



**Blue Ribbon Panel
Report to the Board of Delegates**

August 11, 2010

Background

Manager Focus Groups

As regional needs change, Centralina Council of Governments (CCOG) recognizes that it must adapt to better meet the needs of its member governments and serve the region. CCOG conducted focus group meetings with the region's managers in October 2009. Three regional meetings were held in Gastonia, Matthews, and Salisbury and were attended by city and county managers and assistant managers from jurisdictions throughout the region. Specifically, the purpose of the focus group study was to gather input from professional managers in our region to assess CCOG's roles. This study was completed by Fountainworks, LLC.

Blue Ribbon Panel Purpose and Charge

Utilizing the input from the Manager Focus Groups, CCOG proactively created a Blue Ribbon Panel to make recommendations on the future roles of CCOG and determine ways to renew the organization's focus.

The State of North Carolina is divided into seventeen regions, for planning purposes and for State program administration. Each region has a designated Lead Regional Organization (LRO), as the focal point for planning and program administration. Centralina Council of Governments is the designated LRO for the Greater Charlotte Region. What is most important to the discussions of the Blue Ribbon Panel is what we **do** with that designation?

Centralina was formed in the late 1960's and in its four decades has offered a wide range of programs and services. Some of these have ended because they were no longer needed, and some are relatively new to meet emerging needs.

The Panel considered the following issues:

- The changing environment facing our local governments, region, state and nation;
- Centralina's structure and current roles;
- The great diversity in CCOG membership and their expectations;
- Immediate actions and strategies to ensure the vitality of the organizations;
- Measures to enhance our member services and to better serve the regional needs;
- The right mission for Centralina at this time and for the next 3-5 years.

The Panel consisted of County and City elected officials and managers and was facilitated by The Aycock Group, to help guide the discussion. CCOG staff was available to provide information and answer questions.

The Blue Ribbon Panel completed its work during five meetings in March, April, and May 2010. The meetings worked in progression leading to a set of recommendations. This Final Report represents the Panel's recommendations to be shared with the CCOG Executive Board and Board of Delegates for their consideration and implementation.

The Blue Ribbon Panel

| First Name | Title | Jurisdiction |
|-------------------|--|------------------------|
| Anna Baucom | Board Chairman | Anson County |
| Elizabeth Poole | County Commissioner | Cabarrus County |
| Lindsey Dunevant | County Commissioner | Stanly County BOC |
| Jan Winters | County Manager | Gaston County |
| Scott Padgett | Mayor | City of Concord |
| Patsy Kinsey | Councilperson | City of Charlotte |
| Jennifer Roberts | Board Chairman | Mecklenburg Co. BOC |
| Wayne Herron | City Manager | City of Monroe |
| Sara Haire Tice | Past Board Chairman | Iredell County |
| Jill Swain | Mayor | Town of Huntersville |
| Mary Ponds | Mayor | Town of Granite Quarry |
| Hazen Blodgett | Town Manager | Town of Matthews |
| George Wood | County Manager | Lincoln County |
| John Howren | Councilman | City of Gastonia |
| Lanny Openshaw | County Commissioner | Union County |
| Bob Misenheimer | Mayor, Chairman to CCOG Board | City of Kannapolis |
| Martha Sue Hall | Councilperson, Vice- Chairman to CCOG Board | City of Albemarle |

Measures of Success

The Panel members, at their initial meeting, were asked to answer the following question:

What would success look like at the end of this project?

The Panel identified the following items as answers to the above question, which served as a progress report of the Panel's work.

