Metro Vancouver, Canada, is a consortium of 22 municipalities. It provides a broad range of region-wide services to 2.3 million people including water, sewer and solid waste utilities, air quality, regional parks, social housing and regional strategic development planning. This case examines Metro Vancouver’s collaborative governance model and its application in regional development planning. It illustrates the functions of an inter-municipal consortium in addressing urban development and environmental protection matters that have both regional and local impacts.

Context

Metro Vancouver is consortium of 22 municipalities, one First Nations (aboriginal) government and one unincorporated area located at the mouth of the Fraser River in the Province of British Columbia, Canada (Figure 1). The region’s population of 2.3 million is accommodated in municipalities which range in size from the City of Vancouver, the central city of the region with over 600,000 people, to villages of less than 1000 people.

Collaborative governance

Functions

In Canada, the structure and authority of municipal and regional governments are defined by the provincial governments. Regional functions in Metro Vancouver have generally evolved through a process
of municipalities deciding to collaborate to provide services for reasons of cost or effectiveness, upward delegation of the responsibility to deliver those services to a regional organization, and confirmation of the regional organization’s authority to provide the services through provincial legislation. In the early part of the 20th century, municipalities formed two consortia for utility services: the Greater Vancouver Sewerage and Drainage District (GVS&DD) and the Greater Vancouver Water District (GVWD). Inter-municipal cooperation on regional planning dates from the early 1950s with the establishment of the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board. In 1967, the Province established the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) to bring together the increasing number of single purpose consortia and ensure equal access to commonly needed services. The number of municipalities in the consortium has gradually grown as the population increased and the urban region expanded. In 2008, the GVRD adopted the name ‘Metro Vancouver’ in order to communicate more effectively to the region’s public, and at national and international levels, the Board’s integrated approach to providing regional services. Today, Metro Vancouver incorporates four legal corporations – GVRD, GVS&DD, GVWD and the Metro Vancouver Housing Corporation (MVHC) – with a common political board and unified staff.
Metro Vancouver has essentially three main functions as set out in Figure 2. Set within the context of the Metro Vancouver Board’s Sustainability Framework Vision and Principles, the organization:

- Provides regional services in conjunction with municipalities. These include water, sewerage and solid waste disposal in which Metro Vancouver provides regional services (watersheds, dams, water purification system, major trunk lines, sewer treatment plants, landfills, waste-to-energy incinerator) and municipalities provide local distribution or collection systems. Metro Vancouver’s services also include regional parks to complement parks provided by other levels of government, social housing for low income families, seniors and people with disabilities, and labour relations on behalf of municipalities.

- Develops plans, policies and regulations for the utility services it provides, the provincially-delegated function of air quality management, and regional growth management. These plans are developed with reference to the plans of municipalities, transportation agencies and the federal and provincial governments.

- Political leadership for the region. Metro Vancouver serves as political forum for discussion of significant community issues at the regional level. This includes not only the issues for which it is responsible, such as solid waste management, but also other issues affecting municipalities such as safety and security.

Metro Vancouver’s functions have not been static over the years. Some functions have been considered but not pursued, most notably regional economic development. A role in financing hospitals from the property tax base was returned to the province in exchange for a requirement to partially finance regional transportation development. The province suspended Metro Vancouver’s powers for regional planning from 1983 to 1995, although the Board continued to undertake voluntary cooperative inter-municipal planning. The province has moved transportation responsibilities back and forth between the province and Metro Vancouver, most recently with the Metro Board responsible for choosing from among its members the Board of the regional transit and major roads agency, TransLink, from 1999 to 2007.
Political Structure

Metro Vancouver’s collaborative federation model is reflected in the governance arrangements set out in the provincial Local Government Act. Politicians are elected to their local municipal council, which in turn annually elects from among the council members the municipality’s representative(s) on the Metro Vancouver Board. A municipality receives one vote on the Metro Vancouver Board for every 20,000 residents and no Board Director may hold more than five votes. As a result, a small municipality will have one Director and one vote on the Metro Vancouver Board while a large municipality such as the City of Vancouver will have six Directors and 27 votes. The Metro Vancouver Board has 37 Directors comprising primarily the municipal mayors and senior councillors. The Board elects its Chair and Vice-Chair annually from among its members.

Figure 2. Metro Vancouver Sustainability Framework
The Board Chair establishes functional committees comprising Board Directors and other municipal politicians who do not serve on the Board to undertake the Board’s business. These include committees on finance, water, waste management, parks, housing, regional development, the environment and agriculture. The committees make recommendations to the Metro Vancouver Board which takes decisions.

