EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regional planning in the United States has undergone an evolution over the past several decades—and continues to evolve. In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, regional planning approaches typically focused on single topical areas. In many cases, the early regional plans only addressed transportation. In other cases, regional plans were developed around other single issues, such as parks and open space, or regional economic development. However, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, regional planning began to evolve into more multidimensional and comprehensive area-wide plans and long-range strategies that integrated related topical areas such as land use, transportation, open space, and air quality. As we move further into the twenty-first century, regional planning in the United States continues to transform itself. Regional planning has further advanced integration of complex related issues, such as infrastructure, housing, economic development, and environmental planning.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY: SIX KEY TRENDS

Many of the emerging trends in regional planning reflect a shift toward a more integrated, or systems, approach, with a growing focus on sustainability. The following six emerging trends are highlighted in this report:

1. Regional planning for sustainability
2. Integrated regional planning across related issues
3. Inclusive engagement and expanded partnerships in regional planning
4. New approaches for implementation
5. Changing demographics and changing regions
6. New tools and techniques for regional planning

REGIONAL PLANNING IN THE UNITED STATES: AN OVERVIEW

Regional planning can be defined as collaborating to plan for common issues within a common geographical area that may be defined ecologically, politically, or economically. Jurisdictional boundaries may give definition to the region, but in most instances in the United States, jurisdictional boundaries—including both county lines and city limits—do not necessarily correspond with current understandings or definitions of regional issues.

Regional planning in the United States is in a period of rapid change. As regional planning evolves, it is becoming increasingly creative, collaborative, and integrated across multiple functions, while engaging both public and private actors. At the same time, it is addressing the broader aspects of social, environmental, and economic sustainability. The challenges, and opportunities, of planning on a regional scale show that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, there are many different forms and variations on how regions—large and small, urban and rural—find ways to work together on common issues that transcend borders.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a burst of regional activity as cities grew, suburbs developed, and governments realized that many issues required action beyond a single jurisdiction. Regional entities were typically established to coordinate planning across jurisdictions in order to ensure the efficient use of public funds, manage infrastructure and other types of systems or network planning, and give local governments a stronger political voice in their dealings with state or federal governments.

One of the more common regional governance structures is the special-purpose authority focused on a specific geographic area or issue, such as regional airport, water, or transit authorities. Federal law established metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in the 1960s for regions with populations greater than 50,000 to coordinate long-range transportation planning as a condition of receiving federal funding. Councils of government are another common regional governance model. Informal regional structures also exist. These can be civic collaborations that work with and sometimes include governmental partners, or they may work outside of government and serve as a voice to influence public policies and investments.

Working at the regional level requires coordination among local, state, and federal governments. This can happen through formal processes, such as enabling legislation or official memorandums of understanding between local governments, or it can occur more informally through self-designated regional agencies or collaborations.

A Constellation of Approaches

Such a broad spectrum of regional planning agencies and collaborative efforts exists across the United States that it is chal-
challenging to create a common classification system to reflect all the various structures, functions, and operations. It is perhaps most useful to describe “continuums” related to various characteristics of regional planning approaches, while at the same time recognizing the overall trend toward multifunctional integration. In the United States, there are five characteristics that influence regional planning in various ways and to varying degrees: territory, functions, decision making, participation, and implementation.

**Regional Planning as Sustainability Planning**
Regional planning is continuing to evolve in ways that signal a renewed interest in regionalism sparked by the growing reality that complex issues such as climate change, economic competitiveness, and even infrastructure finance cannot be addressed by one jurisdiction alone. Increased federal support for regional planning activities initiated by the Obama administration in 2009 added to this movement of grassroots regional awareness by local communities. These reflected a trend toward integrated and comprehensive regional planning strategies that is fundamentally reliant on cross-sector partnerships and data-driven processes. Many of these plans and programs are designed around principles of sustainability. A common tag line for the growing recognition about bringing social, economic, and environmental issues into regional planning in an integrated fashion is “think globally, plan regionally, and act locally.”

**New Tools and Techniques**
The emphasis on performance-based planning and the emergence of regional planning issues that introduce increasing uncertainty about the future, such as climate change and technological innovations, have led to rapid expansion in the use of new tools and techniques in regional planning.

Performance-based planning includes specific outcomes to track progress towards established planning goals over time and evaluates policy and investment options and alternatives. The emphasis on performance-based planning is linked to new opportunities to use emerging technologies, open-source data, and metrics that are collected and used by multiple agencies. At the same time, limitations such as the availability of data at the appropriate scale or the source of available data can be challenging for many regions.