- Determine outcomes desired to be accomplished by CCOG and methods to demonstrate short term and long term results.
- Explore the role of regionalism and the role of CCOG in regionalism. Are there other examples? Does the structure support cooperation?
- Have an honest conversation on what makes CCOG viable and not viable today.
- Develop balanced recommendations that reflect the dichotomy of governments (small and large, urban and rural, technical and policy).
- Create clear recommendations with a statement or statements on the vision, role, services and programs for CCOG including explaining benefits.
- Prioritize and focus on “what we do well” and core competencies, while “shedding or sharing” services/programs, as appropriate.
- Gain a better understanding of what CCOG currently does and its potential.
- Develop recommendations to update the website and reflect the work of the Blue Ribbon Panel.
- Consider and involve the views of people who “are not here” and are not involved or interested in CCOG.

The Process

Meeting 1, March 5

The Panel discussed the most important contextual changes and issues that affect the current and/or future work of CCOG. Opportunities and challenges for the CCOG were identified based on the changes and issues that were identified. The Panel also requested more intensive briefing on the current services and programs of the CCOG.

Meeting 2, March 29

The staff of the CCOG presented current CCOG programs in response to the Panel's request. Following discussion of services, program operations, and funding structures, the Panel stated support for continuation of the Aging, Workforce Development and Economic Development programs as currently configured. These programs not only have a positive impact on the region through direct services or as a precursor for job creation; for the most part, they have stable, continuing funding sources and generate indirect costs that help to support relevant agency operations. Of the three programs, Economic Development is the only program that requires an infusion of funding from CCOG above any matching requirements.

In the discussion of regional planning, the Panel identified air quality, water quality/quantity and transportation as the priorities about which they wanted further information. CCOG has a role in each of these topic areas, either as a result of SEQL, CONNECT, individual project grants, or provision of technical assistance or regional partnerships addressing the issues. Each of these is a regional issue that affects multiple jurisdictions, and in which regional action is needed for effective solutions. All three are issues where the CCOG could have leadership and impact and all three are important to the membership the CCOG serves. However, none of the three topic areas has a stable funding source that supports regional planning or programs for the CCOG region.

The final outcome of the meeting, following a budget presentation, was a consensus that it is very difficult to shift any discretionary funding within CCOG, because there is very little discretionary funding available for programs.

Meeting 3, April 15

The Panel confirmed their recommendation to maintain the programs of Aging, Workforce Development and Economic Development as currently configured. The Panel then explored the priorities they had identified in the previous meeting of air quality, water quality/quantity and transportation using the following questions for each priority:

- What are possible CCOG roles?
- What impact should/can the CCOG have?
- What would success look like?

- How would local governments feel about regional action?

They requested a white paper on each topic area based on their discussion for the next meeting. The paper would outline any current CCOG roles in these topic areas, how this compared with the work of regional planning agencies nationally and/or against regional needs, and a discussion of how any disconnects between the current program of work in these three areas, and what the Blue Ribbon Panel wanted to see done, could be addressed.

Meeting 4, May 5

Staff presented brief Transportation, Air Quality, and Water Resource papers at this meeting, and the Panel discussed each.

Because CCOG is already conducting a Regional Transportation Planning Study that focuses on the transportation topic, the Blue Ribbon Panel recommended transportation as a priority, but agreed that the topic should be further development up when the Study is complete (early fall).

Air quality was discussed next and identified as the highest priority. CCOG already does a great deal of work in this area through the CONNECT Regional Environmental Cabinet, the Regional Air Quality Work Group, and as carry-overs from various SEQL outreach projects as funding is available. However, the lack of a reliable funding source has made it difficult to produce a strong, consistent program of messaging and implementation. That is the major difference between what CCOG now does and what national models and the Panel suggests is a consistent, coherent program of messaging and measures for implementation, for systematic emission and regional reductions.

Water quality/quantity (water resources) was the third topic discussed, because it has been such a critical and potentially divisive issue in the region. There is a strong state regulatory structure and limited local expertise in water planning that is not specifically infrastructure-related. Furthermore, there are a number of legislative and regulatory actions and/or proposals that are under consideration for addressing questions related to allocation, inter-basin transfer, and related topics. Given the tentative regulatory environment, the Blue Ribbon Panel chose to consider water resources as a major priority, but agreed that the most important role for CCOG at this time is monitoring and informing local governments about pending proposals and their potential impacts.

