



Economic Development Administration Economic Development Today

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Regional Economic Development in Florida: A Focus on Mega-Region Cooperation

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On Thursday, October 5, 2006 the series *Economic Development Today* featured a telecast on Regional Economic Development in Florida. Governor Jeb Bush, along with local leaders from the private and public sectors, discussed the socio-economic issues related to regional growth in Florida.

This article features how regional planners are collaborating across political boundaries to meet the challenges of economic development in 21st century. Through interviews with local politicians and excerpts from the 5th Annual Metropolitan Regions Forum, this article details the emergence of “mega-regions,” bringing together planning professionals and academics. Specifically, the telecast featured the Miami and Tampa/Clearwater Regions in the South Central Florida Mega Region. Topics ranged from: infrastructure (transportation, environmental, financing), linkages to the global economy, workforce development, and faith-based initiatives.

Florida’s Regional Growth

Like many states, Florida's regions are experiencing many growth related issues, such as rapid population growth, build out of metropolitan areas, uneven and inequitable growth patterns within and between regions, stressed ecosystems, and aging infrastructure facilities that are reaching capacity limits.



In Florida, under **Governor Jeb Bush’s** two terms, the education system has revolutionized to achieve dramatic rising student achievement, a substantial broad-based tax relief has been provided, and economic incentives were created to strengthen and diversify the economy.

The state of Florida, Mr. Bush noted, has an aggressive economic development strategy, heralding its diversified economy, lower tax situation, increased funding for workforce development, and emphasis on staying competitive in the increasingly global

economy. In terms of innovation, he said that Florida is “working hard to try to create that intersection between scientific discovery and general research and development and the jobs that come from that.”

Mr. Bush cited Florida’s geography as a key to its past and future success. As a gateway to the Caribbean and Latin America, the state has focused on infrastructure to make sure that it remains a premier place for the trading of goods and services. With a market of nearly 900 million consumers in the Western Hemisphere, Mr. Bush pointed out that “if you look at a map, we’re right in the center of that.”

In terms of scientific innovation, the governor attributed his state’s ongoing success to the collaboration between universities and research institutes. “We are seeing that [private] investments have increased and have enhanced an already good research base at our universities.” Initiatives through the public and private sector are leading Florida’s advances in the life sciences.

During the past ten years, state officials have seen the value in promoting both economic growth and environmental conservation. “Florida buys more pristine lands than any state in the country,” said Mr. Bush. The state’s focus on protecting the natural environment and green space contributes to overall growth and development of the region. “I think people recognize that the quality of life is larger than just low taxes,” Mr. Bush indicated, “which is good [for building] a quality work force.” Today, Floridians have come to expect officials to recognize the positive relationship between an environmentally friendly living space and a successful workplace.



Because of Florida’s ever-increasing population growth, the state had little choice but to focus on planning in a regional context, particularly in economic development. Despite the varied and diverse cultures that have become the norm in Florida, the state is seeing a concerted effort to solidify growth strategies. Not just in Florida but in all states, Mr. Bush concluded, “communities have to set aside their parochial interests and think in a broader context.”

A Focus on the Mega Region and Long-term Planning

The South-Central Florida Mega-Region is one of ten mega-regions across the nation organizing to plan for future investments. **Carolyn A. Dekle** is the Executive Director of the South Florida Regional Planning Council (SFRPC), a planning and public policy agency serving Broward, Dade and Monroe counties.



The mega-region name itself refers to cooperative planning in a multi-state and almost always multi-county context. Ms. Dekle explained that mega-regions are projected to absorb 70 percent of the population growth that the United States will experience between now and 2015 due to steady birth-rates, immigration, and migration. “Coming from a

high growth state,” she stated, “we understand the need to plan and anticipate the need to provide for services for the persons who are coming to join us here.”

In order for the U.S. to remain competitive in the world economy, the mega-region initiative is designed to provide a policy framework for federal, regional, and state investment strategies. Economic development experts have identified similar mega-regions throughout the country, and Ms. Dekle stated that by working together and sharing best practices with these regions, the U.S. will be better suited to compete in the global economy.

