

# Planning Without Agency: Vibrant NEO 2040

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## Abstract

Since the 1970s, Northeast Ohio has experienced the ill effects of sprawl, as a declining population exerted pressure to develop previously undeveloped land. Local elected officials, planners, and policymakers have long recognized their interdependence and the need for a strategy to sustain the region. However, structural, political, and administrative fragmentation has challenged efforts to develop and implement such a strategy. With no entity having regional authority to implement plans at a regional scale, efforts had not progressed beyond talk.

In 2010, a newly formed Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium (NEOSCC) obtained a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Sustainable Communities Initiative grant to develop Vibrant NEO 2040, a regional planning framework for sustainable development. NEOSCC built a land use map for the 12 counties comprising its area of interest. It collected land use, fiscal, transportation, and environmental data and public preferences. It produced forecasts and constructed four alternative development scenarios, which it submitted to the public for consideration.

At the conclusion of the Vibrant NEO 2040 project in 2014, NEOSCC developed a publicly accessible regional database, generated a framework of development principles, and selected preferred development scenarios. Attention then turned to implementation.

However, in strong home rule states such as Ohio, planning is primarily a local government function. The only entities with a mandate to plan on a regional scale are metropolitan planning organizations and councils of governments. Regional planning frameworks such as Vibrant NEO can be implemented only if local governments agree to work together.

Despite efforts to encourage adherence to NEOSCC's framework, the path to the implementation of a regional plan remains unclear at best. We examine these efforts to move toward regional plan implementation in the absence of agency and explore the extent to which any portion of the 12-county region can deviate from the Vibrant NEO vision before the regional plan loses its coherence and meaning. We ask whether a voluntary

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### **Abstract (continued)**

*framework such as Vibrant NEO can promote and sustain collaborative decision processes among regional decisionmakers and local communities. We find that, in general, this framework is implementable; however, because it is voluntary, implementation depends highly on leaders who find that it is in their (or the public's) best interest to stay within the framework. In the NEOSCC case, several obstacles reduce the likelihood of regional implementation, even as subregional actors move toward voluntary compliance with the framework.*

## **Introduction**

Legacy cities are “older, industrial urban areas that have experienced significant population and job loss, resulting in high residential vacancy and diminished service capacity and resources” (Legacy Cities Partnership, n.d.). These cities and their surrounding regions pose structural challenges to efforts to address their social, economic, and environmental problems sustainably. One such challenge is the mismatch between their physical layout—dating from the time when core cities attained peaks of population and economic activity—and their current population, needs, and resources. For example, legacy cities’ structures and infrastructure tend to take more space than if they had been built to meet the needs of the current population, with current technology. Aging infrastructure needs repair or replacement, while tax bases to fund these improvements are strained and declining. In the absence of new strategies to set them on a sustainable course, legacy regions are necessarily reactive in the short run, using their resources to respond to urgent needs. This reactive strategy is both unsustainable and unwise in the long term; it consumes the relatively small amounts of “seed corn” to repair and maintain what is an already inefficient organization of space that will continue to experience stress and deterioration.

Beyond this general characterization of the legacy status, each city and region tends to have specific circumstances that require tailored solutions. For example, scale is a key consideration: how should the boundaries of a region be selected for planning purposes? Other considerations include environmental assets and expected climate change impacts, housing, transportation and infrastructure needs, economic and political structure, and social problems. Not least are planning and implementation resources and capabilities, including numerous government agencies, private and nonprofit organizations, and local attitudes and willingness to participate in public decision processes. These considerations are not independent of each other; rather, they are interrelated in complex ways with high likelihood that addressing any of them may give rise to “wicked problems” (Rittel and Weber, 1973; Skaburskis, 2008) and unwanted consequences. Therefore, to understand and advance planning in the legacy context, it is necessary to explore both the general features and study specific cases of legacy region planning projects. We propose to engage in this task by focusing on the implementation of Vibrant NEO 2040, a planning framework for the northeast Ohio region devised between 2011 and 2014.

In general, we distinguish three classes of place characteristics that matter both for making and implementing plans. Although these classes are relevant to any region, their mix and interplay is region specific. The first class includes tangible factors: the physical layout, structures and their environment, population size and composition, and socioeconomic characteristics that drive local needs and resources. All factors in this class are affected by a region's legacy status. For example, population and economic decline undermine a region's resource base and attractiveness, as does an environment impaired by previous heavy industrial activities. The aging infrastructure poses both functional and health risks, and the tax revenue necessary for remediation is dwindling. High proportions of population in poverty impose additional demands on the already strained resource base. The current mix of skills does not match well the nature of jobs in the growing industries, and travel connections between where people live and where they might find work are weak or nonexistent for those depending on public transportation. Thus, the legacy status affects both the kinds of plans that can be considered for the region, as well as the prioritization of the scarce resources for implementation.

The second class includes formal functional and organizational systems of governance and their linkages. This class includes the various planning and coordinating agencies, special districts and local governments, and the ways in which they interact. In older regions, it is likely that the passage of time alone accounts for the many layers of government. The overlapping jurisdictions of the various planning and implementation agencies are a result of the region's growth over time, with each planning exercise generating new requirements, regulations, and funding limitations. Thus, today's governance structure is the suboptimal outcome of a set of incremental responses to needs during a multi-decade time span. Were it possible to redesign the governance system for current needs, it would likely look different—leaner and with more coordination and sharing potential. However, the opportunity to redesign a region's governance structure arises rarely, if ever. This legacy reality suggests that the strategy for escaping the mismatch between current regional needs and a region's ability to respond to them may also have to be incremental, although in time it could become more flexible and adaptive by design. Such a strategy would have to consider what could be accomplished and how unlikely it is to happen in the short run, given the current governance patterns, rather than propose and rely on governance changes such as adding a regional decision layer.

The third, intangible class includes informal collective decisionmaking capacity, traditions and processes, and local attitudes toward planning. For example, legacy regions have long histories that left their marks on local cultures, with both positive and negative consequences for decisionmaking and the ability to adapt to new circumstances. In regions where planning—that is, a collective decision mode—has traditionally been perceived as limiting individual freedom regarding the use of private property, it is very difficult to make and implement regional plans, as each locality tends to jealously guard its ability to make land use decisions. The numerous unilateral local decisions increasingly add up to higher collective costs of sustaining duplicative infrastructure and services, reduced ability to adapt to new circumstances, as well as higher environmental impacts. This spatial driver of suboptimal outcomes for all is the result of decisions that may seem desirable from a narrowly local perspective but ignore the broader regional consequences. As is the case with governance, it is unlikely that the local culture can be changed to facilitate planning and

implementation in the short run. However, if incremental changes driven by needs and resources result in successes, it may be possible in time to change attitudes toward regional collaboration and plan implementation.

The three classes of factors affecting plans and their implementation (exhibit 1) are not independent. They interact through complex linkages that sometimes enhance, and at other times lessen, the effects of each on a region. These effects can be surprising and, when they become manifest, are irreversible or difficult to turn around, should it be necessary. Therefore, it is all the more important to devise planning and implementation approaches that take into account these three factors and incorporate them into the plans—which is easier said than done, but not impossible. However, we propose that plans that do not actively take account of these challenges are almost sure to fail. The case of Northeast Ohio analyzed here offers the opportunity to explore how the three classes of factors of exhibit 1 affect implementation in the particular circumstance of a plan devised without an institutional mandate.

We begin by describing the Northeast Ohio region that formed the object of the NEOSCC planning effort. Then we present the resulting Vibrant NEO 2040 framework. We compare this framework with plans devised in other Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) regions that share some of Northeast Ohio’s characteristics. We examine what place and process similarities and differences contributed to the outcomes and to the likelihood of plan implementation, and how the three factors affecting them—tangible characteristics, governance structure, and intangibles—played out in these cases. We end with some observations regarding implementation of the Vibrant NEO framework that can inform both our case and others aiming to set legacy regions on a sustainable course.