Panel members present also noted that CCOG had not done a good job informing its membership about its work in these areas, and recommended a more holistic and comprehensive outreach program to inform members of these and other CCOG services. It was agreed that this outreach/marketing effort should include the continued programs of Aging, Workforce Development, and Economic Development, and this outreach/marketing effort is also added as a key strategy.

Meeting 5, May 26

The Blue Ribbon Panel adopted its final recommendations for the Centralina Council of Governments Executive Board and Board of Delegates.

Final Recommendations

A. Emerging Priorities

The Blue Ribbon Panel determined that CCOG should focus its planning efforts on the following three priority areas: **Air Quality, Water Quantity and Quality, and Transportation.**

The Panel agreed that these issues are regional in nature and critical areas where CCOG could have significant long term impacts. Although these three issues may currently lack structure, policy direction, mandates and resources, the issues are interrelated and need to be guided by a comprehensive planning effort.

The Panel, in its focus on these three issues, has the desire for CCOG to think in new and innovative ways in order to serve the members and the region on these emerging priorities.

The Panel's rationale for establishing these priorities are included, along with a set of recommended action strategies for the successful implementation of these emerging priorities.

1. Air quality

Air quality is a regional issue and can have a direct impact on economic development prospects and transportation funding, as well as on human health and regional quality of life. Cities and counties address air quality at the micro-level, and broader regional approaches are needed to create a "critical mass" of actions that significantly influence emissions reductions. Coordinated and consistent messaging is needed, both to raise awareness of the issue and to engage the public, local governments and business in more focused meaningful action. Air quality, on a regional basis, is not being driven by any other regional leader, although a number of entities are addressing this issue from various directions.

- **Establish** air quality as the highest priority for the Centralina Council of Governments.
- **Fund** air quality work by identifying dedicated and sustainable sources of funding.
- **Identify** federal and corporate grants to stabilize and ramp-up the limited current air quality program and jump start a systematic regional program.

- **Plan** a position description and funding for the hiring of an air quality professional to staff an expanded, sustainable program at the CCOG.
- **Collaborate** with local governments by seeking the commitment of cities and counties to loan local air quality experts (at no cost to the CCOG) as the program continues to develop.
- **Advocate** by encouraging local governments to add support for a regional air quality program at the CCOG to the legislative agenda of their federal lobbyists.
- **Continue** to convene staff, business, and leadership to identify and implement actions to reduce mobile source emissions, a major cause of the air quality problem in the region.

2. Water Quantity and Quality

State regulatory measures, and potentially state legislation, on water are changing. Local governments need to remain informed. There is a desire for local governments and the region to have influence in charting their own future instead of relying only on the state to set the direction. Growth in the region leads to the need to plan for water quality/quantity. The issue of water quality/quantity is larger than any local government can individually address. There needs to be a seamless regional water quality/quantity plan.

- **Convene and Coordinate** discussions on water quality and water quantity that include education, advocacy, gathering of resources, and collaboration.
- **Encourage** water quality/quantity meetings to be hosted by local governments in the region.
- **Inform** local governments of relevant water quality/quantity legislation and regulations.
- **Collaborate** with local governments by seeking the commitment of cities and counties to loan local water quality/quantity experts (at no cost to the CCOG) to pool technical resources.

3. Transportation Planning

Because the Regional Transportation Planning Study will answer many of the questions of interest to the Blue Ribbon Panel (and local governments throughout the region), the course of action for transportation should be determined after the completion of the Study.

- **Recommend** a course of action after the Regional Transportation Planning Study is completed.
- **Resolve** issues raised by the study looking particularly at measures for stronger regional voice in funding and project selection, and determine leadership role, by Fall 2010.

