FROM THE BOOK TO THE STREETS

A Skeptical Examination of the Citistates Idea

Regional Need vs. Local Sovereignty: Who Really Decides?

Prologue: The Seductive Promise of Order

In the early 1990s, Neal Peirce offered America a compelling vision. He argued that our fragmented system of local governments was inefficient, parochial, and ill-suited for global competition. His solution? Metropolitan regions should think and act as unified "Citistates." The idea was elegant, modern, and — on the surface — sensible. But beneath this appealing framework lies a more troubling question: At what cost to local democracy and self-determination?

This is not merely an academic debate. It is a fundamental question about power: Who gets to decide the future of our communities? The citizens who live there, through their locally elected representatives? Or distant planners, regional authorities, and global economic forces operating under the banner of "regional need"?

Chapter 1: The Book — A Vision of Rational Order

Neal Peirce's *Citistates* presented a seductive vision of rational, efficient regional governance. He argued that metropolitan regions were the real engines of the global economy and that traditional political boundaries were outdated obstacles to progress. His solution was elegant: regions should plan and govern as unified entities, transcending the messy, inefficient patchwork of local governments.

On the surface, this makes perfect sense. Who could argue against efficiency, coordination, and strategic thinking? But Peirce's framework contained within it a subtle but profound shift in power — away from local communities and toward regional authorities, planners, and economic interests that claim to speak for the "greater good."

The book never fully grappled with the democratic implications of this shift. It assumed that regional cooperation would naturally emerge from enlightened self-interest. What it failed to anticipate was how this vision would be used to override local preferences in the name of regional efficiency — often with little genuine democratic input from the people most affected.

Chapter 2: The Spread — From Theory to Institutional Power

As the Citistates idea spread through planning circles, it was embraced by a growing class of regional planners, foundation-funded think tanks, and international organizations. The language of "regional cooperation" and "integrated planning" became institutionalized through charrettes, visioning processes, and regional planning bodies. But with this institutionalization came a troubling pattern: the gradual erosion of local democratic control.

Charrettes, originally promoted as inclusive and democratic, often function in practice as sophisticated tools for manufacturing consent. Participants are carefully selected, discussions are tightly facilitated, and outcomes are frequently predetermined by the regional vision being promoted. Local residents who resist are often marginalized as "NIMBYs" or obstacles to progress.

The result has been a quiet transfer of power from locally elected officials — who are directly accountable to their constituents — to regional planning bodies and appointed commissions that operate at arm's length from voters. This is not conspiracy; it is the logical outcome of a planning philosophy that prioritizes regional efficiency over local sovereignty.

Chapter 3: Seven50 — A Case Study in Regional Overreach

The Seven50 Regional Plan in Southeast Florida provides a textbook example of how Citistates principles play out in practice. While presented as a collaborative, citizen-driven process, the plan's development revealed the tensions between regional ambition and local self-determination.

Critics argued that Seven50 represented an attempt to impose a top-down regional vision on diverse communities with different needs, values, and priorities. The charrette process, while inclusive on paper, often marginalized dissenting voices. The plan's emphasis on dense urban development, regional transportation systems, and unified economic strategies frequently clashed with local preferences for preserving community character and maintaining local control over land use.

More troubling was the way regional planning language was used to override local democratic decisions. When communities resisted development projects or zoning changes favored by the regional vision, they were often accused of being parochial or selfish — placing local interests above the "greater regional good." This framing effectively delegitimized local opposition and concentrated power in regional institutions.

Seven50 was not unique. Similar dynamics have played out in regional planning efforts across the country, from California's Sustainable Communities Strategies to regional plans in the Chicago and Denver metropolitan areas. The pattern is consistent: regional needs are invoked to justify overriding local preferences, often with limited genuine democratic accountability.

Chapter 4: The Tension — Regional Need vs. Local Sovereignty

At the heart of the Citistates project lies an unresolved tension: How do we balance legitimate regional needs with the fundamental right of local communities to self-determination in a democratic republic?

