

Megaregion planners believe time has come to think big

By Tom Baxter
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March 24, 2009 — Every day, 34 million people wake up in a place most of them have never heard of: the Piedmont Atlantic Megaregion, or the PAM, as regional planners have taken to calling it.

Conceptually, the idea of American megaregions dates back just a few years, when planners began to contemplate a future in which the old city centers would become connected by continuous strips of urbanization. As seen from a satellite at night, the PAM is that smear of light which stretches from Raleigh to Birmingham, encompassing Charlotte, Greenville-Spartanburg and Atlanta, along with a string of “gateway” cities along the coast.

By 2050 – the timespan contemplated by a group of long-thinkers from government, academia and business Monday at a conference at the Georgia Tech Global Learning Center – the PAM is expected to grow by 70 percent and be home to 57 million. Without careful planning, providing basic services for that population could make today’s traffic jams and water shortages look like child’s play.

“Fifty years, in the life of a state or a city or region, is a drop in the bucket,” said Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory.

The focus of the conference was on how to create a PAM infrastructure that will make it competitive in the global economy in which other megaregions around the world have tackled problems this region is only beginning to deal with. Even Morocco, a noted planner said with chagrin, is planning a fast train that will run 200 miles-per-hour between Tangier and Casablanca.

“The rest of the world is moving forward with these investments, and we are playing catchup ball,” said Robert Yaro, president of the Regional Plan Association.

Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin said her city established itself with significant infrastructure investments, like Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. “But that really is yesterday’s news,” she said, noting the challenges the city and region faces to remain economically viable. With unemployment soaring and basic infrastructure needs unmet, said Cobb County (Ga.) CEO Sam Olens, “We now have a Southeast doesn’t look as pretty as it used to.”

Effective transportation, environmental and resource planning has been frustrated at the local level by a spider’s web of governmental rivalries and indifference toward long-range infrastructure planning at the national level. But there was a strong sense at this

gathering that the megaregion idea, and the nation's willingness to invest in its infrastructure, have arrived at a pivotal moment.

"This is an administration that thinks in regional terms," said Ray Christman, former president and CEO of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta. For the first time since the 1960s, he said, public opinion has shifted in favor of "a robust domestic agenda."

The billions being poured into the infrastructure in the stimulus package represents just the down payment on this robust agenda. But lack of money hasn't been the only problem in forging a solution to the region's basic problems.

Throughout the day there were several mentions of the stark contrast between the Georgia-Florida-Alabama water wars, which have stretched on for more than two decades, and the way in which the former enemies of two world wars are now coordinating their infrastructure planning in Europe.

Progress has been frozen by "absolutely outmoded bureaucratic and institutional structures," said Beverly Scott, president and CEO of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority.

"We are literally walking around in 20th Century armor, for working in a 21st Century world," said Scott who also chairs the American Public Transportation Association.

Olens drew a lot of agreement when he said leaders of the communities which make up this sprawling mega region should start by making the effort to get to know each other better.

"To me, this whole PAM discussion is how we play nice with each other for greater gains," Olens said.

Like the Sunbelt – another place which only came into being after its residents realized it was there – the PAM discussion is also about identity, and that classic Southern question, "Where are you from?" In the coming decades, that answer may become more complicated.

"You're almost trying to erase the borders and think of them, from the perspective of the PAM, as being within new borders," said Rob Nalchik, general manager of Porches Logistics Services