Economic development planners are putting more emphasis on long-term benefits and rewards. “We believe that the primary mission of SFRPC is to think about where we will be 50 years from now.” Return on investment is no longer judged in primarily an annual performance review but rather on a much more open-ended scale that involves many stakeholders. “One of the big challenges,” Ms. Dekle continued, “is knitting together all the different organizations and interests as we move forward.”

Helping to confront the challenge of bringing all of the stakeholders together in regional development is **James Murley**, Director of the Florida Atlantic University Anthony Catanese Center for Urban & Environmental Solutions, whose mission is “to work with policy makers and the public in their pursuit of options for managing growth while preserving natural systems, promoting a strong economy and planning livable communities.”

Mr. Murley contended that planning, at least in Florida, can no longer be seen as solely a domestic affair. “The Florida peninsula essentially is located with three sides being water. That water is the bridge to our international partners: the island nations of the Caribbean, and the countries in South America.” Officials need to realize that a state’s growth can be connected to many external factors, such as trade, culture, and international policy. “Increasingly,” he continued, “our population base as it grows comes from those other countries. We see a future of the mega-region being part of Florida tied to our international members.”



In terms of geography, policy experts in Florida are aware that climate change could hold major consequences for the region. In the South-Central Mega-Region, the highest physical level is a hundred feet above sea level. “In most of the urbanized areas,” Mr. Murley cited, “it is probably 20 or 30 feet [above sea-level].” Within the next 50 years, sea-level rise could have a significant impact on Florida’s barrier islands and estuaries. “We’re making investment decisions today for infrastructure in those areas. If we do not think about sea level rise, which is directly related to climate change, we could have facilities under water in 20 years or 30 years. We have to take the data we’re getting from

the scientists and think practically as we make development decisions and conservation decisions.”

Regional Economic Development at the City Level

Regional growth is not directed by federal and state policy-makers alone, local officials bear the brunt of the on-the-ground planning decisions. In the age of mega-regions, there are already mounting challenges confronting cities and local jurisdictions.

Currently serving her eighth term as Mayor of the City of Hollywood, **Mara Giuliani**, has witnessed first-hand the new policy implications that have evolved over her past 18 years in office. “This region in particular and probably all,” Ms. Giuliani highlighted, “have challenges with transportation.” Getting people to jobs and to educational opportunities is the top priority in her community. “We hear people say boundaries are only important to mapmakers. Certainly people cross boundaries every day on their way to work or shopping. If there is an issue that is regional, it is clearly transportation.



In this area, three counties worked collectively with the support of more than 90 cities. That is why you cannot be thinking parochially. We cannot solve that problem alone.” The cities in South Florida have worked together with the regional planning councils to tackle mutual transportation problems. In addition to a new rail system, Ms. Giuliani cited the implementation of a new rapid bus transit. “None of that could have been done by any of the cities on their own.”

The second greatest challenge is affordable and workforce housing. “We are a victim of our own success,” she acknowledged, attributing the lack of affordable housing to skyrocketing property values. “In order to be able to keep the workforce, have them live here, and attract jobs, we need to work collectively on getting that attainable housing.” The housing issue ties directly into workforce development. “Florida has done a good deal on training, so jobs are not just dead end jobs. We have created incredible opportunity and change in the workforce by taking people with barriers to employment – and creating possibilities.” Ms. Giuliani accredited these successes to regional cooperation: “Working together, we have a group of mayors that work in the region, a League of Cities. We share ideas; we share best practices. I think that has shown certainly in my city through redevelopment.”

An example of a successful partnership in regional development is that of the cooperative efforts highlighted by the neighboring cities of St. Petersburg and Clearwater. Leading these communities’ collaborative efforts are **Rick Baker**, Mayor of St. Petersburg, and **Frank Hibbard**, Mayor of Clearwater.

Oftentimes, communities in the same region share similar geographical challenges to economic growth. “One of the important things for us,” Mr. Hibbard noted, “is the fact that this is a built-out community. That is very unique to all of Florida. So [the two cities] are on the same sheet of music as far as redevelopment. We do not have greenfield redevelopment where we are actually building new things. What we're seeing is the knocking down of old buildings and replacing them with new state-of-the-art buildings.” In this case, the two cities try to coordinate planning projects in order to best allocate new facilities and resources in the region. “So something that St. Petersburg has we may not want to duplicate,” Mr. Hibbard contended, “but we may want to augment it.”