A proliferation of computer-based software has also resulted in the increased use of scenario planning at the regional as well as local level. The scenario planning process uses software tools to develop different land-use and transportation scenarios and visualizations for values and goal setting to engage the public in participatory planning processes. Scenario planning helps local decision makers and the public understand the local and regional impacts of different policy choices on indicators such as land use, energy consumption, pollution, and financial impacts.

**Regional Planning for Environmental Issues**
As the study and understanding of ecology have evolved, so too has the recognition of the importance of working with natural systems—including watersheds, topographical areas, and climate zones—in developing regional plans. Using the regional ecosystem to frame the context for the full range of regional issues (whether urban or rural, large or small) will typically allow for a more complete analysis of those issues and development of workable strategies to address them.

**Regional Water Resource Planning**
The water supply for many urban areas in the United States is typically drawn from rivers or lakes that may be a great distance away, while rural and agricultural areas often receive their water directly from local surface waters or groundwater wells. The land area that contributes to a specific water supply, from either above-ground or subsurface flows, is known as a watershed. Watersheds do not observe municipal or utility boundaries. Therefore, planning at a regional or watershed scale can help ensure consistent water quality and quantity to meet existing and future demand, improve coordination among multiple agencies and stakeholders, and implement land-use planning and ecosystem protection to protect water quality from degradation. Planning at the regional scale also has helped large urban areas cope with extended periods of drought through conservation and other best practices.

**Regional Land Resource Planning**
Land-use planning continues to remain the purview of local individual jurisdictions. At the same time, significant planning efforts occurring at the regional level around water, sewer, and infrastructure planning have forced recognition of ways land use in one jurisdiction may impact other communities. This evolution is probably most pronounced when an understanding of the social, environmental, and economic benefits of effective land use exists: the benefits of habitat lands in urban settings, of rural lands adjacent to urbanized areas, and of parks and open space. Planning for some of these regionally significant land uses is becoming more integrated.
into a systems approach—that is, an approach that considers habitat, open space, and agriculture as a whole system.

Regional planning for parks and open space looks at green places and greenways in an integrated and cross-jurisdictional manner. Regional open space planning in some instances focuses on connections from one jurisdiction to another. In more detailed regional planning processes, open space planning uses a systems approach that integrates green connections with stormwater management, mobility and accessibility, community revitalization, and sustainability.

**REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLANNING**

Regional economic development initiatives are having positive impacts in both metropolitan areas and in rural settings. These developments are creating fresh opportunities for making urban regions more vibrant and sustainable, whether they are growing regions or areas experiencing a shrinking population. Planning for economic prosperity today, whether in growing or shrinking regions, addresses a broad array of assets that include cultural resources and amenities, natural resources, workforce education, and mobility initiatives to improve access and equity for all workers.

Elevating talent and workforce skills is increasingly vital for successful regional economic development programs. In addition, infrastructure investment, which was a major theme at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has become much more complex.

Economic competitiveness planning has emerged as a game changer for regional planning in many parts of the country. In addition, it has become prominent across a variety of scales—from large metropolitan areas to mid-sized urban regions and rural areas. A growing number of regional efforts have begun to emphasize economic competitiveness factors such as adequate infrastructure, housing availability, and workforce development programs in long-range planning. At the same time, many regional planning agencies have moved beyond strategic planning for economic competitiveness. They have taken direct responsibility for project planning and development for major infrastructure projects and system improvements that are identified as necessary components of an economically competitive region. Tribal governments are now playing a greater role in regional planning efforts by partnering with regional districts, serving as state regional transportation organizations, and developing linkages between rural and urban areas.

**REGIONAL HOUSING PLANNING**

The challenges of housing an increasingly diverse population with new needs and demands are being addressed in regional planning efforts, but new strategies are required to address housing needs effectively and overcome the barriers to providing affordable housing at all income levels.

From a regional planning perspective, housing strategies are not just about guaranteeing that people have a place to live; they must also ensure that where people live reflects sound principles of growth and social equity. Providing affordable housing opportunities throughout a region or metropolitan area is critical to maintaining a healthy region that permits individuals to live near their work, allows regions to grow in an environmentally responsible fashion, and begins to undo the concentration of low-income households and people of color in urban neighborhoods that still characterizes many American metropolitan areas. This focus on affordable housing also considers related aspects of planning for housing, such as ensuring fair housing (avoiding discrimination in housing availability) and avoiding dislocation of existing community residents in redeveloping areas (gentrification), as key components of a region’s affordable housing strategy.

**REGIONAL PLANNING FOR CLIMATE CHANGE AND PUBLIC HEALTH**

As recently as ten years ago, almost no regional plans in the United States included any meaningful discussion of climate change or planning for public health. However, over the past decade these two topical areas have gained huge importance in the regional dialogues on sustainability, resulting in well-defined approaches to addressing these topics in multidimensional, integrated regional plans and programs.