**Communications and Public Engagement**

Metro Vancouver’s collaborative governance model relies on extensive communication and dialogue among the municipal partners, with other governments and their agencies, and with the public and economic sector. Key features of this process are:

- The large Board of Directors and committee structure which engages many municipal politicians in Metro Vancouver matters. This is supplemented by periodic Council of Council meetings which bring together the region’s 155 municipal elected officials to discuss critical issues. This ensures a flow of information among the consortium’s political leaders and provides opportunities to influence regional policy.

- Inter-municipal staff committees that bring together representatives of each participating municipality. These include administrative and technical committees on local government management, finance, engineering, planning and other matters. They ensure that municipal staff are informed and provide an opportunity for them to advise the Metro Vancouver staff and Board.

- An extensive public outreach program which includes television programs, community dialogues and conferences, web-based interaction and public meetings.

**Funding**

Metro Vancouver has 1400 employees, an annual budget of $CDN530 million and an annual construction expenditure of $CDN75-100 million depending upon the capital program. Revenue is primarily from utility fees and property tax, with senior government funding largely restricted to periodic contributions to major construction projects. Metro Vancouver’s
operating budget come from six main sources tied to the services provided by the legal corporations:

- Property tax requisitions for parks, air quality, regional growth planning (GVRD)
- Sewer levy (GVS&DD)
- Solid waste tipping fee (GVS&DD)
- Water sales (GVWD)
- Housing rents (MVHC)
- External revenues, reserves and other sources

**Development of a Regional Growth Strategy**

The development and management of Metro Vancouver’s Regional Growth Strategy is an example of the collaborative governance model. The Regional Growth Strategy is a long term framework for the region’s future land use that guides decisions on environmental protection and growth. It is a shared commitment by Metro Vancouver and member municipalities to work together to achieve sustainable regional goals. The integration of land use and transportation strategies is a central component of the strategy and key to how the region grows and changes in the future.

The Board’s approach and provincial legislation governing Regional Growth Strategies set out in the Local Government Act is based upon a non-hierarchical approach to developing policy that seeks a balance between regional and municipal objectives. The province does not approve Metro Vancouver’s Regional Growth Strategy but the legislation does require that municipal councils and the Metro Vancouver Board come to agreement on a plan.

The provincial Local Government Act provisions for Regional Growth Strategies contain a number of features supporting collaboration. These include:

- The development of a regional growth strategy that has the formal acceptance of each municipality prior to final approval by the Metro Vancouver Board. It also requires acceptance by the adjoining regional governments and by TransLink, the regional public transit agency. These organizations have 120 days to either accept or not accept the proposed Regional Growth Strategy.
• The requirement for Regional Context Statements as part of each municipal official plan which shows how they are consistent with the approved Regional Growth Strategy, or will be brought into consistency over time. This statement requires the approval of the Metro Vancouver Board.

• The provision of a dispute resolution process to be used in establishing a Regional Growth Strategy or a Regional Context Statement where the Metro Vancouver Board and a municipality or other organization disagree. If a non-binding resolution process is not successful, the legislation offers a number of options to ensure that the dispute is resolved:
  • settlement by peer panel composed of three persons selected with agreement of the Board and the local government;
  • proposal arbitration by a single arbitrator selected with agreement of the Board and the local government and no written decision;
  • full arbitration by a single arbitrator selected with agreement of the Board and the local government with a written decision.

While Metro Vancouver and its member municipalities are required to come to agreement on land use plans, there is a very weak legislative relationship with the provincial transportation component that is required for effective regional growth management. At present, TransLink is legislatively required to provide an opportunity for Metro Vancouver to comment on its strategic plans, Metro Vancouver is required to obtain TransLink’s acceptance of its Regional Growth Strategy, and TransLink’s Mayors’ Council comprising largely Metro Vancouver Board members plays a limited role in establishing TransLink’s strategic plans. There is no local involvement in provincial highway development.

In addition to legislated requirements, the Board can establish Implementation Agreements with other organizations to achieve specific objectives. While provided for in provincial legislation, these agreements are essentially statements of voluntary cooperation. For example, the Board has an Implementation Agreement with the provincial Agricultural Land Commission which is responsible for designation of agricultural land use areas.

Development of a Regional Growth Strategy requires opportunities for input by citizens, First Nations, school boards and other district boards, and with provincial and federal governments and their agencies. In part,
this is done through an Intergovernmental Advisory Committee involving provincial, municipal and regional officials. There is no prescribed process for public consultation but it can include meetings with municipal councils, public meetings and regional dialogues as well as other methods to collect and assess feedback.