B. Core Services as a Priority

The Blue Ribbon Panel also recommends that CCOG continue the following three core services: **Area Agency on Aging, Workforce Development, and Economic Development.**

The Panel determined that these core services are important to the region, valuable to the members and also have dedicated funding streams that already exist. Aging and Workforce Development are self supporting and economic development is partially self-funded and requires CCOG match.

- **Continue** these programs in their current configuration.
- **Market** these programs to better explain services and opportunities to local governments and the public, including the business community.

C. Marketing for CCOG Programs

The Blue Ribbon Panel believes that the CCOG needs to “tell its story better.” Local governments, in general, and even active members are not aware of all the services and benefits that the CCOG currently offers. The public is often unaware of the CCOG’s existence and impact on the region, making it harder to create support for regional initiatives. CCOG’s three most stable program—Aging, Workforce Development and Economic Development—have broad regional impacts and have been in existence for years and need to be better marketed. Planning needs to be better defined in light of the broader identified policy needs and then marketed as the future regional solutions for the issues at hand.

D. Source data

Comprehensive program inventories on each of the four major areas: **[Area Agency on Aging, Workforce Development, Community and Economic Development, and Planning and Sustainability](#)** are available on CCOG’s webpage: **<http://www.centralina.org/brp.htm>**

**PLANNING DEPARTMENT ADDENDUM
to
Blue Ribbon Panel Report**

The Blue Ribbon Panel (BRP) has pointed out that from a “planning perspective” CCOG should focus on three priority areas: air quality, water quality and transportation. All three are important issues that the region must collectively address and no other regional agency is better suited to address these issues than CCOG.

CCOGs Planning Department has historically relied on technical service contracts for its funding source. Unlike the Aging and Workforce Development departments, and to a lesser extent CCOGs Economic Development department, the Planning Department does not have a steady source of funding. Fees generated from technical assistance contracts as well as from the administration of grants are primarily used to fund CCOG Planning staff.

As technical assistance funding has decreased over the years, CCOG has had to look towards other funding sources. Much of this funding has been made up through grant writing and administration (e.g., through grants from EPA, DWQ and NCDOT). As a result, the department has had to adjust staff loads, areas of expertise, and services provides to match funding levels. For instance, nearly all of the environmental and sustainability work that the Planning staff does is through grant funds. We have also increased the amount of 205J funding to sustain staffing levels.

Although the role of planning staff has changes over the years, there are three areas where the CCOG planning staff continues to provide cutting edge services to the region as a whole and to local governments. These include:

1. Alternative Fuels/Sustainability/energy efficiency
2. Planning Technical Assistance
3. Planning Training for local officials

Each of these areas plays in a unique and important role to the region and its local governments.

Alternative Fuels/Sustainability

CCOG has demonstrated that it is a leader in alternative fuels and sustainability in the Greater Charlotte Region. CCOGs Clean Fuels Coalition (CCFC) is only one of three such coalitions recognized by the United States Department of Energy (DOE) in North Carolina. Since having received that designation in October 2004, CCOG staff has been working with public and private stakeholders throughout the region in promoting the use and availability of alternative fuels. There have been a number of success stories where CCOG worked with individual local governments and stakeholders and others that involved collaboration with a variety of groups. Examples of each include:

- Overseeing the development of the electrification of a truck stop along I-85 in Rowan County. The project was completed in June 2010 with the construction of 44 truck stop spaces where trucks can be “plugged in” overnight (as opposed to idling). CCOG staff helped secure CMAQ funds for the construction of a similar 50 space facility in Kings Mountain in Cleveland County.
- With assistance provided by Duke Energy, CCOG staff worked with others to conduct energy audits in three CCOG jurisdictions.
- The Clean Fuels Coalition led a partnership of the Greater Charlotte Regional Biofuels Project, which received \$185,000 in state grant funds to conduct research and develop an economic feasibility study into making biodiesel from municipal waste grease. Partners include Charlotte Mecklenburg Utilities Department, CPCC and UNC Charlotte.
- Securing 205J funds to work with a variety of stakeholders to create the “Friends of the Goose and Crooked Creek Basin”. This is seen as viable long-term strategy towards maintaining good water quality in these watersheds which are home to a federally endangered species (Carolina heelsplitter).
- Working with stakeholders in the public and private sectors to secure \$2.1 million in funding for a Carolina Blue Skies & Green Jobs Initiative, the main objective of which is to increase the availability of alternative fuel vehicles and infrastructure projects in the region.