In addition, there has been a growing understanding of the strong connections between planning for climate change (both mitigation and adaptation) and planning for public health and wellness. Regional plans and programs are beginning to address these connections in their comprehensive regional plans as well as in partnerships that involve scientists, public health professionals, and urban planners.

**Confronting Climate Change**

Regional planning agencies across the country have taken an increasingly important role in addressing climate change issues. In large part, this may be due to the roles that regional transportation agencies have taken on since the early 1990s
in addressing the effects of transportation and land-use planning on regional air quality. In the realm of climate change mitigation, many regions across the country have incorporated proactive strategies in their long-range transportation plans. In addition, a number of regional planning agencies have also begun to address climate change adaptation—preparing regions to address the various predicted physical changes in the natural and built environments that will result from climate change. As with other airborne pollutants, greenhouse gases do not stay within jurisdictional boundaries. Among the major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in urban regions are power plants and motor vehicles. While the federal government has acted to curb pollution from coal-burning power plants, the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in many urban regions continue to be those related to transportation, which can be addressed in an effective manner at a regional scale. Therefore, many regions in the United States are beginning to develop regional plans and strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to begin to address the impacts of climate change on the natural and built environment.

**Addressing Public Health in a Regional Context**

Another topic of growing importance in U.S. urban planning is health and wellness. Local jurisdictional planning has been integrating aspects of health and well-being into citywide and neighborhood planning through health impact assessments and more in-depth evaluations of environmental quality, safety, and active living. As regional planning evolves, there is growing interest in how to address health-related issues at the regional scale in an effective manner. A number of regional bodies that serve as metropolitan planning organizations are incorporating active living into their decision-making processes for the distribution of regionally managed state and federal transportation funds. This focus includes improving and expanding pedestrian and bicycle facilities as well as programs to support transit-oriented development. This shift toward the incorporation of aspects of active living into regional planning can be viewed as a logical expansion of integrated land-use and transportation planning.

**REGIONAL INTEGRATED PLANNING**

In recent decades, various regional planning problems have arisen that are seen to require more holistic solutions than can be solved by functional, single-focus agencies on their own. The need for regional integrated planning becomes especially relevant when a broad set of planning concerns—such as sprawl, mobility, housing, environmental restoration, and the provision of services—are perceived to require action at a scale not matching the jurisdictional boundaries of any existing general-purpose government (federal, state, county, or city levels). Increasingly, regional transportation plans are addressing a broader array of issues in addition to mobility and accessibility, including equity, economic development, environmental factors, housing affordability, air quality, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Planners in many of the country’s metropolitan areas and smaller regions have been seeking better planning integration as concerns have arisen about fiscally and environmentally inefficient development patterns and loss of natural resources that defy single-sector solutions. Of particular note are efforts by many communities to factor more aspects of environmental planning, including open space, habitat protection and restoration, and climate change—as well as health and social equity—into what may be considered comprehensive regional sustainability plans.

Integrated approaches to regional planning are emerging in a variety of settings and circumstances. Some approaches have developed in response to specific federal or state requirements, such as in states with growth management planning systems or legislative mandates for specific aspects of regional planning. Even in those settings, some regions take integration beyond mandates and requirements, and others develop innovative programs to attain mandated performance goals. In other situations, regions have developed more integrated approaches to regional planning in the absence of state mandates. There are also examples of integrated regional planning efforts that are more grassroots or ad hoc in nature, rather than institutional. Examining the large urban regions of Seattle, San Francisco, Denver, Minneapolis–Saint Paul, and Dallas–Fort Worth shows how regional planning has evolved from a focus on integrating land-use and transportation planning just a few decades ago into broader planning programs that are now more complex and factor in additional issues and topics.

**TECHNIQUES FOR IMPLEMENTING REGIONAL PLANS**

One of the common challenges for those working at the regional scale is ensuring implementation of these plans, since in most instances these planning agencies have little direct authority over land use, economic development, housing
decisions, or even local infrastructure investment. In some instances, regional planning bodies do have authority to implement their own regional land-use plans, such as Metro in Portland, or other regional governmental bodies, such as consolidated city-county governments in Florida, Indiana, and Kentucky. However, the dominant pattern for regional plan implementation is through local member jurisdictions. While implementing planning at the regional scale can be challenging, regions continue to find various ways to carry out their areawide plans and policies.