**Exhibit 1**

**Place Characteristics Affecting Plan Implementations**

Class of Place Characteristics	Components
1. Tangible/measurable characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical layout</li> <li>• Structures and their environment</li> <li>• Population size and composition</li> <li>• Socioeconomic characteristics driving local needs and resources</li> </ul>
2. Formal functional and organizational systems of governance and their linkages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning and coordinating agencies</li> <li>• Special districts and local governments</li> <li>• The ways in which governance entities interact</li> </ul>
3. Intangible informal collective decisionmaking capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditions and processes</li> <li>• Local attitudes toward planning</li> <li>• Informal relationships</li> <li>• Past participatory experiences</li> </ul>

**The Northeast Ohio Region and Its Legacy Characteristics**

Northeast Ohio has many legacy hallmarks and challenges, few of which are unique but whose interplay is specific to the region. The degree of political and administrative fragmentation, and of overlapping jurisdictions, is high. For example, more than one agency has jurisdiction over the

same environmental and infrastructure systems. No entity with planning authority exceeds the boundaries of a single metropolitan area or county. Because northeast Ohio is far from socioeconomically homogenous, and because plans tend to benefit residents differentially, any decision is likely to be opposed by some interest group.

The political and administrative fragmentation coupled with the complex physical and functional interactions among the various natural and social systems of Northeast Ohio pose a serious planning challenge; regardless of how we define the planning region, it is impossible to address sustainable development and legacy challenges within the confines of a single county. Therefore, we may ask how the region's boundaries should be defined for planning and implementation purposes. Which counties should be included, and by what criteria? For guidance on how best to define the region for planning purposes, we look first at the ecological, economic, and infrastructure systems that transcend the political boundaries. The region's dominant ecological element is Lake Erie, with the many watersheds feeding it. Other natural assets include agricultural land and open spaces and the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Administrative services such as economic development, transportation, infrastructure, and water and sewer services also cross county boundaries. Agencies serving these cross-jurisdictional needs include metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), large water and sewer agencies, and, on a much smaller scale, numerous local agencies and school districts. Decisions in the regional space are bound to affect interests of several of these entities, requiring coordination.

In a region such as Northeast Ohio, where numerous actors with limited planning mandates make decisions in real time, it is not surprising to find that outcomes are rarely coherent with respect to their stated goals and objectives. Instead, mutual interference, unnecessary competition, duplication of services, and waste of scarce public resources are likely. In particular, unsustainable development patterns can emerge and proceed unchecked in the absence of regional coordination. Such coordination could be provided by an entity, absent in Northeast Ohio, with recognized "agency"—the capacity of exerting legitimate decision mandate—to plan across city, county, or MPO boundaries.

It is within this complex legacy context of competing regional definitions and spheres of influence that the Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium (NEOSCC) has engaged in an ambitious 3-year, 12-county collaborative planning initiative. It was funded by a fiscal year 2010 (Round 1) Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant (SCI-RPG) from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). We focus on this case to explore whether and how planning without agency—a necessity also faced by other regions—can contribute to regional sustainability.

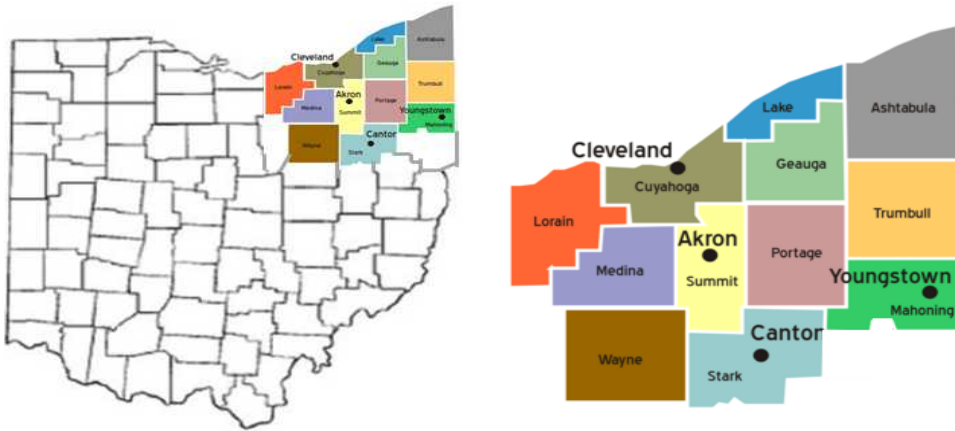
The physical area of Northeast Ohio<sup>1</sup> that was the object of NEOSCC's planning effort is relatively large, encompassing 12 counties (see exhibit 2). This geography largely coincides with the boundaries of the Connecticut Western Reserve: an area owned, sold, and distributed by the State of Connecticut in the years after the American Revolution, with many of the early settlers coming from New England. With 3.3 million acres of land bounded by Lake Erie to the north and

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<sup>1</sup> Here we use *Northeast Ohio* to refer to the definition used for the purposes of NEOSCC's plan.

## Exhibit 2

### The Northeast Ohio Region, as Defined by NEOSCC



NEOSCC = Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium.

Pennsylvania to the east, the Western Reserve extended in the south to include what are now the cities of Youngstown and Akron. Included are the watersheds of the Cuyahoga,<sup>2</sup> Black, Rocky, and Mahoning Rivers (exhibits 2, 3, and 4).

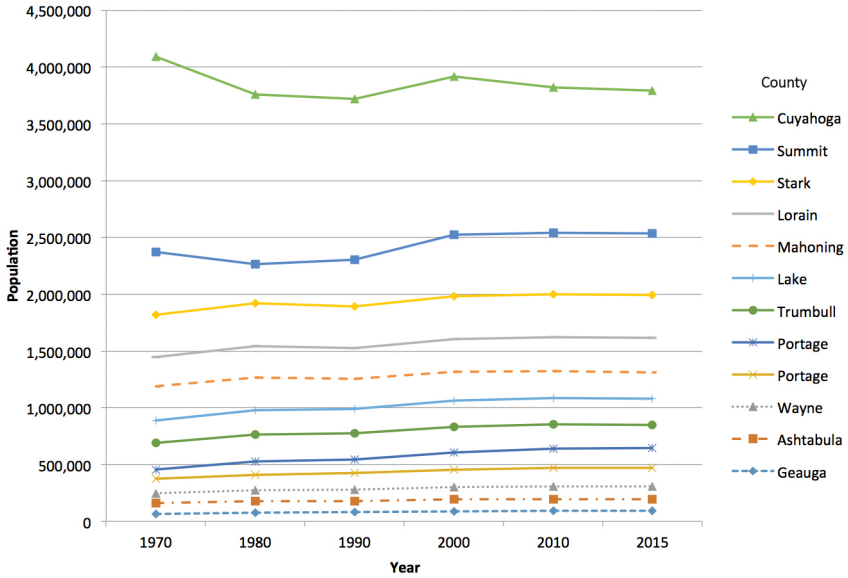
The 12-county region represents 18 percent of Ohio's land area. It houses 3.8 million residents, or about a third of the state's population. One-half of the land is used for agriculture; 25 percent of it is taken by residential uses; the balance consists of industrial and commercial uses, and less than 5 percent of it is open space and parks. About three-fourths of the housing stock is single-family, and one-half of the stock is more than 50 years old; 70 percent is owner occupied. Poverty is heavily concentrated in the region's central cities, with 53 percent of their residents earning less than \$50,000 per year (exhibit 5). However, in 2015, the regional poverty rate (13.3 percent) overall was slightly lower than that of the state (14.8 percent). At \$51,000, the 2015 regional median household income was slightly lower than the statewide median of \$53,300. The region's unemployment rate, at about 5 percent in 2015, was comparable to the statewide rate (exhibits 2 through 4).

Educational attainment is not high in the state of Ohio. The 2014 U.S. Census estimates rank it 36th of the 50 states for the percentage of people 25 and older with at least a bachelor's degree. Earlier American Community Survey census data, from 2010–2012, indicate that the Northeast Ohio region is similar to the state in the percentage of the population without a high school diploma (nearly 10 percent) and the percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher (nearly 30 percent). However, levels of education vary greatly across the 12 counties, with the central cities having lower high school graduation rates and lower proportions of the population with college degrees (Center for Community Solutions, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Of "burning river" fame, due to a serious fire kindled in 1969 by debris and oil discharged by industry and freight ships, the Cuyahoga River is credited with raising environmental awareness across the country, leading to the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 (Layzer, 2015).