As of August 2010, CCOG staff are currently working on 15 separate sustainability projects, all of which are supported through a variety of grants and other outside funding sources.

Planning Technical Assistance

The role which CCOG plays in providing technical assistance has clearly changed over the years. Where at one time, we (CCOG) were the planning staff for a whole host of communities, many local governments have found that their needs have grown and that it is more cost-effective to hire their own staff as opposed to using CCOG staff under contract.

But there are a number of areas where CCOG is regularly called upon to provide assistance. These include:

- **Bicycle and Pedestrian Plans:** CCOG staff has become increasingly active in this arena over the past five years and have written seven such plans. CCOG staff is actively involved in one such grant at present and were recently awarded a contract to work on a second plan. One of CCOGs projects, the Bessemer City Pedestrian Plan, will receive an award from the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association (NCAPA) in September 2010.

NCDOT has consistently lauded CCOG staff for their work and, as a result, approached CCOG to develop the State's first regional bicycle plan. CCOG completed the Lake Norman Regional Bicycle Plan earlier this year.

- **Annexation:** For the past twenty years, CCOG planning staff has written numerous annexation qualification plans and reports at the request of local governments. CCOG does not advocate annexation, but has a cadre of staff members who collectively have worked on more annexation studies than likely any other organization in the State. Being recognized for our expertise, CCOG staff has served on a number of State-level advisory panels dealing with annexation.
- **Land Use Codes and Plans:** This clearly is one area where the volume of work has diminished over the years as local governments create their own planning departments. But CCOG is still involved in a healthy number of code writing or updates as well as working on land use plans. Two such projects are currently underway in Ranlo and Pineville.
- **Staff Planning Assistance:** This is another area where our role has diminished in scope and volume but where local governments appreciate having staff available. CCOG currently serves as staff planners in two communities, Landis and Marshville. In addition to this ongoing work, nearly every year we get called upon to provide interim staff support when there are staff vacancies. Local governments appreciate having a place where quality planning professionals can be tapped to serve on an interim basis.

Planning Training

No other council of governments in North Carolina provides more training to citizen planners, planning staff and elected officials than CCOG. Each year CCOG staff is asked to provide training for individual communities. We also provide sub-regional training to planning officials each year. Both of these are proven and effective means of training citizens who make planning recommendations and decisions on the practical implications of planning law in North Carolina.

In recent years the amount of training that CCOG staff has given has increased and CCOG staff are seen State-wide as leaders in this field. IN FY 2009-10, CCOG partnered with NCAPA to give three statewide training sessions (in Wilson, Greensboro and Asheville) on planning issues. Nearly 300 persons attended these sessions. An expanded arrangement is in place in FY 2010-11 with four training sessions being scheduled. CCOG staff is regularly called upon to provide training at statewide meetings of planners. Presentations were made at the NCAPA annual conference in 2008 and at the North Carolina Association of Zoning Officials (NCAZO) conferences in 2009 and 2010.

Conclusion

The role of the CCOG Planning Department **has changed** over the years. It is clear that the amount and type of work that we have historically offered is no longer in constant demand. But as the needs have changed, so has the work of the CCOG staff. The staff has honed several skill sets that are regularly in demand by our local governments. Eliminating opportunities for our staff to provide these services would provide one less meaningful and attractive option for cities and counties in the region.