



Factors affecting municipal land use cooperation



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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the factors affecting voluntary municipal land use cooperation in Michigan where neither substantial mandates nor incentives for such cooperation exist. Cooperation is conceptualized as the formality of land use cooperation. This paper uses quantitative data obtained through surveys of chief elected officials and finds that the extent of internal municipal support for cooperation, whether elected officials anticipate benefits from cooperation, and the effectiveness of regional institutions at providing supportive services for cooperation have positive impacts on the formality of land use cooperation. The amount of cooperation on services and a regional cooperative culture impact the formality of land use cooperation negatively.

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Introduction

Land use planning in the United States is predominantly a “local” activity. This status quo implies that municipalities primarily plan for land uses within their boundaries seldom engaging in collective regional action to address issues that cross political lines. Recent literature has shown that this patchwork quilt of independent local decision making has fueled sprawling development patterns; fragmented natural resources; and social, economic, racial, and territorial inequality at the regional scale (Judd and Swanstrom, 1994; Porter, 1997; Rusk, 1993). As a result, scholars, legislators, and policy makers have called for greater intergovernmental cooperation and collective regional action on land use issues (Downs, 1994; Florida Governor’s Task Force on Urban Growth, 1989; Innes, 1993; Lowery, 2000; Porter, 1997). Concurrently, the emergence of a new regionalism (see Wheeler, 2002) has urged a shift in focus from government and mandates to governance and voluntary cooperation as the vehicles for collective action.

Whether, how, and why cooperation evolves is not self-evident. While proponents of regionalism agree that cooperation is important to address problems that cross jurisdictional lines, they differ in their views of how this cooperation might to be achieved. From a policy standpoint, very few states have crafted legislation mandating and/or incentivizing regional cooperation (e.g., growth management states). Rather, most states have adopted a more minimalist, politically pragmatic, and permissive attitude (e.g., Michigan). Hedging their bets on governance rather than

government, and voluntary cooperation in lieu of state intervention and formalization, the legislatures in these permissive states have operated under the belief that – if given adequate authorities (e.g., enabling legislation for regional cooperation) – many municipalities would indeed voluntarily engage in land use cooperation. But do they? And if so, what would motivate municipalities that have primary control over land use to voluntarily cooperate across political boundaries in the absence of mandates or incentives for such cooperation? In this paper, I examine the factors affecting voluntary municipal cooperation on land use issues in a permissive state. Using data from Michigan (a permissive state) and multiple linear regression, I focus on five key explanatory variables and their impact on land use cooperation.

Theory/literature review

Decision maker related factors: anticipated benefits and local support for cooperation

The rational choice framework highlights the roles of purposive behavior, self-interest, preferences, strategic interactions, and the calculus approach in decisions to cooperate. Scholars have examined the anticipated benefits from cooperation as payoffs in game theory, ratio of benefits to transaction costs, assessments of local versus regional benefits, long term versus short term benefits, and the allocation of individual versus group benefits (Axelrod, 1984; Feiock, 2009; Gerber and Gibson, 2009; Kwon and Feiock, 2010; Lubell, 2005). This literature suggests that while benefit assessment is complicated, it is an important part of the cooperation process. The assumption generally is that cooperation will occur when potential benefits outweigh costs. The costs could include

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political repercussions; loss of autonomy and control; information costs; negotiating costs; monitoring and enforcement costs; and agency costs (Feiock, 2002; Gerber and Gibson, 2009). If the cooperation process is considered in two stages where the decision to cooperate is made in the first stage and agreements are crafted in the second stage, then some of the above mentioned costs are probably greater in the second stage. These costs are also likely greater for more formal cooperative efforts (e.g., data and information sharing versus the creation of a joint planning commission) (see Kwon and Feiock, 2010, p. 878). Therefore, assessing benefits from cooperation might be important in both the decision to cooperate and explaining whether decision makers will be committed to cooperation (Gray, 1985).

Proponents of regionalism assert that optimal outcomes are better identified when governments can recognize their interdependencies and act together to capitalize on them (Barnes and Ledebur, 1991; Wallis, 1994). This perspective promotes cooperation not just to achieve economies of scale and financial efficiency, but more importantly as a way to address equity and environmental issues that transcend local boundaries (Downs, 1994; Lowery, 2000; Lyons et al., 1992; Rusk, 1993). That said, despite these benefits, not all municipalities engage in cooperation and not all elected officials support collective action. Similarly, cooperation can at times evolve as the result of altruistic behavior where participants cooperate despite costs to themselves. This could occur because the preferences of decision makers to engage in voluntary cooperative behavior might be induced not only by situational factors and strategic interactions with other decision makers (the calculus approach of weighing benefits and costs), but also the building blocks of preferences such as beliefs, attitudes, and values (the cultural approach of using moral justifications) (Scott, 1991, 1995). That is, support for policy actions do not always conform to the assessment of benefit apportionment.

