

**UNIFYING VOICES, CONFRONTING CHALLENGES:**

**A RESOURCE GUIDE  
for Developing Regional  
Collaborations of  
FIRST TIER SUBURBS**



*National League of Cities*

## **NLC's FIRST TIER SUBURBS COUNCIL**

### ***Background***

The First Tier Suburbs Council was established in 2002 to address the unique set of challenges faced by municipalities located outside of central cities and inside the ring of developing suburbs and rural areas. The purpose of the Council is to allow local elected officials from these cities to network with each other and discuss common needs, raise the visibility of first tier suburbs, articulate their unique challenges and opportunities, and encourage NLC to be a vehicle to advance these issues.

Many first tier suburbs benefit from similar opportunities, such as proximity to job centers and established neighborhoods. They also confront common concerns, such as those identified by the Council, including regional cooperation, housing and transportation needs, changing demographics, education, and revitalization. These issues are the focus of the Council's agenda.

### ***2005 First Tier Suburbs Council Steering Committee***

Virginia Barney, City Manager, Upper Arlington, OH

Pam Carter, Councilmember, Tukwila, WA

Bob Day, Mayor, Garland, TX

Wayne Ecton, Councilmember, Scottsdale, AZ

Diana Ewy Sharp, Councilmember, Prairie Village, KS

Thomas J. George, Mayor, Lakewood, OH

Dale E. Iman, City Administrator, Southfield, MI

Jack Jensen, Deputy Mayor, West Carrollton, OH

Peggy Lehner, Councilmember, Kettering, OH

Linda Mau, Councilmember, Roeland Park, KS

A. Keith McDonald, Mayor, Bartlett, TN

Mike McGlynn, Mayor, Medford, MA

Sally Nelson, Councilmember, Burien, WA

Daniel S. Pocek, Mayor, Bedford, OH

John Shady, Councilmember, Moraine, OH

Barbara Staggs, Councilmember, Trotwood, OH

Arthur Sharpe, Jr., Councilmember, University City, MO

Gerry Welch, Mayor, Webster Groves, MO

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**Presented By  
The National League of Cities  
First Tier Suburbs Council**

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## Foreword

This guide is intended to help you, a city official from a first tier suburban community, better deal with the unique challenges you face. Throughout discussions of the National League of Cities' First Tier Suburbs (FTS) Council over the past few years about tackling issues ranging from aging housing stock to vacant retail properties, a recurring theme of "regional cooperation" surfaced. Members of the FTS Council recognized that regional cooperation among first tier suburbs and other players is vital to sustainable development, however, many were unsure where to begin. "How do I become involved in or develop regional partnerships with fellow first tier suburb city officials?" As a participant in a regional consortium of first tier suburbs in the Kansas City region, I know the value of such cooperation.

One of my goals during my term as 2005 FTS Council Chair is to lead an effort by the Council to produce a *Resource Guide for Regional Collaboration of First Tier Suburbs*. I am honored to present this guide as it represents the culmination of work of the First Tier Suburbs Council since its inception in 2002.

Input and information for this document was gathered from a variety of sources. The Council participated in list serve conversations, meetings during NLC's two annual conferences, and a summer meeting of its Steering Committee in 2005. These exchanges uncovered the particular questions that city officials have about regional cooperation, such as what information would be most useful and how others developed such collaborations.

Other sources of information include presentations to the Council by Robert Puentes, Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institution, in March 2004 and by John McIlwain, Senior Resident Fellow and the J. Ronald Terwilliger Chair for Housing at the Urban Land Institute, in March 2005. Additionally, William H. Hudnut, III, former mayor of Indianapolis and Senior Resident Fellow and Joseph C. Canizaro Chair for Public Policy at the Urban Land Institute, provided a wealth of information for first tier suburbs in his book *Halfway to Everywhere*. I would also like to thank Bill for valuing our communities and initially organizing the First Tier Suburbs Council at NLC. Much appreciation is also given to Christiana Brennan, Senior Research Associate at NLC, who drafted this guide.

I would also like to thank the vice chairs of the Council, Deputy Mayor, Jack Jensen, West Carrollton, OH and Mayor Daniel Pocek, Bedford, OH, and the FTS Council Steering Committee for supporting and greatly contributing to this effort.

I hope that this guide encourages creative and collaborative ways of solving the difficult challenges that we face as city officials representing first tier suburban communities.

