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Panel talk: Gov't collaboration will be key in recovery

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St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The recession and the fiscal crisis it's setting off in state and local governments will force creativity and even (gasp) collaboration in providing services. Or at least it ought to.

So says Robert Lang, a Brookings Institution fellow and professor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas who headlined a panel discussion on local government collaboration put on by the St. Louis chapter of the Urban Land Institute this morning. Regions that hope to compete in a global economy simply can not afford to pay for layer upon layer of local government in an age of strapped resources, he said, and doing so will hold them back in the recovery.

"Every penny you spend on redundancy is a penny you can't spend on innovation," he said.

And that, it hardly needs to be said at this point, poses a dilemma for the famously-fragmented St. Louis region, (which ranks third in local governments per capita among the nation's 25 biggest metro areas, according to Lang). A significant number of those, he notes, are fire districts, which are quite expensive to maintain. In good times, these many governments have their good qualities, and their expense is easier to overlook. But when things get tight, that expense can fast become a burden (and not just for homeowners but for businesses or potential businesses, which may instead choose a city with fewer layers of government).

Lang, who works on municipal collaboration efforts in Nevada, notes that there is no quick or easy fix to this. Merging governments, sharing services or finding other solutions to make local government more efficient basically needs to be conducted on a case-by-case basis, with much sensitivity to local concerns. And it has to be negotiated with a sharp eye for savings (how do you convince the employees of two merging fire districts to take the less-generous pension package instead of the more-generous one?).

But as anti-tax sentiment swells and tight budgets force tough choices on state and local government, you can expect more experimentation in this area. And to the successful experimenters will go economic development spoils.

"Some places will work it out," Lang said. "And the places that do not are going to be at a competitive disadvantage."

Other highlights:

- Lang told of how, during the '60s, Atlanta adopted the moniker "The City too Busy to Hate," and pitched itself to northern businesses as an alternative to its next-state-over rival Birmingham, the site of so much Civil Rights-era conflict. The new Arizona immigration law, he said, risks turning Phoenix into "the new Birmingham." Not a good development for its hopes in the recovery. His point: Embrace immigration if you hope to thrive in a global economy.

- For all the talk of a booming federal government, Lang noted that the number of federal employees in 2002 was roughly equal to the number of federal employees when John F. Kennedy was president. There were 2.54 million in 1962, and 2.69 million in 2002. Local governments, on the other hand, have exploded. There were 5.17 million local government employees in 1962. Forty years later, 13.28 million.

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