.

With the constant flow of workers and customers across state boundaries, the Upper Valley is a regional economy with infrastructure, housing and economic needs that transcend either state's individual requirements.

Historically, this type of cross-border economy has proven to be very beneficial in Europe, where many countries are smaller than some American states, and two or more countries might butt up against one another with a vibrant regional economy at their intersection. Take Luxembourg and Germany, for instance. Of the 167 banks registered in Luxembourg, 48 are branches or subsidiaries of German banks. Even before the European Union integrated Europe's fragmented economy and virtually eliminated country borders, citizens of both countries crossed the border for work and pleasure in a regional economy that has its own dynamic.

In such an interlinked cross-border economy, the importance of regionwide planning becomes important. One cannot speak of creating jobs on one side without considering the housing and environmental impact on the other. With this in mind, I set out to find out what the state of government planning for the Upper Valley was like.

Three regional planning organizations are responsible for charting future plans for the Upper Valley's communities, and for helping its towns and villages. Two of them are in Vermont: the Two Rivers Regional Planning Commission in Woodstock and the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission in Windsor. One, the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission, covers most of the New Hampshire side of the region.

What about a regionwide planning organization? “We used to have a regional

planning group around 10 years ago,” Tom Kennedy, executive director of the Southern Windsor County commission told me, “but there is no singular structure now.”

Kennedy said there are many reasons for this, but the two most prominent are that states are generally prohibited from spending their citizens' tax dollars to benefit another state, and parochial interests that accentuate the divide.

Tara Bamford is the executive director of the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee commission, which was founded in 1963. It used to include the Vermont towns of Hartland and Norwich, but these two moved to the Two Rivers commission in Woodstock in July 2004.

Bamford's organization has compiled some of the most oft-quoted regional statistics -- the current estimated Upper Valley housing deficit of 3,000 units, for instance, comes from the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee commission. Bamford is a strong believer in regional planning, noting for example, that “because Lebanon's workers cannot afford to live there, the impact of this is felt regionwide, not just in Lebanon.”

Patrick Gregory, executive director of the Two Rivers commission, said providing planning and technical assistance to the 30 towns his organization supports is a large task to begin with, and another organization would add further overhead. He said the existing, informal planning process that brings the individual regional planning groups together as needed is the most effective use of their resources.

The Connecticut River Byways initiative to promote regional tourism is one such showcase project. In this case, “we were even able to overcome the limitations of spending one state's money on another state by being creative,” Gregory said.

In addition to the three regional planning groups, there are two main economic development organizations that serve the area: the Green Mountain Economic Development Corp. on the Vermont side and the Grafton County Economic Development Council on the New Hampshire side. (The Sullivan County Economic Development Council has ceased to exist for financial reasons.)

The easiest way to understand the differences between the regional planning groups and the economic development groups is to remember that the planning groups work with municipalities, and the economic development groups work with businesses, said Steve Epstein, executive director of the Grafton County council told me.

If a town in the Upper Valley wanted help ensuring its town plan would meet state legal requirements, the town would contact its regional planning group. On the other hand, if a business wanted to relocate there and needed assistance working with regulatory agencies or a start-up loan, then it is the economic development groups that would step in to help.

The question I would like to raise is this: Would it not make sense for the heads of regional planning and economic development commissions to meet on a regular basis as an ad-hoc Upper Valley planning and economic group to keep each other abreast of issues that transcend their boundaries, and to take an Upper Valley perspective of developments?

In today's fast-moving business environment, where political and geographic boundaries do not constrain the flow of business, is it enough to wait for specific projects to coordinate regionwide planning? The agenda for the monthly meetings

could include presentations of Upper Valley-centric ideas that need the support of Vermont and New Hampshire to germinate, and group dynamics would spark fresh ideas. Why not give it a test run?

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