

International Perspective on Transit

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The Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC), the planning district for the fourteen local governments in Northern Virginia, has a partnership with the Verband Region Stuttgart (www.region-stuttgart.org), a region of 179 local governments in Germany. Recently I participated in a week-long, privately-funded visit to Stuttgart in a dozen-person delegation of government and community leaders to learn from the experiences the Germans have had with a regional governance.

NVRC (www.novaregion.org) is not well known because it provides few services directly to citizens. Its planning role is limited by the reticence of local governments to give up powers to a regional body and the unwillingness of the state legislature to grant direct power to the planning district commissions (PDCs) throughout the state. PDCs in Virginia have the responsibility to encourage and facilitate on a regional basis problems of greater than local significance. The PDCs assist local governments but have no power over them.

In contrast, regional governments in Germany are given significant powers and duties. The Verband (or association) Region Stuttgart, our host for the tour, has its own directly elected representatives of the population, the Regional Assembly, that has responsibility for regional infrastructure, land use, and transportation policies as well as the job of business and tourist marketing, operating the public transportation system, and waste management. As the very professional staff who directed our study of the region explained it, "The central aim of the Verband is to marshal the forces of the 179 independent municipalities within the Stuttgart conglomeration in order to enable the region to compete effectively at the European and the world level."

The planning function has the goal "of developing the Region on a sustainable basis and to ensure it has a secure future." The regional plan covering 10 to 15 years designates areas that can be used for housing, commerce and industry, and "green belts and zones." Local governments are required to follow the plan. Integrated with the land use plan is a traffic and transportation plan that includes roads, railways, and bicycle paths.

The regional government operates through contracts with private companies the extensive electric railway system of the region. Trains run on time, and extensive use of technology makes it easy to use the public transportation system. Currently, 37 percent of all trips in the city of Stuttgart, which has a population of 580,000, and 47 percent of all trips to the center of the city are made by public transportation.

There are clear advantages to the integrated land use and transportation plans of the region. But those advantages are realized when a regional body has clear authority. There are lessons to be learned from the experiences of others that have application to our region.