

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
Annual Retreat
July 22 – 23, 2011
Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay
Cambridge, Maryland

Summary Report

Background

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) held its twelfth annual retreat on July 22-23 at the Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay in Cambridge, Maryland.

COG initiated an annual, summer retreat process beginning in 1999. At the first retreat, there was an intensive facilitated process that resulted in the landmark COG Strategic Plan “New Directions, Shaping Opportunities” formally adopted by the COG Board in November 1999. The 1999 Strategic Plan has provided an excellent framework guiding the work of COG policy boards and committees, technical committees and staff. Following the 2004 retreat, the COG Board adopted its first major revision and refinement to the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan is now more fully integrated into the COG fiscal year work program and budget.

Since 1999 COG has used the summer retreat as an opportunity to address specific regional policy and agency operational issues and further develop COG’s strategic direction. The retreats have also served as an important networking opportunity among COG members and senior staff.

Retreat Evaluation

At the outset, participants identified their expectations and outcomes of the weekend retreat: identification of priority issues for COG with a focus on doing fewer things better, provide staff with guidance to implement priorities, have opportunities to build and strengthen relationships and of course, have fun. COG received retreat evaluation forms from 9 participants on how well expectations were met. Most responses were positive; a summary is provided in Attachment A.

One Region Moving Forward

As a result of the work of the Greater Washington 2050 Coalition, the COG Board decided to consolidate its work and policies on regional growth and development under one program that has been branded *Region Forward*. The primary focus of this year’s retreat was examining the steps COG and its member local governments should consider in order to achieve the goals outlined in the *Region Forward* planning guide and revitalize economies still suffering from the

effects of the recession. The retreat featured sessions that described the region's changing demographic make-up, the need for community energy plans and a metropolitan business plan.

The opening dinner and keynote address focused directly on how the National Capital Region can continue to thrive given the federal government's changing fiscal priorities. Jared Bernstein, a senior fellow with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, discussed the ways local officials are trying to stimulate economic activity and suggested a focus on business sectors that are expanding such as health care and green energy.

The Saturday morning session provided a detailed look at the region's changing demographic picture and how those changes will influence the region's workforce, economy and public services. Paul DesJardin, COG's Director of Planning and Community Services, outlined the changes that were evident in the 2010 Census as well as in the American Community Survey (ACS,) a new census survey that has replaced the old long form census document.

Participants were most interested in several issues: what (in addition to the federal presence,) is driving growth in the region, how should officials engage newer residents and involve them in the political process, and the need to use new data to inform decisions on affordable housing and transportation. **The group concluded that COG's *Region Forward* initiative should use census data to be proactive in making decisions.**

Saturday's mid-morning session on Community Energy Planning discussed strategies local communities can adopt to reduce energy costs, control emissions and increase reliability. Peter Garforth, detailed major uncertainties such as the shift in weather patterns and the increasing cost and declining reliability of energy sources prove the need for community energy planning.

Participants discussed how the process has worked in COG members jurisdictions including Arlington, Loudoun and Montgomery Counties. A key point of interest was whether the energy needs of storm water management can be part of the community plan because of the growing cost and challenge of that issue. Elected officials from various jurisdictions within Maryland and Virginia also discussed the possibility of working together on the issue. **Several participants suggested that COG help with the process.**

Saturday's luncheon focused on metropolitan business planning and whether the concept would work for the region. Amy Liu, the deputy director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, discussed the economy as a main reason for developing such a plan and focused on several points that are the key to developing a metropolitan business plan.

Participants discussed whether a metropolitan business plan would work because the region crosses state lines. **It was suggested the idea is worth exploring further.**

During the next afternoon session, Dave Robertson led discussions about pursuing opportunities to recruit new member governments for COG and the use of new technologies to enhance public and member participation.

Participants concluded that new members should come from jurisdictions already contiguous to the existing region so the organization wouldn't lose its focus on metropolitan Washington. They agreed that retaining current members and adding value to their membership is of primary importance.

It was agreed that the Executive Director will reach out to Laurel, Leesburg, and Charles County for potential membership in COG. It was suggested that staff examine opportunities for COG Board of Directors video conference participation.

The final session of the retreat focused on the transportation and land-use projects that might qualify for another round of funding under the Department of Transportation's TIGER (Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery) grant program. The region succeeded in winning a \$56 million grant in the initial round of funding and the Transportation Planning Board (TPB) has developed a list of regional priorities that can be used quickly when other funding opportunities come up.

Participants discussed many of the region's transportation and land-use projects and whether they might be included among the six sites to be submitted for the next round of funding under the TIGER grant. Projects will need to be considered regional priorities to be considered, and the environmental and affordable housing merits of a project also will be considered. **The participants agreed on the value of regional projects that integrate transportation, land-use and environmental values.**

The 2011 retreat ended after a brief summary of each session.

2011 RETREAT SURVEY

9 Surveys received.

What were your expectations for the retreat?