Livable Region Strategic Plan and Metro Vancouver 2040

Metro Vancouver’s current Regional Growth Strategy, the Livable Region Strategic Plan (LRSP), was adopted in 1996. It built upon previous collaborative inter-municipal plans adopted in 1966 (Official Regional Plan), 1975 (Livable Region Strategy) and 1980 (Updated Official Regional Plan). The LRSP is used by the Board, municipalities and other organizations as the framework for making regional land use and transportation decisions.

The Livable Region Strategic Plan is being updated through an extensive consultation process involving municipalities, the general public and a wide range of community interest groups. Based upon the concept of sustainability, the proposed Regional Growth Strategy entitled “Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping Our Future” has five key goals:

- Create a Compact Urban Area
- Support a Sustainable Economy
- Protect the Region’s Environment and Respond to Climate Change
- Develop Complete Communities
- Support Sustainable Transportation Choices.

Implementation Through Agreements

Implementation of the Regional Growth Strategy is in part through Metro Vancouver’s services and its ability to influence the plans of other governments but primarily it is through Regional Context Statements which are part of municipal Official Community Plans. Once Metro Vancouver has adopted a Regional Growth Strategy, each municipality must prepare within two years an updated Regional Context Statement showing how local plans will help to achieve regional objectives or, where necessary, how they will evolve over time to become more consistent. These are submitted to the Metro Vancouver Board for acceptance. The Regional Context Statement is a means of protecting a municipal council’s authority
to make local planning decisions while ensuring that the council and the regional board agree upon matters of legitimate regional interest. If Metro Vancouver does not accept a Regional Context Statement, it must notify the local government and indicate the provisions to which it objects and the reasons for its objections within a specified period of time. Resolution of conflicts regarding Regional Context Statements is governed by the same legislation as for Regional Growth Strategy.

**Outcomes**

Metro Vancouver is widely known as one of the world’s most livable regions because of its spectacular natural setting, high standard of living and environmental quality. The practice of collaborative governance among municipalities over many years through Metro Vancouver and its predecessor organizations has helped to guide development and provide cost-effective urban services. The Metro Vancouver model, however, is challenged in a number of significant ways.

The governance model provides few institutional arrangements for collaboration between Metro Vancouver and the provincial government. This is an important relationship because the Province sets Metro Vancouver’s governance arrangements, approves regional plans for liquid and solid waste, determines environmental standards, and provides important regional services such as highways, public transit and agricultural land protection. While there is dialogue between Metro Vancouver and the province at both political and staff levels, the absence of a well-developed collaborative process can result in a misalignment of objectives. This is particularly critical for the Regional Growth Strategy’s ability to coordinate land use, which is governed by municipalities, and major transportation facilities, which are governed by the province.

A second major challenge is the requirement for a very high level of agreement among the consortium municipalities on policy and actions. As a consensus-based, collaborative federation, Metro Vancouver invests considerable time in seeking solutions that meet the needs of all its members. In the case of the Regional Growth Strategy, provincial legislation requires that all municipalities agree with the Strategy prior to Board approval. As a result, the significant compromises required to establish plans or actions may not serve the region in the longer term.
A third issue is whether Metro Vancouver’s extensive collaborative governance model is the most appropriate to manage the issues of urban development of the 21st century. In recent years, Canada’s two other major metropolitan regions experienced governance change as the Province of Ontario amalgamated the municipalities of Metro Toronto into a single City of Toronto and the Province of Quebec undertook significant amalgamation of local government functions in the Montreal region. In Metro Vancouver, the number of consortium members is increasing and there is a growth in special purpose collaborative structures to address increasingly complex region-wide issues such as safety and security. The future may require stronger Metro Vancouver political leadership through a part of the Board being directly elected rather than appointed by municipalities and a consolidation of some organizations to provide equitable and efficient decision making and services.

Questions for Consideration

1. The Metro Vancouver Board of Directors comprises municipal councillors appointed by each member of the consortium. The Directors must both consider what is best for the region as a whole and what is best for their municipality. What dilemmas might this present? How might they resolve them?

2. Metro Vancouver’s strategic plans often address longer term matters such as the growth of the region and investment in utility services over the coming decades which may not be of immediate interest to the public. What approaches might be used to engage people and organizations in regional issues to ensure they reflect public values?

3. Metro Vancouver’s Regional Growth Strategy presents objectives for the region’s future land use and transportation development. The transportation system, however, is the responsibility of the province which is not closely engaged in development of the Strategy. How might Metro Vancouver most effectively engage the Province on land use and transportation coordination?