Both cities share the same vision for workforce development, said Mr. Hibbard, noting that each has overcome similar challenges to retaining a productive and youthful labor force. Economic development relies not only on the business sector, but equally on the livability of the community. “One of the challenges communities face across the country,” stated Mr. Baker, “is that they may have great high schools and a community college system, but when they graduate there are no jobs to come back to.” It is the job of the political leadership to attract and keep businesses in the region. The two cities enjoy many large employers and continued job growth. The region as a whole is constantly recruiting economic engines. “We have a pretty strong critical mass going to be able to retain the folks that are growing up here,” concluded Mr. Baker.



Despite the alliances and concerted development efforts between the cities, Mr. Baker cautioned that no city should give up its identity in the name of regionalism. “You should continue to market your city,” he advised, “but there are issues – and it will change from region to region – that you can agree on. A need to find new water resources: we came together as a region to develop a water system. Transportation is another issue. We have to have transportation corridors going between our communities. You look for the areas you agree on and work on those. We are trying to look at it from the perspective of the greater area as a whole and how we can work together to impact the whole community.”

Regional Development and the Private Sector

The private sector plays perhaps the most important part in the economic development of any community. **Neisen Kasden**, Chair of the Beacon Council, was instrumental in leading the revitalization of Miami Beach’s South Beach through his work as chair of the Miami Beach Community Development Corporation, city commissioner and as mayor.

“The regions are actually beginning to knit together,” asserted Mr. Kasden. “You can see the progression of development: it started in Miami Dade County; it went up to Broward and Palm Beach County; now, it is up to Indian River County.” It is this type of development pattern that he foresees as actually linking the region together. “Business leaders are the first people to realize that they have to do business across borders, across county lines and city



lines. So business leadership in order to create a mega-region needs to be engaged and take the lead.” Yet, Mr. Kasden sees the need for cooperation and a continuing dialogue between the private and public sector. “There is a big role for universities and think tanks to begin to put a face on regionalism, as well as public officials. It always takes a bold leader to help advance [private enterprise] in the public spirit and the public sector.”

Additionally, Florida’s mega-region is starting to see the engaging of the private sector in furnishing the infrastructure that will tie the communities together. The concept of road construction being paid for and owned by the private sector is becoming increasingly attractive to jurisdictions looking to take on transportation improvements without the needed funding. “Infrastructure dollars are key to growth and livability,” maintained Mr. Kasden. “If you do not have the infrastructure, you have problems. But given the anti-tax sentiment in the country and budgetary constraints, there are limited dollars to provide the infrastructure that is needed to make an effective region. So privatization, and potentially even privatization of commuter and rail service, is an innovation that is being explored in this country.” Mr. Kasden admits that high-level business involvement is not a panacea to the challenges of economic development; however, the private-public partnership is integral to successfully tying the mega-region together.

The other component of development from the private sector is that of voluntary and interfaith-based initiatives. **Dr. Daniel Bernard** established Somebody Cares Tampa Bay to unify and mobilize the church across denominational and racial lines with a focus on giving back to the community. His organization is a network of independent, community based non-profit agencies providing outreach support to Tampa Bay ministries who assist poverty-stricken families and the working poor.

“We have 300 compassion organizations that partner with us,” cited Dr. Bernard, “and about 150 churches as well. Collectively, we’re working on things like Back-to-School. We give out about 30,000 back packs filled with school supplies in the local areas. The cost is about \$300,000. The retail impact in the community is about \$1.2 million.”



Somebody Cares Tampa Bay also sponsors a special week-long event called CareFest. “It started when we approached Tampa and St. Pete and decided we would like to serve the city. Out of that an event called CareFest began.” Dr. Bernard

explained that, “the cities give us projects to do. We get the Christian businesses and compassionate organizations to work together to actually go out and accomplish all these projects.” Assignments have included painting houses, updating building facilities, and renewing parklands. “We’re now in 16 communities across Tampa Bay. It costs us about \$900 each; the retail value to each project is about \$6,600. We bring in over \$1 million of goods and services to the Tampa Bay area.”