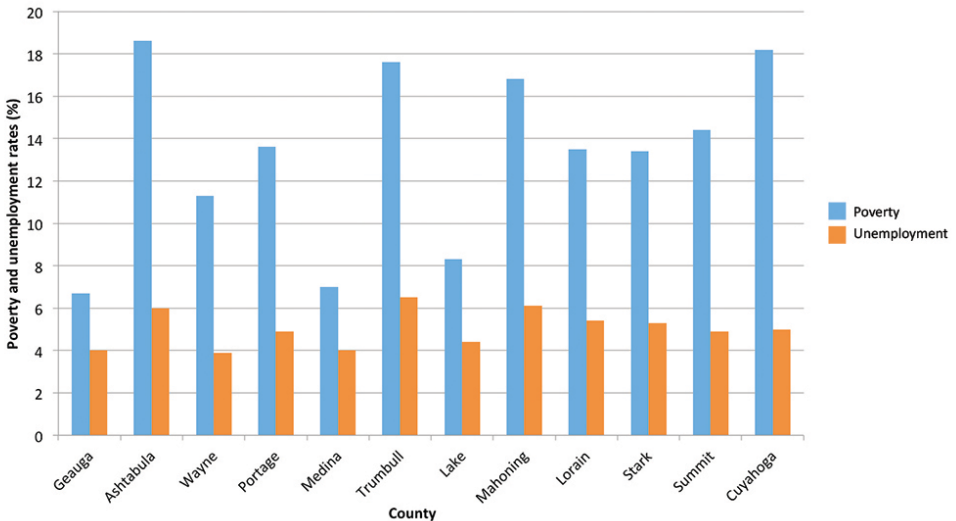
### Exhibit 3

Population Trends of Vibrant NEO's 12-County Region, by County



### Exhibit 4

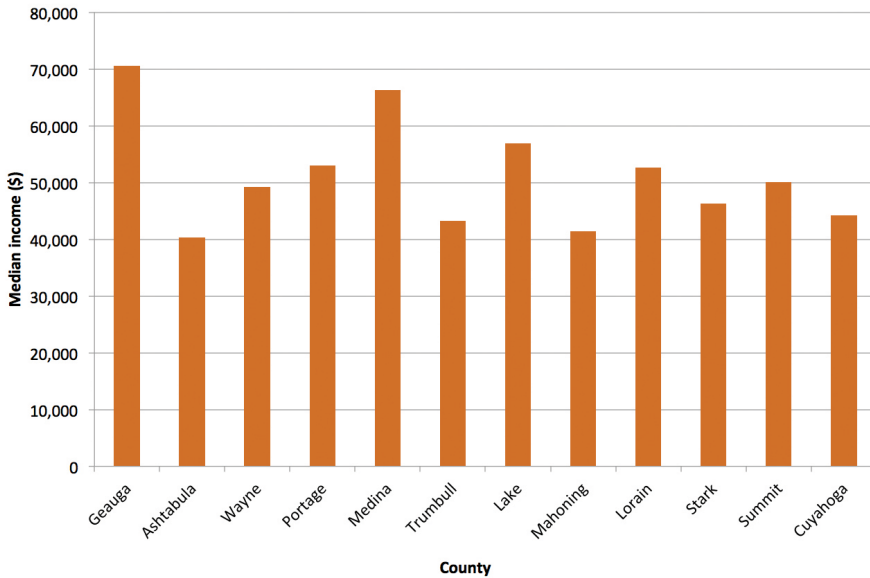
2015 County-Level Poverty and Unemployment Percentages in Vibrant NEO's 12-County Region



Note: Counties ordered by increasing population size.

### Exhibit 5

2015 Median Income in Vibrant NEO's 12-County Region



Note: Counties ordered by increasing population size.

Within this 12-county region are 7 legacy cities (Akron, Ashtabula, Canton, Cleveland, Lorain, Warren, and Youngstown); 400 smaller cities, villages, and townships; 15 public housing authorities (PHAs); 700 taxing jurisdictions; and 5 special-purpose multicounty intergovernmental organizations. Governance of the region involves more than 2,500 elected officials. Little evidence of a shared identity or culture exists among the distinct urban, suburban, and rural parts of the region. It is highly segregated both racially and economically. The strongest unique shared identifiers that emerged during a 2005 regional visioning process called Voices and Choices, were arts and cultural amenities, Lake Erie, the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, and to some extent Cleveland's sports teams (Northeast Ohio Citizens Speak, 2006).

Since the 1970s, the Northeast Ohio legacy region has experienced tension between a sharply declining population (exhibit 3), especially in its urban centers, and intense pressure to develop previously undeveloped land. The drift from central cities toward the edges resulted in low-density sprawl. The amount of urbanized land in the region increased by 60 percent from 1970 to 2000, while the region's population grew less than 4 percent (Fund for Our Economic Future, 2011).

The pattern of population out-migration from the central cities has been partly subsidized by the federal and state highway system, a failure to include the cost of infrastructure expansion in the price of new development, and partly by state and local economic development incentives that encouraged development in greenfields. The legacy of sprawl has far-reaching consequences across all interacting physical and social systems of the region. Benefits typically accrue to those sufficiently wealthy to buy property at the underdeveloped edges, whereas costs of new development



are shared across the board through higher prices for utilities and other regional infrastructure and amenities. Sprawl has either created or enhanced environmental, socioeconomic, and political/administrative threats to the sustainability and resiliency of the region.

Sprawl has extended the radius of commuting, with pressure on the transportation system and increased levels of pollution in all media—air, water and soil—due to the heavy reliance on cars throughout the region. It has required expansion of the radius of infrastructure services, with costs borne by everyone in the region. The costs of sprawl have been well documented (for example, Burchell et al., 2002; Carruthers and Ulfarsson, 2003; Gordon and Wong, 1985; Harvey and Clark, 1965; Johnson, 2001; Litman, 2015; Trubka, Newman, and Bilsborough, 2010). Some sprawl consequences include increased poverty in central cities, a locational mismatch between affordable housing and jobs, depletion of the local tax base, declining city services, replacement of agricultural land with suburban development and its negative impact on local food supply and green spaces, and the fragmentation or even elimination of some wildlife habitat. Added to sprawl consequences, environmental threats to the Northeast Ohio region include the effects of climate change on Lake Erie, pollution of water, soil, and air—partly a legacy of the industrial heyday—and invasive species of plants and wildlife. As a result, quality of life has declined for all.

Local elected officials, planners, and policymakers have long recognized the need to stem the movement of population and businesses away from the region's urban cores and into greenfields. On the other hand, the region's political fragmentation and Ohio's strong culture of local government home rule have been steady barriers to the kind of planning that would lead to sustainable growth patterns. Despite repeated calls for solutions, ranging from regional government to regional cooperation around economic development and planning, the region has never made much progress on this front, unlike places such as Chicago or New York.

Regional leaders from every sector—the church, political leaders, philanthropists, grassroots, academics and leadership organizations—have also understood the need for greater collaboration to address the costs of sprawl. The 1990s and early 2000s were especially active in efforts to promote greater regional sustainability. “Church in the City,” in 1993, an initiative led by the Catholic Diocese of Greater Cleveland, focused on the social and economic consequences of sprawl; the Regional Prosperity Initiative, initiated by the Northeast Ohio Mayors and City Managers Association, promoted regional collaboration, tax sharing, and sustainable economic development across a 16-county region. Other sectors also got involved. In 1994, the Ohio Taskforce on Regional Competitiveness and Cooperation, led by three Northeast Ohio state legislators, sought to develop strategies for regional economic competitiveness and cooperation across governmental jurisdictions; the Sustainable Communities Symposium, a citizen-based, grassroots effort based at Cleveland State University, with funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and various foundations, worked to build support for sustainable regional planning. In 2004, the Fund for Our Economic Future (the Fund) was formed as a philanthropic collaborative based in Northeast Ohio and committed to shaping and sustaining the region's long-term economic competitiveness. One of its first efforts was the aforementioned “Voices and Choices” regional visioning process. At the height of its activities, the Fund covered 22 counties coinciding with the regional definition used by Jobs Ohio, the state economic development agency. The Fund followed on the heels of the Regional Economic Indicators project, a university-based effort to track the regional

economy in the Cleveland, Akron, Canton, and Youngstown metropolitan areas. The Northeast Ohio Regional Leadership Task Force, a consortium of 14 community leadership programs created in 1995, held an annual region day to educate future leaders about regional issues and organized several university-based research projects and conferences on regional issues.

