The following article presents excerpts from Curtis Johnson’s keynote presentation at the 1998 CIP Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba: “The Emergence of Citistates and their Impact on Urban Planning.”

Based on a book we [Curtis Johnson and Neal Peirce] wrote in 1993, we have a definition for citistates we’d like to see show up some day in a dictionary:

**citi•state - n -** a region consisting of one or more historic central cities surrounded by cities and towns which have a shared identification, function as a single zone for trade, commerce, and communication, and are characterized by social, economic, and environmental interdependence.

Notice right away that it doesn’t mention government borders. As we see it, citistates are not political inventions, they’re organic. A citistate is what the economy does—how wide the city’s newspapers circulate and television signals reach, the area from which people commute in for jobs, and the territory in which people identify with the city’s professional sports teams. It’s the labour market; the retail market; the health care market.

And it’s not merely big places ...

But (you may say) the facts of globalization, with its punishing pace of international markets, are now nearly a clichéd reality. The new rule is getting its recognition: either you organize as a region to be competitive, or you get left behind, collecting the leftovers from smarter places.

Maybe we know the new rules, but the reality remains that governments above the local level are largely paralyzed on the most important questions; and government at the very local level (worship it as we will) hasn’t the tools for the job. And where there is some regional body, as with Council’s of Governments in the U.S. or as it was with your former regional planning commissions here, they survive only by avoiding the tough issues—steering around conflict. All this in an atmosphere of declining public trust in government and its officials.

The landscape of earnest efforts is littered with casualties, and still new things are tried. Where we meet today, in Winnipeg, there’s been a nearly continuous seminar of success and frustration with reorganization. Look eastward and witness the provincial fist thrust into the
face of six reluctant cities last January 1, creating the new [City of] Toronto. Or Nova Scotia creating a new Halifax from the city, two towns, and a county. Recall the aborted attempt to create a true metropolitan government in the Rotterdam region about three years ago. Add up all over North America the hundreds of failed attempts to resurrect the annexation and consolidation tools over recent decades.

So where does that leave us, in a democratic society? It leaves us to practice the art of collaborating across institutional and ideological lines. Collaboration is in many ways an unnatural act, even among presumably consenting adults, because most of us go mostly to meetings where we're assured of seeing people with whom we already agree.

Collaboration inherently requires us to assemble the parties who disagree, who bring divergent perspectives to the table. And this new diversity is not merely over opinions, but over who has the privilege of being there to express them. This larger, rounder table is still an awkward notion for many in our culture, especially ageing white males. But we're getting used to the drill. (My wife's penetrating little question on this matter asks: "If a man speaks in a forest, and there's no woman there to hear him, is he still wrong?")

But collaboration is exactly what's working.

When Cleveland was flat on its back a couple of decades ago—the butt of jokes on late night television, its Cuyahoga River catching fire from saturated pollution, its brash young mayor driving it off the cliffs into bankruptcy—business leaders joined forces with the elected officials, foundations, and eventually neighbourhood activists. First they fixed the downtown, recognizing the signature potential it represented; now they're working on the neighbourhoods, like Hough and Fairfax. Talk to people who were involved and they'll tell you it took a network of trusting relationships to transform Cleveland into a comeback place.

The same was true for Chattanooga, Tennessee, once the most polluted city in the United States. Left for dead only a generation ago, Chattanooga today collects awards for liveability, including a major citation at the latest HABITAT conference in Istanbul. It did it with collaboration, involving thousands of citizens in setting goals and carrying out projects, first in the 80s and again in the early 90s. Today they're pushing themselves to the level of outrageous ambition, pursuing a strategy for a totally sustainable business and manufacturing community; and if you go to one of their meetings you need nametags to know who the business executives, environmental activists, elected officials, and neighbourhood leaders are. They all speak the same language about the kind of community they want.

In San Diego—which is today actually the San Diego-Tijuana citistate—they've created something called the San Diego Dialogue, combining local government leaders, representatives of non-profit and community-based organizations, and business executives with bold, visionary support from the University of California at San Diego. At the busiest border crossing in this hemisphere, San Ysidro, nearly half the four million monthly traffic count is for regular business or commercial
activity. When the San Diego Chamber of Commerce meets, you can safely bet the Mexicans are there.

Their neighbour just northward, Los Angeles, has official aspirations to create a transportation collaborative stretching westward from Laredo, Texas, to the L.A. port. This Southwest Passage with road and rail capacity for NAFTA goods is tracking a shift in commercial routes away from north-south to an east-west pattern.

In Seattle, a business-led group called the Washington Trade Alliance takes two trips a year with a regional delegation of about 70 civic, political, and business leaders. Half the destinations are international regions—hot spots for economic growth. Executive Bill Stafford modestly explains that over the past five years, he's been building "the most internationally sophisticated civic leadership in the world."

In Texas, there's a 90-mile corridor between San Antonio and Austin where an old organization has been rebirthed, uniting about 40 governments and some 200 businesses, all increasingly convinced that their most serious problems—transportation and growth management—will overwhelm them all if they don't act together as a single regional force. Just in time, too. In another two years, a truck leaving Laredo coming up I-35 with NAFTA goods will take a slower trip to Fort Worth than before we had interstates.

Maybe you won't think so, but an outsider finds much to admire in the Edmonton, Alberta, experience. Its efforts to create the Capital Regional Forum from among the willing local governments, after your Municipal Government Act passed in 1994, shows the other side of regional pressure. It is not just the push from the provinces to be more efficient. There is the pull from the people who, if they are regarded as stakeholders, do show up, actually do care, and will spend time to create common ground. While I realize this regional forum is yet considerably short of a declared success, the language swirling around their efforts—results-oriented, issue-driven, getting buy-in, leveraging resources, making strategic alliances—are the words of processes from which effective governance is crafted.

The pressure is not going to disappear. Only if we can plan and pursue action agendas on a regional level can we preserve what people want in their communities: competitive economic opportunities and good places to live.

Curtis Johnson is the current chair of the Metropolitan Council for Minneapolis-St. Paul. The Council is one of North America's earliest and premier regional organizations, responsible for area-wide planning, establishing transportation and water priorities, and operating the transit and wastewater systems. Mr. Johnson co-authored the book Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World, which claims that large metropolitan areas are defining the new political geography of global economic competition.