

TIMES ♦ LEADER

Expanding the Meaning of Common Good

By [Mark Guydish mguydish@timesleader.com](mailto:mguydish@timesleader.com)

Education Reporter

October 2, 2007

David Rusk can't boast the best hearing – he bears the trademark round plastic device on his skull for a cochlear implant – but his vision proves crisp and far-sighted.

The former mayor of Albuquerque and peripatetic proponent of regionalization presents a potent case, if you take off your provincial blinders and allow your own view to broaden a bit.

Municipal boundaries become meaningless in daily activities, Rusk argued. With so many small boroughs and townships in our area, people often sleep in one, work in another, shop in a third. “You live your lives crossing municipal lines every day.”

Rusk, who spoke to a crowd of local community leaders Thursday, hunts for the way borders ought be drawn to reflect the way people live. So, when he asked “what's the real city of Wilkes-Barre?” and offered two definitions, you knew which one he'd pick:

“Is it a 7-square-mile, 43,000-person municipality, or an 86-square-mile urbanized area where 210,000 residents live, work, shop and play, crossing municipal boundaries constantly.”

If Rusk had his way, “Wilkes-Barre” would actually be Wilkes-Barre, Nanticoke, Pittston, Ashley, Avoca, Courtdale, Dallas, Dupont, Edwardsville, Forty Fort, Harveys Lake, Hughestown, Kingston, Laflin, Luzerne, Plymouth, Pringle, Sugar Notch, Swoyersville, Wyoming, Warrior Run, Yatesville and parts of 18 other burgs.

All told, 41 “little boxes,” as Rusk called them, would be one “big box.”

Time for a game plan

Of course, the outcry at such a concept would kill the plan the moment it was uttered, and the politicians present Thursday knew this. As Luzerne County Commissioner Greg Skrepenak noted, it makes no difference “that the social problems affecting us don't stay in those little boxes.”

Skrep's former fellow commissioner Todd Vonderheid spoke eloquently about his belief that financial woes will force municipalities to start thinking regionally on things like police and fire protection. "You come to it either through enlightenment or crisis," Todd said, "I think the reality in our case is not to hope for enlightenment."

As sad as it is true. Even as local boroughs and townships find themselves so cash-strapped they have to shrink or eliminate their police departments, they still snub the idea of regional police forces, refusing to trust their protection, even in part, to another municipality. Meanwhile, the crooks don't care who's running the PD, they just care about getting caught. And as Vonderheid noted, a recent study showed they aren't getting caught as much as they used to around here.

When asked why prosperous outlying townships would ever decide to regionalize with decaying inner cities, Rusk turned the question back to the crowd, and Vonderheid again gave the eloquent answer. Studies show that the problems of older cities migrate to prosperous surrounding areas. "It's going to be their problem eventually. Those who chose to organize differently will be the ones who prosper."

Rusk offered an innovative strategy for overcoming the inertia: Create "communities of common interest." Residents of several municipalities could debate and vote on regionalizing a given service. The decision would still rest in local hands, but it would rest in *everyone's* hands. A single municipality could no longer scuttle an idea the majority in the "community of common interest" wanted. It's worth consideration.

Frankly, if you can really look around our region and see nothing but a rosy *status quo* worth preserving, you might want to get your vision checked.

Call Mark Guydish at 829-7161 or e-mail mguydish@timesleader.com