These civic initiatives, discussions, and studies have raised awareness of the benefits of sustainable regional growth and of the negative impact on sustainability that continued sprawl was having on the region's economy. Real progress toward regionalism remained slow, however. As in many legacy regions, citizens and civic leaders may begin to think differently about their future after participating in initiatives such as those described previously. Nevertheless, heightened public awareness does not translate into the political will needed to overcome existing political and administrative fragmentation and to engage in collaborative planning across jurisdictions. In the absence of an entity with the ability or authority to plan and implement at a regional scale, most Northeast Ohio efforts never progressed to the stage of "do things differently."

Would the usually contentious communities of Northeast Ohio ever agree to collaborate to produce a regional plan, in recognition of the interdependencies of their disparate communities? If so, once they produced a plan, would they collaborate to implement it? HUD's SCI presented an opportunity to answer these questions. Next, we describe how some actors in the region took advantage of this opportunity to coalesce into NEOSCC and attempt to generate a framework for regional sustainability-enhancing decisions.

## **Approach**

We used a qualitative approach to examine the NEOSCC case. Our approach has several components that shed light on the roles played by the three classes of factors which we identified as affecting planning processes and the likelihood of plan implementation (exhibit 1). We scanned the regional planning and collective impact literature. We identified comparable SCI projects among the first round of grantees to derive linkages between planning context, scale, structure, and likelihood of implementation. We reviewed documents produced by NEOSCC, contemporaneous newspaper and social media information, and social-environmental regional data, as well as HUD's database and literature about the SCI projects. We attended several of the NESOCC workshops and community events and a scenario generation workshop. One of us currently serves on the newly established NEOSCC Launch Board, tasked with implementation. Lastly, we interviewed 22 individuals: several of the key participants in the NEOSCC process, some of those involved in the NEOSCC Launch Board, and leaders of a comparable SCI project in Buffalo, New York. Our analysis of responses led to ex-post assessments of the NEOSCC process and expectations for implementation of Vibrant NEO. To address the key issues in this article—planning without mandates in a legacy region—we characterize the context of the regional decline, the scale of the initiative, its outcomes, and the role of governance structures, including lack of a superordinate organizational structure with a planning and coordination mandate. We also examine how collaborative efforts can be sustained in such contexts. We draw on previous research in these topical categories.

For example, through meta-analysis, Ansell and Gash (2008) extracted several models of collaborative governance and provided the conditions for success for each model. They identified several

characteristics that were critical in the success or failure of the 137 collaborative governance cases they studied. Along with the history of relationships, they included a set of variables relevant to our case: the participation incentives that partners had, as well as the power balance. Leadership and the specific institutional arrangements were of consequence for these initiatives, as they are for NEOSCC.

Goldman and Deakin (2000) explored planning through partnerships in the regional space in the context of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991, which gave the larger MPOs decisionmaking authority that in most states had previously rested with state departments of transportation. They examined MPO leadership roles in related collaboratives in 24 cases. Of the five types of activities and arrangements they identified—consultation, coordination, cooperation, consensus building, and collaboration—the first three predominated among MPOs. This finding constitutes a benchmark for assessing the past and future role of the MPOs in NEOSCC. The authors highlighted the social learning effect of collaboratives, and also recognized that results are mixed.

Kaufman (2016) addressed various aspects of governance and how they might affect planning and implementation in a legacy context, specifically in terms of responding and adapting to climate change—which is one of the concerns in the quest for sustainability of regions. She deemed implementation a key evaluation criterion for plans because, in its absence, the best laid-out plans will miss their mark. The Vibrant NEO case is explored in the light of the implementation imperative.

Because Vibrant NEO is one of the projects funded by the SCI-RPG program, we drew on evaluative research of new regionalism. Work by Alexander (2010), Bates and Zapata (2013), Kok and Veldekamp (2011), and the earlier Wilbanks and Kates (1999) are particularly relevant to our question about the “right” scale for regional planning initiatives. The latter also touches on sustainability, a central concern of Vibrant NEO.

Ample literature on community collaborative efforts exists. We drew on instances of regional collaboration, such as described by Benner and Pastor (2015). The quality of Vibrant NEO’s public participation aspect is informed by work such as Irvin and Stansbury (2004). Vibrant NEO made use of scenarios to get consensus around a preferred alternative. We looked at similar and other uses of scenario tools for regional planning, such as that of Chakraborty (2010). Together, these sources helped us derive insights about how context, scale, and stakeholder engagement affected the NEOSCC project, and more generally, how these factors can contribute to or hamper regional planning and implementation of legacy regions’ redevelopment.

## **Vibrant NEO 2040**

NEOSCC produced the Vibrant NEO 2040 vision and framework, from 2011 to 2013, in the context of the large and complex legacy region described previously. The collective impact model of SCI offered an appealing approach to tackling longstanding concerns and planning issues and to position the region to compete in the new economy. The NEOSCC partners hoped that the funding and a supportive federal partner would provide the impetus needed to bridge longstanding divides

and support the hard decisions that would be needed to move to a regional approach to strengthen the economy and sustain the region. The relationships and alliances that would be forged through the planning process were expected to carry through to implementation.

Other SCI legacy region grantees faced similar challenges and had, perhaps, similar hopes. We identified 12 comparable places with one or more commonalities with the northeast Ohio project, including an informal alliance of partners, more than five political jurisdictions, and more than one MPO or other regional planning body, such as a council of governments (COG; exhibit 6). NEOSCC stood out in several ways, even among the 12 comparable regions. To our knowledge, it was the only grantee that created a new, nonprofit entity as its “backbone” organization to carry out the SCI planning process. It was also the only one to bring together five regional planning entities (MPOs and COGs) across 12 counties. In addition to the relatively large geographic scale of the planning area and the low level of social cohesion within it, we set out to explore the relationship between the NEOSCC structure and the planning outcomes and the likelihood of their implementation.

We examine how NEOSCC dealt with its challenges in both the planning and more recently, the implementation phases. Despite the challenging context, the NEOSCC project represented an unprecedented opportunity to develop a framework for regional planning in Northeast Ohio. Our analysis focuses on the lessons NEOSCC offers for planning without agency. In the remainder of this section, we describe NEOSCC’s organizational structure, its goals, and its planning approach.

**Exhibit 6**

**SCI Grantee Projects Comparable to NEOSCC**

State	Lead Organization	Project
California	Sacramento Area Council of Governments	Regional Plan for Sustainable Development
Massachusetts	Metropolitan Area Planning Council	MetroFuture
Texas	Capital Area Council of Governments	Sustainable Places Project
Texas	Houston-Galveston Area Council	Our Region Houston-Galveston Regional Plan for Sustainable Development
Virginia	Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission	Many Plans, One Community
Florida	South Florida Regional Planning Council	Seven50: Southeast Florida Prosperity Plan
Alabama	East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission	Community Livability for East Alabama Region Plan 2030 (CLEAR Plan)
Missouri	East-West Gateway Council of Governments	One STL: Many Communities, One Future
Missouri	Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)	Creating Sustainable Places: Regional Plan for Sustainable Development
North Carolina	Piedmont Authority for Regional Transportation	Piedmont Together
New York	Regional Plan Association Inc.	New York-Connecticut Sustainable Communities
Ohio	Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency	Vibrant NEO 2040: Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium Initiative

*NEOSCC = Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium. SCI = Sustainable Communities Initiative.*

## **Organizational Structure**

Aiming to promote a regional economic growth strategy for a 16-county Northeast Ohio region, the Fund convened, in 2010, a consortium of 33 Northeast Ohio public and nonprofit organizations that successfully competed for a Category 1 SCI-RPG, administered by HUD. The consortium created a new nonprofit to carry out the work: NEOSCC, a freestanding nonprofit, “civic consortium” incorporated in 2011. During the course of 3 years, NEOSCC proceeded to formulate Vibrant NEO 2040, a vision and framework for developing sustainably 12 Northeast Ohio counties.

The decision to create a new nonprofit was made once it was determined that “no single organization was equipped to manage an effort of this scale and ambition” (interview with NEOSCC participant). As the region’s largest MPO, serving 5 of the 12 counties, the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), in Cleveland, became NEOSCC’s fiscal agent. To encourage buy-in from leaders across the planning region, and to avoid a Cleveland-centric perception, NEOSCC located its offices in Akron, Ohio, the region’s second largest city. The organization’s 501(c)(3) status was not formalized, and the organization was not fully functional (with staff and an office) until October 2011, 9 months after NOACA entered into the formal grant agreement with HUD. This process significantly delayed the start of the organization’s activities.