In our constitutional system, local governments derive their authority from the people through elected representatives. This is not merely administrative convenience — it is a deliberate design to keep power close to the people. When regional planning bodies override local decisions in the name of "regional need," they are effectively substituting their judgment for that of locally elected officials who are directly accountable to their constituents.

The question becomes: Who defines "regional need"? Is it truly the collective will of the region's citizens, or is it the vision of planners, developers, and economic interests who stand to benefit from regional consolidation? And even if regional needs are legitimate, at what point does the pursuit of those needs justify overriding the democratic choices of local communities?

These are not abstract questions. They go to the heart of what it means to live in a democratic republic. If we accept that regional authorities can override local preferences whenever they claim a "greater good," we have effectively created a new layer of government that is less accountable to the people than the local governments it supplants.

Chapter 5: Homogenization vs. Local Distinctiveness

One of the most troubling aspects of the Citistates approach is its tendency toward homogenization. Regional planning, by its nature, seeks to create unified strategies, unified branding, and unified development patterns across diverse communities. While this may serve economic efficiency, it often comes at the cost of local character and cultural distinctiveness.

Communities that have developed unique identities, architectural styles, economic bases, and social fabrics over generations find themselves pressured to conform to regional development templates. Historic districts may be sacrificed for density goals. Local business districts may be displaced by regional commercial centers. The very qualities that make communities distinctive — and worth preserving — are often viewed as obstacles to regional efficiency.

This raises a fundamental question: Are we building regions that serve people, or are we reshaping people to serve regional economic strategies? The Citistates vision, for all its talk of sustainability and livability, often

seems more concerned with creating efficient economic units than with preserving the diverse, organic communities that make places worth living in.

The result is a subtle but profound form of cultural erosion. Not through dramatic upheaval, but through the gradual homogenization of places under the banner of regional progress. Communities that once had distinct identities become interchangeable nodes in a regional economic network, their unique character sacrificed to the demands of global competitiveness.

Chapter 6: The Democratic Deficit

Perhaps the most serious critique of the Citistates model is its democratic deficit. While regional planning processes often include extensive public engagement, the fundamental decisions about regional structure and priorities are typically made by planners, foundation-funded organizations, and economic interests operating outside the normal channels of democratic accountability.

Elected officials at the local level — who are directly accountable to their constituents — find their authority constrained by regional plans and policies developed through processes that are only indirectly democratic. When citizens object to regional plans through their locally elected representatives, they are often told that their concerns must yield to the greater regional interest — an interest defined not by voters, but by planners and regional authorities.

This is not how democratic republics are supposed to work. In our system, the people, through their elected representatives, are supposed to be the ultimate decision-makers. When regional planning bodies effectively override local democratic decisions, they are substituting their judgment for that of the people — often with little genuine accountability.

The Citistates vision, for all its progressive rhetoric, often functions as a mechanism for concentrating power in the hands of regional elites while diminishing the democratic voice of local communities. This is not an accidental byproduct — it is inherent in a planning philosophy that prioritizes regional efficiency over local self-determination.

Epilogue: The Uncomfortable Questions

The Citistates idea, as articulated by Neal Peirce and implemented through projects like Seven50, offers a compelling vision of efficient, coordinated regional development. But it also raises uncomfortable questions that its proponents have been reluctant to fully confront.

Is regional efficiency worth the cost to local democracy? Can we truly balance regional needs with local sovereignty, or does one inevitably dominate the other? Are we building regions that serve people, or reshaping people to serve regional economic strategies? And most fundamentally: Who gets to decide?

These questions do not have easy answers. But they are questions that must be asked — and answered — if we are to preserve the democratic foundations of our republic while addressing the legitimate challenges of regional coordination. The Citistates vision may offer valuable insights, but it should not be accepted uncritically as the inevitable future of urban governance.

The journey from Neal Peirce's book to the streets of our communities has been remarkable. But the destination we are heading toward deserves more skeptical scrutiny than it has yet received. The future of local democracy may depend on it.

— The End —

A critical examination of Citistates and regional planning in a democratic republic