**Funding for Regional Plan Implementation**

One of the most common approaches taken by regional planning agencies to promote local implementation of regional plans is the distribution of regionally managed funds from federal, state, or regional sources to specific projects and programs in local jurisdictions that support regional planning goals and policies. In addition to their transportation improvement programs, a number of regions have created “livable communities” local assistance programs. These programs provide incentives to local jurisdictions to better coordinate housing, economic development, and transportation in compact urban communities. Such programs may also focus on funding environmental mitigation efforts or social and cultural quality-of-life initiatives.

Regionally managed transportation funding programs in Portland, San Diego, San Francisco, Denver, Philadelphia, and Atlanta include investments in urban centers—among other projects and programs that are also eligible for regional funding—but none of these has gone as far as the Seattle region in focusing on investing regional dollars exclusively in projects that support centers.

**Collaboration with Implementation Partners**

As regional plans become more integrated and take on more interrelated issues, often there are partners beyond the regional planning body who are responsible for one or more aspects of implementation. These partners may be governmental or quasigovernmental bodies, including special districts set up for providing transit, water, or parks; nongovernmental organizations, including housing authorities or economic development enterprises; or academic institutions. Collaborative efforts can help obtain funding for plan implementation and translate regional objectives into local actions.

**Consistency Review**

Consistency review is a process whereby local plans or programs are evaluated according to whether they adequately address adopted regional plans and policies. The process may be formal or informal and may be required under planning-related statutes or official provisions, or through a voluntary program. Especially when tied to incentives or requirements, such as eligibility to compete for regionally managed federal funds, consistency review can be a useful tool for ensuring implementation of regional planning policies at local levels.

**Technical Assistance**

As noted previously, implementation of regional planning commonly occurs through steps and actions taken by local jurisdictions. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was common for councils of governments receiving federal funding to help localities with various types of planning. In many regions, regional planning bodies continue to provide technical assistance to jurisdictions for implementation.

**Performance Monitoring**

Regional planning bodies are often best equipped for developing and maintaining data and information related to monitoring planning outcomes. Regional monitoring programs typically include implementation monitoring, which involves tracking actions and steps committed to as part of a regional planning process. These programs also often include performance monitoring, which relates to tracking whether established goals have been achieved as a result of actions taking place. Information from monitoring performance helps planners, decision makers, and community members understand whether objectives are being met and whether implementation efforts are effective.

**THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL PLANNING**

Regional planning in the United States has historically faced and continues to face many challenges. There have been and continue to be political pressures against regionalism. Dedicated funding has been a significant challenge and continues to hamper the broadening of regional planning efforts and initiatives. Yet regional planning continues to make a remarkable contribution to places large and small, metropolitan and rural, and continues to evolve and renew itself.

**An Action Agenda for Regional Sustainability Planning**

Many of the standards and principles that are applied to local planning initiatives across the country also have application for regional planning. A current example is the Ameri-
can Planning Association’s Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places, developed as part of APA’s Sustain-
ing Places initiative. Regional planning should address the
topics of livable built environment, harmony with nature,
resilient economy, interwoven equity, healthy communities,
responsible regionalism, authentic participation, and ac-
countable implementation.

In addition, based on the major trends for regional plan-
ning, this report suggests the following topics for a regional
planning agenda:

- Regional plans that are more comprehensive in nature
- Megaregional planning
- Regional action plans as organizing frameworks
- Changing demographics and regions
- New tools and techniques

**Future Work for Understanding and Advancing
Regional Planning in the United States**

The emerging trends in regional planning strongly suggest
that there is a bright future for regional planners and leaders
in the United States. The challenges that they will face high-
light the need for additional research, work, and information
sharing in the field of regional planning.

Historically, regional planning has been enabled and
funded by the federal government and by numerous state
and local governments. The federal transportation agencies
should continue their efforts of the last 20 years while remain-
ing open to innovation. In addition, the U.S. Department of
Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental
Protection Agency should become more engaged in sustain-
able regional planning, and the Economic Development Ad-
ministration and other similar federal agencies should, at a
minimum, maintain their current efforts.

It is also pivotal that the states play an increasing role in
adapting enabling legislation and providing financial assis-
tance. Each state is different, but they all benefit by promoting
sustainable planning and development at regional and local
levels. APA and its individual divisions and chapters should
work towards these ends.

In addition, further research on best practices for region-
al planning agencies in the areas of water planning, climate
change, bioregional planning, and innovative collaboration
would greatly advance state-of-the-art regional planning
across the United States. This information gathering and
sharing could be pursued in collaboration with universities to
produce research and training related to a variety of planning
and modeling topics that are relevant to regional planners.

There is both promise and excitement regarding the fu-
ture of regional planning. It has been and no doubt can con-
tinue to be a game changer in terms of improving the built
environment and the infrastructure necessary to support it,
improving the natural environment and the role it plays in
health, and improving social and economic well-being for all.