All the best,

Diana Ewy Sharp  
Councilmember, Prairie Village, KS  
2005 Chair, NLC's First Tier Suburbs Council

## Introduction

First tier suburbs are cities and towns outside of central cities and inside the ring of developing suburbs and rural areas. These places can be very diverse from place to place with respect to size, demographic characteristics, age, history, resources and governmental structure. Many first tier suburbs within a region share common assets such as proximity to job centers and historic areas. They also share challenges, such as aging infrastructure and rapidly changing demographics. In order for first tier suburbs to address their challenges and build on their assets most effectively, city officials from these places need to recognize their commonalities.

This handbook promotes coordination, first, among similarly situated inner-ring, first tier suburbs. This initial coordination is intended to foster strength and unity of purpose for more effective exchanges with other regional players. Collaboration can be formal, as seen in the Dayton, OH area, or less formal and based on cooperation around specific issues as seen in the Shelby County, TN region. After surveying city officials from first tier suburbs and reviewing the current research, one message is clear — whether it’s formal or informal, *cooperation of first tier suburbs within a region will strengthen these cities and towns.*

This resource guide is meant to:

1. help local elected officials from first tier suburbs identify their challenges and assets within the regional context;
2. explain how working with other first tier suburbs will help them more successfully address these challenges and build on their assets;
3. identify how they can begin to build both informal and formal coalitions; and
4. identify resources and examples of creative collaborations.

## What are my assets to build on and challenges to confront?

First tier suburbs have a distinctive set of opportunities and challenges that set them apart from their neighboring cities and suburbs. Examining the assets that are available to build upon and the challenges that face first tier suburbs are important steps to understanding how a first tier suburb fits into the regional landscape and what types of links exist for potential partnerships. Here are some typical assets and challenges identified by city officials from first tier suburbs.

### *Assets*

- Design and Quality Mixed-use neighborhoods with parks and sidewalks; balance of jobs, services and housing; ability to support frequent transit; and an urban feel and structure with less costly housing and land (than both the central city and rapidly developing outer suburbs).
- Centrality and Convenience Located between new employment centers and the traditional central business district and close to central city cultural, entertainment, sports, and education amenities.
- Infrastructure Established transportation, water, sewer, and schools and established networks of hospitals and amenities.
- Sense of Place Historic areas that create a sense of place not only for the community, but for the entire region.

## ***Challenges***

- **Housing** Challenges include aging, deteriorating, and inadequate housing stock, poor maintenance, foreclosure, high property turnover, and predatory lending. Strategies are needed to help first tier suburbs develop a wider range of housing options to remain competitive with new suburbs and to address and accommodate changing demographic needs.
- **Transportation** Challenges are focused on issues with aging infrastructure. Strategies are needed to ensure that first tier suburbs have the transportation infrastructure needed to sustain the community and to ensure that transportation decisions are linked to land use and economic development decisions.
- **Demographics** Challenges include declining population, increased poverty, rising social service needs, high unemployment, and rapid ethnic change. The city and regional vision should be inclusive and recognize the needs of an increasingly diverse and aging population.
- **Education** Challenges include deteriorating schools, poor school performance, obsolete facilities, and the negative impact of low quality schools on business investment. Quality schools are a critical component to the long-term vitality of first tier suburbs and the competitiveness of the entire region.
- **Other** Challenges include declining and abandoned retail and commercial corridors, brown fields, build-out, decrease in intergovernmental assistance, declining tax base, reduced public services, concentration of working poor families, and the inability to attract knowledge workers.

## **What are the benefits of participating in a collaboration of other first tier suburbs?**

A coalition of first tier suburbs benefits participating cities in a variety of ways. City officials can learn from each other and exchange ideas, solve mutual problems together, and present a unified voice in regional, state, and national conversations.

### ***Exchange ideas***

Other first tier suburbs within the region are probably facing similar challenges, and perhaps they have even implemented successfully strategies. Building a coalition of first tier suburbs within the region can help facilitate the sharing of new strategies and solutions.

For example, the Mid-America Regional Council's First Suburb Coalition in the Kansas City metropolitan area created the *First Suburbs Handbook: Case Studies and Development Tools for First Tier Suburbs*. The handbook identifies tools and resources available to first tier suburbs and identifies examples of first tier communities successfully using these tools. The handbook can be accessed at <http://www.marc.org/handbook.pdf>

The Michigan Suburbs Alliance (MSA) is another example. MSA is an organization of 14 suburban Detroit mayors and city managers confronting a variety of challenges such as high infrastructure replacement costs, deteriorating pre-1960s housing stock, population decline,

double digit increases in retiree health insurance costs, and flat or declining revenues in one of America's most sprawling regions. The MSA is working to improve the overall quality of life in metro-Detroit, with a primary focus on economic viability and sustainability. The MSA has developed a Redevelopment Ready Community pilot program that has identified best practices for suburbs to follow to make redevelopment processes less cumbersome for developers. <http://www.michigansuburbsalliance.org/>

### ***Solve mutual problems together***

Sharing energy, resources, ideas and decision making leads to more successful problem solving; a collaboration of first tier suburbs creates a means of communication for collective problem solving.