NEOSCC had a board comprised of 33 entities including representatives from 4 MPOs, 1 regional COG, 6 counties, 4 cities, 3 universities, 3 PHAs, and 13 other regional organizations. Many of these entities had been involved in one or more previous initiatives during the course of nearly 20 years to promote regional collaboration and planning. However, while earlier initiatives set the stage, NEOSCC’s was the first regional planning effort in that 20-year period that had obtained considerable federal funding. The participants contributed in-kind resources that supplemented the grant and enabled the group to fund consulting services for producing a geographic information system (GIS) regional database and scenarios for the future and for the design and facilitation of public outreach.

At its peak in 2012, the nonprofit had a staff of 12, including interns, and also worked with several consultants. NEOSCC also drew on NOACA staff to manage the work, and all the participating MPOs contributed staff time. In July 2012, NOACA’s long-time director retired, and the board hired Grace Gallucci, who came to Cleveland from Chicago. She brought a new approach and perspective on regional planning, having worked on larger regional collaborative projects in Chicago. She took a more active role in NEOSCC than her predecessor. In December 2012, as the work was floundering, leadership of NEOSCC shifted to the MPOs. Gallucci became the board chair and the leaders of the other MPOs became officers; a representative from HUD was added. Together, the new leadership convinced the NEOSCC board to hire the planning consulting firm Sasaki Associates to complete the scenario planning and fiscal impact model. Since the end of the planning period, Gallucci has continued to lead the Launch Board and add representation from the private sector to the effort (Gallucci, 2015).

## **NEOSCC Goals**

NEOSCC aimed to produce a regional sustainability plan for Northeast Ohio that encouraged active integration of the region’s employment centers (Cleveland, Akron, Canton, and Youngstown) and addressed the region’s economy, environment, transportation systems, housing and community

development, and placemaking. Some of these issues—economy, environment, and transit or transportation—are regional, in the sense that they are functionally and economically interconnected across the regional space and therefore most effectively addressed on a regional basis. Moreover, the planning and administrative bodies have authority that typically crosses municipal and, in some cases, county boundaries, making it feasible for decisions to be made collaboratively. For other issues—housing, land use, community development, and placemaking—decisions are made locally, although the impacts of these decisions have regional implications. The NEOSCC framework was expected to account for these different levels of “agency” and to achieve the following outcomes.

- Concrete plans for regional issues.
- Shared priorities to guide local action.
- Formal shared strategies and processes to enhance local planning.
- A set of shared tools to support ongoing planning efforts.

### **The NEOSCC Planning Approach**

In the first phase of the Vibrant NEO project, NEOSCC participants organized around thematic groups or workstreams corresponding to key categories of concerns: Environment, Connections (transportation), Housing and Communities, Economic Development, and Quality Connected Places. Each group was responsible for surfacing problems in its category, identifying and collecting information, and formulating sustainable development principles for the region. They all received data and GIS support.

As it had promised in its proposal, NEOSCC sought community input throughout the planning process through various communication channels—in person, and through media, newsletters, community meetings, caucuses, workshops and charrettes, surveys, and an online planning game, “Imagine my NEO.” It also conducted a regional assessment of impediments to fair housing and a fair housing equity assessment.

The second phase entailed assembling a regional information database, including the first ever regional land use map for all 12 counties. Forecasts were developed by extending trends from 1970 to 2010 for key regional variables, including population, employment, housing, and transportation. This database was used to construct four future growth scenarios: “trend,” “grow the same,” “grow differently,” and “do things differently.” The scenarios differed from each other in their underlying regional preferences for planning and growth choices. For example, the “trend” scenario depicted current trends continuing along with no planning intervention, a scenario NEOSCC considered to be unsustainable. As alternatives, they offered the three other scenarios: one in which population and employment growth remained constant but local government implemented the Vibrant NEO framework (“Do Things Differently”); a second one in which population and employment growth increased but jurisdictions made no policy changes (“Grow the Same”); and a third in which growth increased, and Vibrant NEO was implemented (“Grow Differently”).

These scenarios were then submitted to the public for consideration through the various communication channels. According to NEOSCC documents, 5,600 people in the region were engaged. Most participants preferred the “Do Things Differently/Grow Differently” scenarios, both of which included the implementation of the Vibrant NEO framework.

In the final phase, the Vibrant NEO framework consisted of 8 objectives, 4 themes, 9 recommendations, and 41 initiatives for implementing the recommendations. The four themes for building a vibrant, resilient, and sustainable Northeast Ohio were rather unobjectionable and, to some extent generic, likely a good fit for any legacy region. Their intent was to counter some of the negative effects of past urban sprawl, and to contain it in future development. The four themes are—

- Strengthen our Established Communities.
- Increase our Transportation Choices.
- Protect our Natural Resources Regionally.
- Promote Collaboration and Efficiency.

For example, strengthening established communities means building inside existing urban areas instead of greenfields. Protecting regional natural resources is also to be accomplished by foregoing continued expansion in the regional space in favor of compact development.

Examples and principles for collaboration and partnering, for data-driven decisionmaking, and for governance accompanied the themes. At its conclusion, the Vibrant NEO framework was posted on its website, and more than 1,300 people signed on as Vibrant NEO Champions. The products included a publicly accessible regional database, and a framework of development principles that would correspond to the two scenarios that garnered the most public support: “Do Things Differently/Grow Differently.”

To inform the predictions and scenarios, NEOSCC worked with each of the 12 county auditors or financial officers to compile a parcel-level land use and zoning map for more than 1.8 million discrete parcels in the region. It was the first time such a map had been created in northeast Ohio. NEOSCC also obtained zoning maps from the 400 cities, villages, and townships in its planning space. This GIS-based regional database had many benefits. It pulled together existing data and more than 200 existing plans and studies that were used in the scenario planning. It provided the participating MPOs a regional dataset and a fiscal impact analysis, along with the assumptions used to construct the four scenarios. This extensive database continues to be accessible. For example, NOACA used it to prepare its long-range transportation plan, saving the time and money that would have had to be spent to collect the data it needed.

At the end of the SCI grant period, NEOSCC published the Vibrant NEO 2040 Vision, Framework and Action Products. This award-winning framework<sup>3</sup> consisted of options, in the form of the four scenarios, with associated fiscal impact analyses for the future of the region. It illustrated that Northeast Ohio’s communities would experience serious deficits in the future if development

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<sup>3</sup> Vibrant NEO 2040 was the winner of the American Planning Association’s 2015 Daniel Burnham Award for a Comprehensive Plan.



patterns continued as population levels fall. The report included recommendations and tools that could be used to implement the preferred scenarios “Do Things Differently/Grow Differently.” NEOSCC also delivered a promised dashboard of critical indicators, a tool kit of best and promising practices, and a set of potential pilot programs and policy recommendations.

## Next Steps

At the outset, NEOSCC hoped that federal funds would be available to assist with implementation, and that the new nonprofit would generate sufficient local political (and financial) support to enable it to become the champion of plan implementation. However, by the end of the grant period, in June 2014, it became clear that NEOSCC lacked the political and financial support to continue its activities. It demobilized its staff, closed the Akron office, and expended its remaining funds.

The MPOs, which had led much of the planning process, stepped up and created the NEOSCC 2.0 Launch Board (which retained NEOSCC’s nonprofit status) to generate a structure for implementing the recommendations. NOACA director Gallucci, who had chaired the NEOSCC board, was elected chair of the Launch Board and became the steward of the SCI mission. Thus, NOACA became the new “backbone” organization for the Launch Board bringing together the other MPOs and partner organizations. The Launch Board’s primary role is to energize and activate the Vibrant NEO framework and the principles therein<sup>4</sup> by educating regional stakeholders and the general public about the plan, and by encouraging and tracking progress. Launch Board members contribute a small membership fee to cover expenses. Outside of membership dues, Vibrant NEO has no additional funding. NOACA has been providing in-kind staff support to convene meetings, manage funds, and prepare a newsletter that showcases initiatives that align with the framework, but the Launch Board has no dedicated staff. However, its nonprofit status enables the Launch Board to apply for grants and raise additional funds in the future and at some point, with sufficient funds, it could formally track implementation and/or undertake an assessment of progress and impacts.

