CHAPTER 10

State–Local Relations

CHAPTER SUMMARY
State legislatures are the trustees of the basic rules of local governance in America. The constitutions and laws of the states are the legal instruments of local governance. States have recently begun to treat local governments as partners, though the effort is by no means a well-coordinated one. General-purpose governments typically have wider latitude than special-purpose governments. The more recent a state’s constitution, the more likely it is to empower local government; but only about one-half extend truly proprietary policymaking power to their cities, and even fewer accord counties similar powers. The real distribution of authority can be seen in an important function like highway planning, where state and local officials do consult. Surveys show general satisfaction with this arrangement, but the state has the last word and in some functions, like growth management, the consultations generate considerably more friction. The relationship between states and their local governments has been described as a tug a war. The bottom line of what local governments really want from their states is more money.

State governments find their dealings with local governments confounded by the side effects of urbanization. Several waves of suburbanization have affected the urban area: the 1920s move to the suburbs facilitated by the automobile; a resurgence in the 1950s that saw retail stores follow the population exodus; and, most recently, the development of office space beyond the central city. Indeed, central cities in the 1980s were fundamentally altered as the urban landscapes became composed of relatively self-contained and self-sufficient decentralized regional units. These “boom towns” outpaced the central cities and are considered to be the “new frontier” of urbanized America. This has created a need for changes to outdated state policy toward metropolitan jurisdictions. Rapid unplanned growth continues to produce sprawl and “shadow governments.” State governments appear to be doing more than they used to about the problems created by unplanned growth. New developments on the outer reaches of the central city are called “edge cities.” Their existence around cities like Phoenix and Seattle and state responses are illustrations of state involvement with the problem. Smart growth policies have now become a common concept in urban American to limit the negative effects of growth and sprawl.

A new form of local government, called “shadow governments,” emerged from edge cities found outside of large fast-growing cities like Phoenix, Arizona and Seattle, Washington. They may be private enterprise shadow governments, such as homeowner associations; public-private partnerships, such as development corporations; or subsidiaries of conventional governments with unusual powers, such as areawide planning commissions. More than 150,000 such arrangements exist nationwide. Although they generally operate within the confines of state law, the states have displayed a curious hands-off posture. This is surprising, inasmuch as the shadow governments raise serious questions of power and equity. Their vaunted efficiency, however, makes them a power to be reckoned with and their number is increasing, not decreasing. Continued urban expansion and shadow governments make up extended webs of independent jurisdictions. State governments seem not to have much idea about how these places would best be governed.

Regional government is one alternative to these specialized mini-governments. And closely
related to regional government is the city-county consolidation currently found in thirty-three consolidated governments. These governments are seen as a way to address stubborn areawide problems and produce economies of scale in service delivery. Criticisms of these arrangements include their inaccessibility and the destruction of hard-won political gains of minorities. Regardless of the reasons, the voting public has stubbornly resisted them, and state legislatures have been reluctant to follow the nineteenth-century lead of unilaterally creating them.

Strong local governments make for resurgent state governments. Local governments benefit from positive relations with the states. Nonetheless the two levels frequently clash, with dire consequences. State-local relations are always in flux, and the trend over the past three decades has been toward increased state assistance and empowerment of local governments.