The Suburban Cities Association (SCA) in King County, WA helped city officials recognize their common need for a land assessment and were able to accomplish this by pooling funds within the coalition. A first tier suburb city official from Tukwila, WA noted, "SCA effectively pooled the money each city received from the state to do forecasting of buildable land and capacity for growth. This pooled money was used to contract with a professional." More information about the SCA can be found at <http://www.suburbancities.org/>.

First tier suburbs in the Dallas metropolitan area came together to perform a joint study of underperforming and vacant retail areas. In 2002, the cities of Carrollton, Plano and Richardson participated in a joint study of neighborhood retail properties to develop specific policies, standards and actions for revitalizing or redeveloping aging or under-performing retail centers or vacant retail land. The study analyzed the demographic characteristics and unmet retail demands of each community and included redevelopment plans for six prototypical sites. Subsequent to the effort, each city developed its own implementation strategy as the next phase of the effort. The city of Richardson, for example, now funds a position at the Chamber of Commerce for a retail specialist. Information about the joint study was gathered by the Greater Dallas Planning Council <http://www.gdpc.org/>.

### ***Speak with a collective voice***

A coalition of first tier suburbs, whether it is formal or informal, provides city officials from first tier suburbs with a stronger voice with which to represent common concerns and to approach regional, state, or even national conversations.

Ken Montlack, President of the Ohio First Suburbs Consortium (OFSC), notes that regional collaboration is vital to successful problem solving. Together, cities may advocate for changes to federal, state, regional, and county policies or work together for joint education, marketing and redevelopment. All of these strategies require some type of coordination among first tier suburbs.

OFSC, a growing organization of older communities located near Ohio's largest cities in the major metropolitan areas, was established to help educate and gain support from the state government on those issues pertinent to first tier suburb communities. OFSC facilitates meetings between city officials from first tier suburbs with lawmakers, state agencies, and other state-wide organizations that share common interests with first tier suburbs. The OFSC state agenda includes:

- Allocating state infrastructure funding to support and improve existing local communities.
- Committing to adequate, shared state-local revenues.
- Supporting economic redevelopment of established communities.
- Protecting neighborhoods and residents from predatory lending.

For more information about OFSC, contact Kimberly Gibson at [kgibson@morpc.org](mailto:kgibson@morpc.org).

The first tier suburbs in Shelby County, TN represent a similar mission with a different structure. These first tier suburbs have an informal agreement. Mayors of these cities meet on a monthly basis and have made joint legislative recommendations to the state legislature. A first tier suburb city official from Bartlett, TN said, “We find that we are far more effective when we speak with one voice.” First tier suburbs also present a common agenda when dealing with other regional players in the Metropolitan Planning Organization. For more information, contact Mayor A. Keith McDonald at [kmcdonald@cityofbartlett.org](mailto:kmcdonald@cityofbartlett.org).

## **How can I build a coalition of first tier suburbs partners?**

The decision to form an informal or formal coalition depends on the nature of the problems and level of commitment of the players. Whether it is formal or informal, the following key points should be considered to help a city official establish regional collaboration (not in any particular order):

1. Seek allies and support based on common challenges and assets.
2. Develop a core group of respected leaders in the region to sponsor the effort and carry it forward.
3. Make sure the group of leaders represents the diversity of your region (ethnically, politically and geographically).
4. Know your region and its politics.
5. Make sure all stakeholders are informed and involved.
6. Develop ways to “force” elected officials to get to know one another.
7. Keep your city officials informed. If you are the representative make sure you share what you are doing with your Mayor, Council, and City Manager.
8. Identify your region’s needs and how a collaboration can help meet them.
9. Determine your mission. Do you want to lobby? What issues do you want to focus on? Is networking on a regional basis an important consideration?
10. Keep your focus on issues of importance to your city as a first tier. If the issue is broader, then support a larger group.
11. Determine who will provide technical support, research, and lobbying for the group.
12. Use resources that are readily available, such as NLC’s First Suburbs Council, first tier web sites, the Urban Land Institute, The Brookings Institution, and your local regional planning agency.
13. Pick initial projects that can succeed.
14. Celebrate your successes.
15. Make it rewarding and fun.