As with the other comparable SCI grantees, the task of implementing plans that align with the Vibrant NEO framework and principles fell to local and regional planning organizations. NEOSCC’s MPO members have taken the lead. Not surprisingly, they have different levels of commitment to abide by the Vibrant NEO principles. NOACA used the framework, and the accompanying data collected and analysis developed for the scenario planning, to create county-level reports for each of the five counties in its metropolitan region. NOACA staff also encouraged county planning agencies in its five-county region to apply the principles and framework in community land use planning, which is happening most notably in Cuyahoga and Lorain Counties. Several MPOs used the data and analysis and incorporated the principles and framework in its long-range transportation plan. Further, the MPOs are trying to work with regional business partners to define job centers and encourage companies to locate in areas consistent the Vibrant NEO 2040 framework.

The next section examines the planning process and outcomes, using the three classes of factors proposed at the outset to affect plan implementation: tangible, functional-organizational, and intangible (exhibit 1). In the process, we make comparisons of NEOSCC with other SCI projects.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://vibrantneo.org/vibrantneo-2040/vneo-2040-full-report/>.



## **Analysis of the NEOSCC Process and of the Vibrant NEO Outcomes**

The NEOSCC planning process and the resulting Vibrant NEO 2040 Framework advanced somewhat Northeast Ohio's ability to think and act regionally. In this section, we analyze both the planning process and the implementation of the framework. The planning process was inclusive and comprehensive. The involvement of the three federal agencies—HUD, EPA, and the U.S. Department of Transportation—modeled the kind of collaborative approach necessary at the regional level for carrying out SCI. It encouraged the Northeast Ohio MPOs to work together. The federal funding and inclusion in a national pilot provided an incentive for local governments and agencies to participate. Working through the process together gave the participants an appreciation of each another's assets and potential regional contributions. It also provided the opportunity to come and stay at the regional decision table, even when disagreements about the direction cropped up.

About halfway through the planning process, some of the NEOSCC members began to get “cold feet,” perhaps because they began to encounter pushback from constituents concerned about losing local control with a regional plan. NEOSCC began to reframe the work as a framework rather than a plan to more accurately reflect the intended end product. The framework provided a menu of recommendations and enabled local entities to pick those most applicable to their corner of the regional space. Also at this time, leadership made a subtle shift from the nonprofit NEOSCC to the MPOs, which was an important turning point because the MPO boards include local elected officials with the ability and mandate to implement transportation and environmental plans. Further, some recognized that once the framework was completed, the MPOs would be the champions in moving the region toward the Vibrant NEO vision of sustainability (Gallucci, 2015).

Some stakeholders have argued that the networking, community building, and relationships that were developed and strengthened during the planning period are the most important outcomes. “There was true value in the having the dialogue even if the final product had to be moderate enough to win consensus. It offered a rare opportunity for decisionmakers and stakeholders in this large region to come together and debate the issues. This was a real value. Regardless of the final product value, the process was useful” (interviewee). “The project opened minds, particularly in Stark and Mahoning counties, about what could be accomplished together” (interviewee). “It will be a challenge for this group going forward to keep relationships moving in a way that is beneficial for all involved” (interviewee).

The NEOSCC planning process laid the groundwork for new types of collaboration among the 4 MPOs of the region as they move forward in the implementation phase. Their GIS staff trained together and are now using the same software and base maps. The leaders have continued to work together. Their participation in the regional planning effort, together with the regional database and heightened awareness of impediments to fair housing and to regional sustainability, appear to have left a meaningful mark on their decisionmaking resolve.

Further, several stakeholders value the Vibrant NEO tools for scenario planning and fiscal impact analysis, coupled with the new relationships between the four MPOs. Early evidence indicates that MPOs are using the Vibrant NEO framework and its principles to collaborate more than would

have been the case in the absence of the NEOSCC project. The framework lends legitimacy to the allocation of funds to improve the quality of life in core communities, such as complete streets and added bike lanes. Further evidence indicates that the region's MPOs are incorporating the Vibrant NEO framework principles in their economic development strategies. Examples include the Northeast Ohio Four County Regional Planning and Development Corporation's (NEFCO)<sup>5</sup> 2017 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy and NOACA's Long-Range Transportation Plan Connections+ 2035. In addition, two counties in NOACA's service area (Cuyahoga and Lorain counties) have adopted comprehensive plans that align with Vibrant NEO.

In other comparable SCI regions, the SCI-RPG program grants were most effective when used to boost an existing regional planning process in which the participants were partners who had already worked together in the past on regional planning issues. Examples are the Buffalo and St. Louis, Missouri-Illinois projects. Through this previous experience, the partners had developed preferences and norms for working together. Their backbone organization or coalition had a clear and tested identity connected with the region for which they were planning (Akerlof and Kranton, 2010). These conditions created a natural constituency for dealing with inevitable conflicts and committing to carry out the plan beyond the SCI grant period. Thus, in Buffalo and St. Louis, at least two of the three classes of factors affecting implementation (exhibit 1)—governance and intangibles related to collective decisionmaking capacity—were in place.

No entity existed that “spoke for” the Northeast Ohio region (as defined for the Vibrant NEO initiative). NEOSCC was incorporated as a nonprofit to fulfill the role of such a regional convener. In other words, compared with Buffalo and St. Louis, Northeast Ohio began at a disadvantage with respect to governance and collective decisionmaking capacity. The creation of the new nonprofit structure was an attempt at making up for both gaps. However, the kinds of relationships that contribute to implementation are difficult to conjure in the short run because they require time for trust building, and for jointly developing decisionmaking routines. Setting up a new nonprofit was also expensive (according to interviewees); it diverted limited administrative time and funds away from the demanding work required by the terms of the grant. The most compelling case for creating the nonprofit was the need for a neutral convener, and indeed, NEOSCC served that purpose. However, NEOSCC proved unsustainable, perhaps because it failed to make its own sufficiently persuasive case. The coalition members were not interested in raising the funds needed to support a planning and coordinating organization with a focus on the 12-county region. In contrast, among the 12 SCI projects comparable to NEOSCC, 6 were convened and hosted by regional planning bodies, either a COG or MPO (Lombardi, 2016).

We note that the loose connection among NEOSCC members appears to be the most salient difference between Vibrant NEO and other SCI projects, which have kept their planning collaboratives together and are using them to facilitate plan implementation. One added contributor to the success of those projects may be the set of physical characteristics of the planning region—the first of the three classes of factors affecting plan implementation that we proposed at the outset (exhibit 1). Accordingly, the Vibrant NEO planning process and implementation might have been less difficult and more successful if it had been less spatially ambitious.

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<sup>5</sup> NEFCO serves Portage, Stark, and Summit Counties and the city of Wooster in Wayne County.

For example, the Cleveland and Akron metropolitan regions are connected through out-migration and commuting patterns, economic activities, natural environmental subsystems, and infrastructure, and thus already shared some regional identity. Their MPOs had worked closely together on planning efforts (historically, they had been one MPO). For these reasons, a planning effort focused on these two metropolitan areas may have been more successful. It would have been easier to persuade the governing entities and the public at large of the benefits of collaborating for a sustainable future, including joint land use and housing planning to limit further sprawl and reduce transportation costs.

It is certainly possible, and sometimes desirable, to plan across a large regional footprint and implement at a local level. As noted, a large regional footprint makes sense from an economic, environmental, or transportation standpoint. That is because those systems are interconnected across relatively large spaces that transcend administrative boundaries. In setting NEOSCC's geographic footprint, the Fund, which triggered the initiative, worked within practical and political limitations to get as close as they could to the geographic outline for the State of Ohio's Third Frontier and other regional economic development efforts, including the Fund's own 16-county geography (interviewee). However, in retrospect, it would have been wiser to "start small," develop some successful examples of collaborative planning, and build out over time to the larger "economic region."

