

What Does It Mean to be a Binational Region in a Globalized World? Cross-Border Innovation and Community Prosperity in Southern Ontario and Western New York



**BORDERS IN
GLOBALIZATION**

Overview of the Issue

The cross-border region encompassing western New York and southern Ontario is in transition. Rather than maintaining a status quo outlook forged from decades of decline in population, employment and GDP, leaders on each side of the border are leveraging assets to strengthen human capital and create purposeful transformation to foster sustainable communities, creativity and innovation. Buffalo Niagara is targeting investment in initiatives such as the build-out of the Downtown Medical Corridor; investment in cultural/heritage tourism and health sciences innovation; and stewardship of the Great Lakes. In 2015, Buffalo Niagara also was selected as one of several regional site teams for a “Communities that Work” partnership, a workforce development effort aimed toward driving talent-based economic development locally and across the country. At the same time, parallel efforts are taking place in southern Ontario. Just a stone’s throw away, leaders in the Niagara Region and City of Hamilton are similarly committed to increasing economic opportunity and creating well-paying jobs by strengthening innovation (e.g., health sciences), natural heritage (Niagara Falls and Great Lakes) and cultural asset (tourism) strategies – all with an eye toward workforce development and creating healthy, vibrant, prosperous communities.

Recent reports (Snyder 2014) suggest that cross-border regions are becoming more globally competitive for firms and talent. These regions are increasingly viewed as hubs for facilitating innovation, creativity and prosperity. Whether part of a broader “Tor-Buff-Chester” megaregion (Florida, 2008), or as part of a Great Lakes cross-border region, the binational southern Ontario-Western New York region is unique in North America for the depth and breadth of its cross-border assets. As the largest cross-border region along the Canada-US border, the time is now to better understand these assets to create innovative and prosperous communities.

Recognizing this potential, stakeholders in this cross-border region recently have undertaken a strategic planning exercise to create a process that engages key stakeholders from the community for cross-border relationship building, capacity building and information sharing. Also, using the life sciences sector as a starting point, they are beginning to make the economic case and develop a forward-looking approach for cross-border coordination and collaboration - an approach that uses scenarios to examine benefits, constraints and multiple paths forward. In 2017 and beyond, they intend to deepen research, analysis, understanding and engagement; continue to build capacity; and ultimately build an innovation and prosperity agenda for this cross-border region.

Most Relevant Existing Policies and Legislation

In addition to federal legislation in both countries aimed toward better border security (e.g., Beyond the Border Accord) and economic prosperity (e.g., Regulatory Cooperation Council, North American Free Trade Agreement), policy and planning at the regional level in both communities are important for creating binational innovation and community prosperity. In Western New York, for example, the Regional Economic Development Council, established in 2011, has undertaken a series of strategic planning exercises and implementation actions. In its most recent (2016) Plan update, the Council noted that its placemaking strategy has focused on smart growth to set the stage for innovation; create an environment conducive to successful entrepreneurs; attract and retains a talented workforce; and build on the strengths of priority sectors.

Southern Ontario, in turn, is focused on similar efforts. Its Niagara Region Growth Management Strategy (Niagara 2031) aligns existing policies with the policies of the Province's Places to Grow Plan (2006) and the Provincial Policy Statement (2005). With focus on containing sprawl, strengthening sustainability objectives and creating innovation clusters in sectors such as health sciences and advanced manufacturing, among others, southern Ontario leadership and stakeholders are positioning the region for strong growth in years to come.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders involved in this cross-border planning exercise are drawn from the public sector, private sector, non-profit sector and academic community. Public sector interests cut across jurisdictions and scale, and represent federal, provincial, state and local public sector economic development interests. Key stakeholders include, but are not limited to, the following: Brock University; McMaster University; the University at Buffalo; the Buffalo Niagara Partnership; the Niagara Chamber of Commerce; the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce; the Trillium Foundation; the Oishei Foundation; the US Consulate-Toronto; the CA Consulate-NYC; the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission; the Peace Bridge Authority; Global New York; Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Growth; the U.S. International Trade Administration; and Global Affairs Canada.

Important Policy Challenges

Policy challenges fall into three distinct buckets. The first challenge is that much of region's planning and public policy at the regional, state, provincial and national levels ignore the cross-border nature of the region. If leadership wants to bolster economic competitiveness and ensure long-run prosperity, stakeholders must pursue planning action and policy that take the cross-border nature of this region into account (Florida, 2008). Relatedly, developing actual on-the-ground policies and planning tools that can be coordinated at a local scale, along with federal, state and provincial systems that have profound cultural, economic, social and political differences will be a daunting task.

Second, designing a process that is bold – yet also streamlined enough to take into account varying interests outlined above is challenging. This effort represents the nexus of urban planning (specifically,

placemaking) and international relations (diplomacy) – two disciplines and approaches at wholly opposite ends of the collaboration scale spectrum. Successfully drawing on processes and tools used in both of these contexts will be critical to this cross-border regional planning initiative.

Third, selecting the appropriate geography for implementation will be challenging. Geography is linked to identity and culture. But does a cross-border identity exist? Leadership selected the Counties of Erie, Niagara and Cattaraugus in western New York and the Regional Municipality of Niagara and City of Hamilton in southern Ontario as the point of entry. Stakeholders are working to better identify the appropriate geography – is this geography adequate? Should they extend to the 8-county region in western New York and through the Greater Toronto Area in southern Ontario? Should they extend to Tor-Buff-Chester? The Pacific Northwest Economic Region is, by most estimations, the most successful example of binational collaboration – but this takes place at the state-provincial scale. Is that the key to its success? Should the current endeavor be rooted in the State of New York and Province of Ontario? What exactly is the appropriate scale to effectuate success?

Policy Alternatives and Policy Futures

As noted above, cross-border regions are recognized as playing an important role in today's globalized world. Part of the allure of the cross-border southern Ontario and western New York region is that investment on one side of the border will reach two sizable marketplaces in two separate countries. As a result, this cross-border region may garner more and more political, economic and social influence in the 21st century. Cross-border regions with strong identities, strategies and perspectives that transcend international borders are likely to hold an invaluable competitive edge. For both sides of the Niagara River, that is an advantage worth pursuing.

References

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