***Case Study: The First Suburbs Consortium of Dayton Ohio Council of Governments  
by Deputy Mayor Jack Jensen, West Carrollton, OH***

We recently organized a formal first tier suburbs organization in the Dayton, Ohio metro area called The First Suburbs Consortium of Dayton Ohio Council of Governments. We had several advantages that allowed our process to move quickly. These included a core group of visionary elected officials who already knew one another from interaction at NLC and other venues and recognized the need for and benefits of mutual cooperation, a very supportive regional planning agency, and a strong presence of already established first tier organizations in several other Ohio metro areas.

The idea of developing The First Suburbs Consortium of Dayton Ohio Council of Governments had been discussed casually here for the last year or two. Interested elected officials started joining and attending the First Tier Suburbs Council activities at the annual conferences of NLC. Out of these discussions and meetings, a list of potentially interested cities was developed and several individuals were invited to meet to explore if the idea had merit and, if so, to establish a core support group. The core group met several times, including a luncheon meeting at the NLC conference in Indianapolis in 2004. The group examined the need, what might be accomplished and if there were already existing organizations in the Dayton metro area that could meet these objectives. The Dayton area has had a long history of governmental cooperation. All of the cities in the Dayton area operate under the council/manager form of government. These managers meet regularly to discuss common concerns and exchange ideas. In addition there is a formal mayors/managers organization, a regional planning organization and numerous other specialized regional or sub regional groups.

The core group, working with the mayors of their respective cities and with the regional planning agency held a meeting in February 2005 to introduce the idea to interested cities. Speakers included Robert Puentes from the Brookings Institution and a representative of the umbrella Ohio first suburbs group (Ohio First Suburbs Consortium). All elected officials and the City Managers from the prospective first tier cities were invited and the meeting included a breakout session designed to get to know one another better and to identify mutual First Tier concerns. At the end of that meeting there was consensus on forming a steering committee to guide the development of the organization. Twenty-three individuals volunteered representing all of the cities in attendance.

The steering committee held its first meeting in April and by June had discussed and resolved a number of organizational questions, developed and approved by-laws and a sample resolution for communities to pass to join the group and identified and started work on an issue of unique interest and importance to first tier suburbs. Much of this work was assigned to sub committees, which allowed things to proceed more rapidly. Another advantage was the good mix of mayors, council members and city managers, which resulted in balanced discussions at meetings.

At the June meeting, steering committee representatives were asked to ask each community to officially join the Consortium. Ten of the originally identified cities have joined.

For more information on the First Suburbs Consortium of Dayton Ohio Council of Governments, contact Jack Jensen at [jackjensen@ameritech.net](mailto:jackjensen@ameritech.net).

## Resources

Many of the resources listed here can be found at the First Tier Suburbs Council website at [http://www.nlc.org/inside\\_nlc/committees\\_\\_councils/465.cfm](http://www.nlc.org/inside_nlc/committees__councils/465.cfm).

### *Regional Collaborations of First Tier Suburbs*

- Ohio First Suburbs Consortium <http://www.firstsuburbs.org>
- Northeast Ohio First Suburbs Consortium, Cleveland, OH region <http://www.firstsuburbs.org/neohio/index.htm>
- Southwest Ohio First Suburbs Consortium, Cincinnati, OH region <http://www.firstsuburbs.org/southwestohio/index.htm>
- Central Ohio First Suburbs Consortium, Franklin County, OH region <http://www.firstsuburbs.org/centralohio/index.htm>
- First Suburbs Consortium of Dayton Ohio Council of Governments, Dayton, OH region contact Jack Jensen at [jackjensen@ameritech.net](mailto:jackjensen@ameritech.net)
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, Greater Philadelphia, PA, Camden and Trenton, NJ <http://www.dvrpc.org>
- East-West Gateway Coordinating Council, St. Louis, MO region <http://www.ewgateway.org>
- Mid-America Regional Council's First Suburbs Coalition, Kansas City region <http://www.marc.org/firstsuburbs/>
- Michigan Suburbs Alliance, Detroit, MI region <http://www.michigansuburbsalliance.org>
- Suburban Cities Association, Seattle, WA region <http://www.suburbancities.org>
- Greater Dallas Planning Council, Dallas, TX region <http://gdpc.org/>

### *Other Resources*

- *Valuing America's First Suburbs: A Policy Agenda for Older Suburbs in the Midwest*, The Brookings's Institution <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/firstsuburbsexsum.htm>
- *Half Way to Everywhere: A Portrait of America's First Suburbs*, The Urban Land Institute <http://www.uli.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Bookstore&Template=/eCommerce/EcomDefault.cfm>
- *First Suburbs Handbook: Case Studies and Development Tools for First Tier Suburbs*, Mid-American Regional Council <http://www.marc.org/handbook.pdf>
- The National Association of Regional Councils <http://www.narc.org>



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