



PRESS-REGISTER

Planners eye megaregional cooperation

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Consider this item from Press-Register archives, penned by Casandra Andrews:

"During the first half of the 20th century ... some coastal Alabama residents felt like they got the short end of the stick from the rest of the state. So in 1947, Mobile's city fathers did a bit more than lobby politicians for a larger slice of the state's resources.

"That year, the Mobile Chamber of Commerce published an image of what they thought should be the Greater Gulf State ... that extended as far west as Pearl River, Miss., and as far east as Gulf County, Fla., encompassing ... 63 counties and about 2 million residents. Only a handful of southern counties in Alabama made the cut.

"The Mobile Chamber's position, then, was that counties in lower Alabama, southern Mississippi and Northwest Florida had 'emerged as a new economic commonwealth, where the people have mutual interests and their welfare is so closely interwoven that it might well be designated as the Greater Gulf State."

It was an idea perhaps slightly ahead of its time. But new research by the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association labels the Gulf Coast -- from the Florida Panhandle to the Mexican border (including Houston, Mobile and New Orleans) -- one of 10 emerging "megaregions" in the United States.

The megaregion discussion is somewhat new among planners, said Catherine L. Ross, director of the Center for Quality Growth & Regional Development at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. She includes Alabama and Mobile as part of the Piedmont Atlantic megaregion, an area that includes northern Florida and Georgia, then stretches north to Tennessee and the Carolinas.

Such regions are not drawn arbitrarily, she said last week, but defined by factors such as economic interaction, infrastructure, natural resources and cultural identity.

Transportation and infrastructure, she said, are some of the easiest issues around which regions unite. Harder but necessary, she added, is planning that allow cities within such large regions to identify their own specific advantages and amenities, then work to develop successfully within those niches.

"It becomes about how we work together and how we divide resources so that each gets something," she said, "and all of us not try to duplicate what others have."

Such planning, she said, might have helped avert the water war among Alabama, Georgia and Florida.

Win Hallett, president of the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce, helped organize some regional chamber and business links during the early part of the decade, including joint trips to talk with political leaders in Washington, D.C., about common needs.

"There was a lot we could agree on," he said, but noted that the effort faded in part because "at the end of the day, the more important things were on our own agendas."

Regional efforts since have come in starts and stops, he said, but the chamber remains active in regional partnerships from Envision Coastal Alabama to the iTenWired technology initiative. Regionalism also figures prominently in chamber planning studies.

"We're convinced that if we make better informed decisions today with how we develop with all this growth in front of us, the proactive cost will be a fraction of the reactive cost," he said. "We are interested in a region because those are the units of competition in the global economy."

For information, see www.cqgrd.gatech.edu/megaregions/PAM.php or www.america2050.org.

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