- Good opportunity to interact with elected leaders from around the region.
- Get to know colleagues better
- Learn from presentations
- Learn from experiences of other jurisdictions.
- Networking; information
- Discussion on current and future issues of regional importance and conversation with regional colleagues.
- Great conversations on key issues.
- Regional networking, learning best practices, intellectual stimulation.
- Thought-provoking discussion, learning more about how we fit into region.
- Gain knowledge on current issues; network with colleagues.
- To gain knowledge through formal and informal discussions.

Were your expectations met?

8 of the respondents said yes; 1 respond no -- expectations not fully met.

Retreat activities: 1 being poor; 5 being excellent.

Shifting Roles: How the National Capital Region Can Thrive in a Changing Policy and Budget Environment

1- 0	4- 5
2- 1	5- 1
3- 2	

Comments:

- Very informative and motivational.
- Strong presentation by Jane Oates.
- Inspiring, but wanted more specifics.
- Speaker was terrific! Great choice – need to stay connected with her.
- We started to late; hard to stay awake.

Retreat activities: 1 being poor; 5 being excellent.

Census 2010 Snapshot: The Face of a Changing Region

1- 0	4- 6
2- 0	5- 2
3- 0	(1 No response)

Comments:

- Very interesting – Paul did a great job!
- I learned a great deal – very helpful.
- Good overview.
- Good information and stimulation of thought.
- Presentation was well done, but much of the information was familiar. Hard to give detail for such a large region. Had useful informal conversation with Mr. DesJardin during unscheduled time.

Retreat activities: 1 being poor; 5 being excellent.

Community Energy Planning: What Is It and How Can It Help Your Community Attain the Region Forward Sustainability Vision?

1- 0	4- 3
2- 0	5- 5
3- 2	

Comments:

- I've heard discussions on this topic before and I'm finally understanding it! But how to implement?! *Perhaps next time, run a slideshow/powerpoint all the way through to see that it works.
- Very useful.
- Garforth excellent, panel members excellent.
- One of the most information-packed sessions I've attended. Have shared some of the ideas already in our community.
- Not commenting or rating myself! I always think Peter does a great job and am hopeful region gets going on this work.

Retreat activities: 1 being poor; 5 being excellent.

Creating a Metropolitan Business Plan: New Job Opportunities and Partners

1- 0 4 - 7
2- 2 5- 0
3- 0

Comments:

- Would likely have been higher, but technical breakdown marred the presentation; derailed the speaker.
- Not very useful, but Brookings always interesting.
- Interesting but needs lots more conversation – too bad about Amy’s slides.
- Difficulty will be in getting 2 states and DC to agree.
- Powerpoint failure stalled momentum, but good information and discussion.

Retreat activities: 1 being poor; 5 being excellent.

Member Roundtables:

- **Opportunities to Recruit New Member Jurisdictions**
- **Using Technology to Enhance Public and Member Participation**

1- 0 4- 2
2- 0 5- 1
3- 2 (4 No responses)

Comments:

- Useful, but perhaps not the best use of time.
- Opportunity for good feedback.
- We had a chance for more interaction and reaction; good feedback.
- Did not attend but did review powerpoint. Recruiting new members outside current geographic area seems very difficult without an option for participation outside COG offices. My travel time is longer than the time actually spent in meetings. I support audio/visual teleparticipation – but also remember very strong objections from at least one board member when this option was discussed for emergency use. We have had relatively successful call-in participation on my COG committee in the past.

Retreat activities: 1 being poor; 5 being excellent.

Crosscutting Issues Dialogue: Region Forward and Transportation Priorities

1- 0 4- 3
2- 0 5- 0
3- 4 (2 – No responses)

Comments:

- Not sure they good any feedback on the prioritization challenge before the region.
- Not enough opportunity to really engage members in a useful dialogue about moving the region forward, and setting transportation priorities.
- Good discussion, but not as exciting as rest of agenda.
- We are such a car-centric community. It's hard to feel part of multimodal conversations until we get Metro out to Loudoun.
- Provided information but did not get to main item for discussion.
-

Retreat activities: 1 being poor; 5 being excellent.

Location and Facilities: 3 – 1; 4- 5; 4.5 – 1; 5-2.

Overall Retreat Rating: 3 – 1; 4- 5; 4.5 – 1; 5-2.

Overall Retreat comments:

- Value of conference is directly related to the extent of attendance. The disappointing turnout significantly tarnished the benefit of attending.
- Despite all of the topics and sessions, the day went very smoothly and quickly. All topics were interesting and pertinent.
- I always enjoy spending time with elected leaders and COG staff. Region needs this collaboration.
- Very good overall.

Additional Comments and Recommendations for Future Board Retreats:

- **Thanks for the flashdrive – looking forward to viewing graphs, etc.**
 - **Possible scenario training exercises.**
 - **Speaker before or during dinner on Friday? Would love to see a focus on the value of our rural areas surrounding the region and in some of the member jurisdictions, e.g., a local food/biofuel session.**
 - **It would be better if the schedule allowed for a real break between some of the sessions. The reality was that the Q&A went through the whole break time and was not always very informative. Perhaps allowing for a few public questions followed by an informal chance for individuals to speak with the presenter would work better.**
 - **Leave more time for informal discussions and start and end formal discussions as scheduled.**
- P.S.: Thank you for having the retreat!**