The "start small" strategy would have enabled NEOSCC to overcome an obstacle specific to the Ohio context that other SCI projects may not have had to contend with. Implementing plans like Vibrant NEO is voluntary in Ohio; no means of enforcement or recourse exists, should any of the NEOSCC members fail to act in keeping with this framework. Therefore, implementing the Vibrant NEO framework depends on many autonomous regional partners voluntarily coordinating their actions in the regional space to attain joint objectives. Moreover, the plan has no formal (regional) custodian. In other words, no entity has a mandate to even monitor, let alone enforce, plan implementation. The incentives, in the form of increased efficiencies and sustainability of the region accrue in the long term, while the necessary resources have to be expended in the short and middle terms. Therefore, what elected officials, administrators, and the public face is the challenge of difficult tradeoffs among competing, equally desirable objectives, requiring expenditures from a finite source, some of which pay off in the shorter run than Vibrant NEO. Elected officials, in particular, tend to prefer projects whose quick results redound to their reelection benefit.

Next, we focus on the functional-organizational characteristics and on the intangible: the collective decisionmaking capacity, traditions and processes, and local attitudes toward planning of exhibit 1 to assess NEOSCC's ability to encourage implementation of the Vibrant NEO framework. We consider the Buffalo project to be the most similar to NEOSCC for several reasons. Although most SCI-RPG program grantees face similar implementation challenges that make it advantageous to pursue a distributed rather than centralized approach, New York is a home rule state like Ohio, where individual municipalities have land use jurisdiction whereas the MPOs are primarily focused on transportation. As well, neither Northeast Ohio nor the Buffalo region has a regional governing body. However, in the Buffalo region, a history of key regional actors working together through the University of Buffalo's Regional Institute toward shared goals carried through implementation of the SCI project (Quebral, 2016). The steering committee guiding the planning also lacks a planning

mandate but had built sufficient trust across a smaller geographic region to have a stronger voice than NEOSCC. It meets regularly to identify grants and collaborative opportunities, programs to be aligned with the regional plans, and other collaborative opportunities to implement.

Despite this important similarity, two significant differences from NEOSCC account for the more successful Buffalo SCI experience. First, unlike in Northeast Ohio, Buffalo's business community remained very involved in the project; and second, a parallel regional planning initiative at the state level rewards with funding regions that collaborate. The strong alignment between the SCI plan and the state regional development plan reinforced private sector acceptance of the sustainability framework (interviewees). Significantly, the New York state agency that oversees regional economic development was part of the group that applied for the SCI and played a key role on the steering committee. State funding supported implementation. Some major state investments catalyzed projects that are aligned with the project. The SCI project helped to position the Buffalo region to compete for state funds.

The University of Buffalo was a key convener and anchor partner through the university's regional institute, which has a grant to provide technical assistance in the area of clean energy. In addition, the university contributes to implementation through a public citizen planning school. Communal learning and teaching the plan to citizens, community leaders, and city officials is a key part of the implementation. The individuals are expected to get involved in various projects that further the SCI goals and get training and technical expertise from students, faculty, and professionals at the school. Through their high-quality and intense public participation effort, Buffalo provided a ready pool of educated citizens who could effectively advocate for the implementation of sustainability principles.

NEOSCC has not yet developed any process guidance for the framework, or any tools for contingent arrangements that would provide incentives for members to act consistently with the Vibrant NEO framework. Beyond the SCI grant period, technical assistance is provided informally, if at all. The NEOSCC project is not unusual in this sense; planners tend to direct their attention to objectives and expected outcomes. Rarely do they incorporate into plans or frameworks the steps needed to achieve these outcomes, nor is it usual to incorporate into plans implementation milestones where review and adjustment might be warranted, given progress on the ground or contextual events that might warrant a course change. It is not clear that NEOSCC, with its structure and lack of formal mandate, would have been able to build in these process steps and commitments. In general, however, planning interim commitments should become both a best practice and an evaluation criterion for plans.

In terms of the type and quality of public participation, NEOSCC fell short. Several key constituencies needed for plan implementation were not involved in developing the Vibrant NEO framework. Specifically, most participants were public entities. Political and business leaders gave only tepid support during the planning process. As a result, no clear political or business champions emerged to advocate for the regional aspects of the plan. Worse yet, in Geauga, a largely suburban and rural county that is part of NOACA, county commissioners signed a resolution opposing the Vibrant

NEO framework, reflecting the attitudes of constituents active in groups opposing sustainability initiatives such as Agenda 21 (Sitarz, 1993).<sup>6</sup> These groups had their largest impact in Geauga although they were also active in other parts of the region.

Recognizing that business should be at the implementation decision table, NEOSCC participants changed the composition of the board during the postgrant launch phase. The plan had been for the Launch Board to be comprised of one-third government, one-third business, and one-third nonprofit sector members. Nevertheless, public entities ended up occupying 60 percent of the Launch Board positions, with 17 percent going to nonprofits, and 19 percent to developers and architects from the private sector. One task of the Launch Board, albeit voluntary, is to track accomplishments. Once per quarter the partners are to submit reports. However, no one is tracking these reports or applying to them any performance measures. Other SCI projects are facing similar issues.

As in other SCI projects, the responsibility for advocacy, technical assistance, and data collection and distribution at a regional level is dispersed and ad hoc. However, other legacy regions such as Buffalo and St. Louis have a designated organization tracking their progress and offering technical assistance to communities that want to develop plans aligned with the SCI principles and frameworks. Northeast Ohio lacks such an entity. For the Buffalo project, the University of Buffalo is playing this monitoring role as an ongoing activity through its Regional Institute although it too is done on an in-kind basis, without a dedicated funding stream to support the work. In contrast, no entity is formally tasked with tracking Vibrant NEO progress although members are asked to report NEOSCC-related “news” to NOACA. Without clearly defined roles and responsibilities for tracking progress or implementing the framework among the members, and in the absence of a dedicated funding source to support even part of a full-time equivalent (FTE) on an ongoing basis, regular tracking, reporting, and evaluation are extremely difficult. To keep sustainability in the public eye, and to maintain relevancy and momentum for the plan, it helps to promote actions that are going to align with the plan.

Local deviations from the course set by the Vibrant NEO framework are to be expected throughout the Northeast Ohio region, which leads us to ask: to what extent can any portion of the region deviate from Vibrant NEO before the framework loses its coherence and its ability to steer the region toward sustainability? How would progress toward sustainability and deviations from it be assessed? How could one prevent a complete unraveling by the plan’s horizon of 2040? Collaborative decisionmaking at the regional level might contribute to plan implementation, provided the Vibrant NEO process promotes and sustains collaborative decision processes among regional decisionmakers and local communities. While it is too early to tell, unless the Vibrant NEO implementers engage in concerted, directed efforts to tend to the collaborative aspects, this project is unlikely to attain its horizon-year target.

Early signs are not boding well for the collaborative. Citizens from across the region repeatedly express support for regional, collaborative, and sustainable approaches. However, to implement

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<sup>6</sup> In 1992, the United Nations passed a nonbinding action plan called Agenda 21 that encouraged cities to pursue sustainable development. Despite no formal adoption of the policy in the United States, some activists view it as a limit on property rights.

such approaches, decisionmakers have to expend serious political capital at the local level. So far, politicians have been reluctant to make hard decisions to change development patterns. Further, key state institutions such as the Ohio Department of Transportation and the Governor's office were not involved in the NEOSCC effort, resulting in very little state support for collaborative regional planning (interviewee).

The decisionmakers' reluctance to collaborate and change course is partly due to the fact that, despite NEOSCC's attempt at community engagement, the level of grassroots awareness of Vibrant NEO in the Northeast Ohio region is quite low. It is insufficient to motivate politicians to take risks. Bringing people in the region together, engaging, and consulting them could have been easier had the Vibrant NEO target region been a subset of the 12 counties it included. With a smaller region, interdependence arguments for regional collaboration ("we're all in it together") would have been more compelling to residents. Instead, the participation process effectively elicited public input on goals and values, enough to give NEOSCC members a sense that the recommendations reflect what people want (interviewee) but not necessarily sufficient to support actions. Nevertheless, engaging the public even to a small extent across the 12 counties may have laid the groundwork for future collaborations, which may not happen at all otherwise.