There are other reasons to hypothesize that local decision makers' support for cooperation would be significant predictor of land use cooperation. The growth management literature suggests that even in states with extensive state level institutional arrangements for planning, the state level mandates and incentives do not in isolation tell the whole story of planning or policy implementation. For example, with regard to compliance, Innes (1992) found that even in mandated settings with the looming threat of sanctions against non-compliance, additional negotiations were necessary between the state and local governments to promote local compliance. May et al. (1996) found that municipalities only "step through the motions of the requirements" without effectively implementing mandated activities when they are not fully committed to the purposes underlying those activities. Similarly, in incentive based environments, May et al. (1996) describe that incentives alone were not enough to explain compliance to state agendas (also see Berke et al., 1999). Compliance was explained as a result of the locally perceived need for regional action, the general commitment or preferences of local decision makers to undertake regional actions, and the extent to which the state and regional entities could provide supportive structures to facilitate planning.

In the context of local governance, elected officials, planning commissioners, and planning staff play distinct roles in local land use planning decisions. Together they represent the intra-local dynamics of cooperation (e.g., the political receptivity for cooperation) and have the ability to create a cohesive institutional environment for the implementation of cooperative efforts. In terms of local support for cooperation, therefore, one has to consider the extent to which all three of the above-mentioned actors are supportive of land use related cooperation.

Proposition 1. *Elected officials' perception of benefits from cooperation will positively impact cooperation.*

Proposition 2. *Local internal support for cooperation positively impacts cooperative action.*

Informal institutions: regional governance culture and cooperation on services

Land use planning is an inherently political process. The political culture of a locality refers to the orientation among decision makers (and the public) about the definition of politics, the role of government, and the shared meanings of what is acceptable political action and what is not (Elazar, 1994; Sharkansky, 1969; Visser, 2002). Political culture might be represented by the locality's political history, its voting history, and the predispositions of its decision makers. While there is tremendous debate about how political culture should be defined and operationalized, for the purposes of this paper, I take a narrow view of political culture. Because of this narrow definition of political culture, and in an effort to not conflate it with the broader definitions of political culture or regional culture, I refer to this idea as the regional governance culture of an area. I define regional governance culture as "the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying rules and assumptions that govern behaviors in the political system" (Pye, 1968, p. 218). This governance culture could be deconstructed in several ways.

First are decision makers' beliefs about others (Kelley and Stahelski, 1970; Lubell and Scholz, 2001). Beliefs about others could be about reciprocity concerns (i.e., whether or not a person would be likely to reciprocate based on past experiences). Believing that other stakeholders can be held to their promises (trust) has been shown to increase the likelihood of cooperation (Coleman, 1990; Putnam et al., 1993). Kelley and Stahelski (1970) show that past experiences are linked to expectations of how others are likely to behave in the future and these past experiences matter in the context of cooperation. Similarly, Selin and Chevez (1995) write that organizations that have experienced conflict in past relationships find it difficult to collaborate.

Second, belief of perceived control of the situation (Ajzen, 1991) could impact cooperation. This is because actors will be less likely to cooperate if they view a situation as unmanageable and if they perceive themselves as having insufficient control over resources to effect action. Because of the importance of this factor, Stone (1989) frequently emphasizes how important it is for actors to have access to both financial and institutional resources. In Stone's account, control over resources explains how regimes can cause purposive action (also see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). The capacity to act, therefore, is an important component of how informal institutions facilitate cooperation.

Third, similarity in decision-makers' assessments of problems will increase the likelihood of cooperation. Scholars working on collaborative planning models have emphasized the importance of common goals for cooperation (Gray, 1985; Innes, 1993). Bennis and Biederman (1997, p. 204) explain that groups having a common cause or a shared goal believe they are on a holy mission from God as they coalesce around this cause. Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) found that successful collaborative initiatives tend to organize around a common cause. This common cause or problem motivates disparate individuals to come together, remain committed, and dedicate resources to solving it. Similarly, shared perceptions of why such problems exist can motivate collaborative action.

Finally, the presence of leaders who are able to spearhead collaborative efforts would matter in creating a regional culture that is conducive to cooperation. Generally, leaders are able to promote policy innovation and change. For example, Mintrom (2000) examined the concept of policy entrepreneurship in school choice policies at the state level and drew conclusions about how innovative individuals can spur significant change in the policy arena.

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