Getting people to work together and bring about unity is challenging admits Dr. Bernard. “But think of what could take place if we could work together, how much more we could do. When you have small successes, people begin to jump on board.” Dr. Bernard

maintains that development requires investment from the private sector as a whole. “The business community has been a tremendous help merely because they have the vision for development. That is *why* they are in business. They have been a tremendous help and catch the vision sometimes quicker than the church community. With that, they bring their resources. That also helps people, especially in the nonprofit sector, for them to come on board. It gives them credibility when they see the business community involved.”



Florida’s Future in the Eyes of Regional Planners

The economic development initiatives in the mega-region involve many different stakeholders. By way of managing, tracking, and forecasting the growth, regional councils play a leading role in the state of Florida.

As the Executive Director of the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, **Philip Laurien** notes that the region’s concerted efforts in regionalism may be the largest ever undertaken in America. “The growth in our region certainly compels us to think forward. We currently have over 40 developments of regional impact with a minimum of 1,000 houses – in very far-flung places,” explained Mr. Laurien. “Developers want to go where the land is cheap and bring all the services out there. So there really needs to be a vision for what the future of this region is going to look like 50 years from now.”

Mr. Laurien believes that the future success of the mega-region will be founded on today’s surveys and data research, and the implementation thereof, on the shared values of the people living in the region. In addition to the data collection, over 6,000 people have attended survey workshops in order to determine the best course of development for Florida. At times, such research conflicts with the planners’ existing strategies. “What people are voting for is compact centers connected by transit and surrounded by open space,” Mr. Laurien identified, “not at all like current comprehensive plans. So I think the overarching issues are going to be building a transportation system and preserving the open space that people want.”



This focus on the public’s desires for future investment is shared by **Daniella S. Levine**, Executive Director of the Human Services Coalition of Dade County. She facilitated the formation of the county coalition in order to meet the needs of families and neighborhoods through public education, advocacy, promotion of collaboration, and public dialogue on critical human services issues.

Workforce issues are of primary concern for Ms. Levine when discussing Florida's future regional growth. It is important to recognize that the quality of the business community is mutually dependent on the quality of the workforce. "We have done a survey about the challenges facing people in the region. We have some of the lowest educational attainment in these metropolitan areas. We have very low-paid jobs, and an increasing service economy. And housing costs are disproportionately high, driven by market forces such as foreign investment." Once again, a theme emerges of unchecked growth creating a backlash against the community. "So foreign trade has its benefits but also has its detriment," Ms. Levine continued. "We certainly have an international culture in the mega-region. We have a growing percentage of Spanish native speakers in the region. That affects the educational system, the workforce. These are issues that started out in southeast Florida and certainly have translated to southwest Florida and up to Orlando. As a larger region, it is a conversation we should be having to look at the future." Like Mr. Laurien, Ms. Levine agreed that before any thoughtful planning for the future can be made in the region, it is imperative to look at the greater picture of where things are headed due to current trends and policy initiatives.



Building on the mega-region's past successes should not be overlooked, contended **Manny L. Pumariega**, Executive Director of the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council. "We have been in a leadership role of trying to protect our environment and our resources. From an emergency preparedness standpoint, we have played a leadership role there: In 1980 we were the first to prepare a hurricane evacuation plan. We worked with emergency directors in our region." When examining seemingly bright success stories, new opportunities can be gleaned. "One of the things we're missing that we found out -- the employers in our region were not engaged. We're proposing an initiative this year that would engage the employers in trying to help us with an evacuation plan."

"Regionalism has legs here," declared Mr. Laurien. In a way, he contended, Florida's immense growth does not allow officials to act independently; each action in one city affects the next. "You do not have time not to cooperate. You do not have time not to work together, because the issues are overarching – transportation, water, housing affordability. You *have to* work together." Accordingly, it is important for the state, and its many different players, to recognize the certain overarching themes vital to the success of economic development on a regional scale.

This telecast was moderated by Matthew E. Crow, Director of Communications of the Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce. It may be viewed in full on the EDA website at: www.eda.gov/NewsEvents/WebCastsVideos.xml.

If you have any questions on the telecast series or ideas for future telecast topics, please contact Peggy Tadej at tadej@narc.org.