NEOSCC's failure to build capacity to continue beyond the grant is proving to be a major challenge. In part, this failure is a consequence of NEOSCC's lack of formal planning and implementation mandate. As one interviewee observed, it is difficult enough to produce and implement plans with a mandate. All the MPOs in Northeast Ohio have agreed to implement the Vibrant NEO framework by incorporating its principles in their regional strategic plans and long-range transportation plans. Ozawa, Shmueli, and Kaufman (2017) argued that agencies' readiness to implement principles can sometimes stem from their intent to take the recommended actions anyway. In the Vibrant NEO case, the MPOs acting as good regional partners costs nothing and provides some benefits. Their buy-in would have been tested if they had had to expend additional resources and change their course.

The conceptual reframing of Vibrant NEO from a plan to a framework was helpful in easing the NEOSCC members' concerns regarding interference with their local decision processes. A plan may direct the specific siting of various land uses for the collective regional benefit, but at the expense, perceived or actual, of certain parts of the region. In contrast, a framework consists of decision principles that serve a set of jointly agreed-upon guidelines, without specifics. Thus, local decisionmakers remain free to act as they prefer, as long as they abide by the principles of the framework. For example, encouraging the location of businesses at the existing cores is a principle that can be implemented in any way that seems feasible locally. It was relatively easy for NEOSCC members to agree on such broad planning principles across the 12-county region, such as "reinvest in core areas."<sup>7</sup> Predictably, however, conflicts arise when the time comes to act on the framework principles. Examples of decisions that could be expected to generate conflict and intraregional competition include where to invest the regionally available resources in infrastructure; how to attract new businesses to core areas; where to change zoning for an equitable distribution of affordable housing; or how to provide transportation access for workers to lower-wage job centers. In other words,

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<sup>7</sup> Ozawa, Shmueli, and Kaufman (2017) dubbed such general, unobjectionable principles "motherhood and apple pie": they fit in nearly every region of the nation, and it is easy to garner consensus around them in the abstract.

unsurprisingly, when NEOSCC members realize concretely what the lofty goals and principles of the Vibrant NEO framework mean for their constituents in the short run (rather than at the 2040 horizon), the ensuing conflicts overwhelm and override the consensus around principles.

## **Conclusions**

Any regional planning effort has supporters and critics. The direct participants in NEOSCC whom we interviewed believe the region will be better off for having the Vibrant NEO framework. However, expecting NEOSCC, without a formal mandate, to become the regional planning entity for 12 counties may have been too ambitious. As in other regions, as a result of NEOSCC's lack of mandate, the Vibrant NEO project implementation has to rely on the organizations in the region that do have "agency" to plan. NEOSCC faced some additional challenges resulting from the region's lack of will to plan. These challenges are related to the three classes of factors laid out at the beginning of this article (exhibit 1) that affect plan implementation: tangible characteristics, governance, and collective decisionmaking capacity.

Among the tangible obstacles to implementation, we deem the most important to be the scale of the undertaking. Selecting the boundaries of a region for planning purposes is complicated, with pros and cons for broad and narrow definitions. In our case, NEOSCC chose the broad approach, with several disadvantages, especially for an undertaking with no mandate and no history of collaborative planning at that scale. In its current configuration NEOSCC lacks the public mandate for change that might keep the project going. Setting aside the logistical difficulties, this region encompassed too many differences—rural and urban, wealthy and poor, growing and shrinking—so the affected stakeholders were bound to have very divergent interests that proved difficult to bridge. Arguably, this difficult situation would not have been the case had the planning region included fewer counties sharing more physical and socioeconomic characteristics and a higher degree of interdependence. A narrower definition of the planning region would also have made possible more meaningful public participation and buy-in, which in turn would help propel the effort into the future.

In terms of governance obstacles to implementation, NEOSCC's lack of agency and resources, beyond those secured through the SCI-RPG program grant, undermines its ability to continue to bring its members to one decision table, to encourage collaboration and to support and advocate for the principles put forth in its planning framework. NEOSCC was very careful to call its work a framework and not a plan. This distinction is meaningful—many decisions can be construed as consistent with a framework; this is more difficult with a plan. Arguably, plans obsolesce faster than frameworks and are more difficult to update when necessary, due to the need for plans to be guided by a specific sense of how people will live in the future, and to make spatially specific siting choices for specific land uses. The longer the time horizon of the plan, the more likely it becomes that technological, economic, and lifestyle changes will make some or even most of the planned allocations unnecessary or outright undesirable. By looking back for a number of years comparable to the plans horizon instead of trying to guess ahead, it is sometimes easier to realize how much has changed in this equivalent time span. For example, 25 years ago (the distance in the past about equivalent to Vibrant NEO's horizon) we travelled, worked, shopped, communicated, used



energy, and accessed information quite differently from today. Planning decisions responding to those needs are now obsolete. In contrast, a framework that proposes to conserve open spaces, protect the natural environment, or diversify energy sources and transportation modes—without specifics on how to do it—runs a lesser risk than a plan to become meaningless in 25 years. It has been argued (for example, Grübler, 2003) that the pace of technology development is accelerating. In such a context, attention to the assumptions we make about the future when devising plans becomes even more important.

NEOSCC made a point of empowering local leaders and residents to make planning decisions. This empowerment helped to allay concerns voiced by local governments and gave the process greater legitimacy. Plan implementers can never rest; they must continuously communicate with the public and evaluate and update plans in response to changing conditions. To do so, the many decisions about projects and their funding that affect the planning space need to be tracked, assessed for consistency with the plan, and communicated back to the public, as is being done in other SCI regions. In Northeast Ohio, it remains up to each MPO to abide by the proposed Vibrant NEO framework or deviate from it, as they deem necessary and consistent with their duties. If deviations accumulate, the framework runs the risk of becoming nothing but a document on a shelf or website, a fate shared with many regional plans.

With respect to collective decisionmaking capacity, NEOSCC's nonprofit structure was unsustainable. It undermined its ability to attract and hold potential funders' interest. NEOSCC's failure to achieve buy-in from the political and business communities limited its ability to make the case that the seven metropolitan areas in the counties were sufficiently interdependent to be "all in it together." One sign of lack of collective interest in the Vibrant NEO framework has been, and continues to be, the absence of political or business champions for making the changes necessary to implement the sustainability plan. The "trend" scenario, consisting of trend projections, depicted a regional future no different from the recent past, which led to an unsustainable use of resources, as localities continue to fight for their share of a shrinking pie. Had NEOSCC successfully persuaded decisionmakers and the public of the need for a course change, we would have expected it to trigger a broader public conversation, to call for regional collaboration and for concerted regional efforts to take action to buck the trend. However, civic and political leaders have failed to call for such joint action. The region's MPOs are the only agencies stepping up to meet regional challenges and solve the problems.

In the end, NEOSCC was not able to channel the relationships that were built among decisionmakers, the scenario planning and fiscal impact analysis tools, or the fair housing plans, to fundamentally change decisionmaking processes in the region. However, the strategy it championed—investing in core areas—is wise for Northeast Ohio. As a legacy region, it must adapt to its current circumstances (declining population and resources and growing urban sprawl). The first remaining challenge is finding ways to implement investment, mostly in core areas, in the absence of local and state government incentives to do so. The second challenge is to engage in collaborative decisions consistent with that goal. Such engagement is not outside the realm of possibilities. The NEOSCC initiative has set the table for continued conversations among the region's decisionmakers by surfacing their joint interests and getting them to think regionally. Grace Gallucci (2016) has expressed hope, saying, "If we haven't done anything else, we have created a mental map across the



region that enables better decisions at the county and metro levels. Even though it's a more informal structure, if it can get the job done it will suffice." However, more needs to be done to take this framework and its core principles to the point where key decisionmakers change the way they act and begin to help the region "Do Things Differently/Grow Differently" by setting it on a different path.

It takes great political courage to join forces across the region and to overcome the barriers of race and income that divide Northeast Ohio. Georgine Welo, the mayor of South Euclid, one of Cleveland's inner ring suburbs and a long-time political observer, said, "We fail at regionalism because we can't find political solutions. We don't recognize that sharing strengthens us, not weakens us." Despite the drawbacks mentioned, the Vibrant NEO project has value both in terms of process and products. It resides mainly in the framework, data platform, and fiscal impact tools, which are likely to continue to be used in comprehensive planning throughout the region. The implementation of the Vibrant NEO framework will depend on the extent to which the many organizations with "agency," for example MPOs and other planning agencies in the region, voluntarily align their plans with the framework. The true test, however, will be whether they can ever agree to collaborate on major development and infrastructure investment decisions.

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