

More Cooperation Sought on Area's Future

Civic, Business and Government Leaders Are Organizing Effort to Plan Vision

By Alec MacGillis
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, June 21, 2006; B05

A group of business, civic and government leaders is preparing a multimillion dollar effort to plan for Washington's future, saying a major initiative is needed to overcome regional divisions that hamper solutions to the area's problems.

The effort's leaders say the Washington area is at risk of becoming a victim of its success as the region's booming economy produces concerns about traffic congestion and sprawl, housing affordability and imbalanced economic growth. The region, which leads the nation in job growth and includes some of its fastest-growing counties, is expected to add 2 million residents and 1.6 million jobs by 2030.

Too often, say participants, the region has failed to act as one because it is divided among the District and two states, with the added complication of the large and not-always-cooperative presence of the federal government.

"There is a strong prospect of big growth in the future, and if we are to maintain the appeal of the region to workers and businesses and maintain the quality of life, there is a strong belief that we have to get better aligned on how we want that to happen," said George Vradenburg, a retired America Online executive who is helping to lead the discussions.

The effort contemplated would be modeled roughly on what planners call "visioning" exercises undertaken in other metropolitan areas in recent years, including Salt Lake City, Los Angeles and Chicago. Typically, consultants use high-tech mapping and digital imagery software to produce scenarios for an area's development, and the public then offers reactions online or at workshops. In several cities, organizers have set up an office with paid staff to help implement their plan for up to a decade after the initial process.

The Greater Washington Board of Trade, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments and the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region are leading the initiative. The trade group and COG have ventured long-term planning efforts before with mixed success, but what is being discussed is larger, with cooperation across the private and public sectors that earlier efforts lacked.

The three organizations have been meeting to plan the effort for the past three months. They hope to get final approval from their boards by the fall, then raise money and secure the participation of other major players, including the governors of Maryland and Virginia and the mayor of Washington.

In a sign of the region's divisions, intense discussions have occurred in the group about ensuring that the exercise does not focus exclusively on the symptoms of rapid growth, such as traffic and housing costs. These problems may be particularly dire in booming Northern Virginia, say some participants, but other issues -- such as struggling schools in the District and relatively low job growth in Prince George's County -- need to be addressed in other areas.

The issues must be tackled together, some participants say, because they are related in many ways -- the jobs imbalance in the region, for instance, makes the westbound Beltway congested on weekday mornings.

"This region, while growing and prosperous, is very divided along race and class lines, and this project, if it is to succeed, has to bridge that divide," said Alice M. Rivlin, a Brookings Institution researcher and former chairman of the D.C. financial control board who is participating in the talks. "It has to involve leaders from the eastern side of the region, from Prince George's and the eastern part of the District."

As important, say others, is ensuring the effort has enough momentum to produce real results. Jay Fisette (D), COG's chairman and an Arlington County board member, said a key will be getting heavy involvement from the business community.

"It has to become not simply a planning process but a real campaign," he said. "People don't want just planning and study, they want implementation. They want a sense that their time and energy is going to something, that it's not just going to sit on a shelf."

John Fregonese, an urban planner based in Portland, Ore., who has consulted on several regional exercises and is in discussions with the Washington group, said some cities have produced more real results than others. The most cited success is Envision Utah, which began in 1997 and has been credited with helping to shape several walkable planned communities and building support for a light rail system. Less successful, Fregonese said, have been exercises in Austin and Nashville.

The planning efforts are not cheap. Envision Utah maintains a staff for about \$1.3 million annually, and in Los Angeles, the Southern California Compass has cost about \$5 million, paid for mainly by grants and other private funding. Organizers of the Washington effort say they hope all three participating sectors -- business, government and nonprofit -- will share the cost, which is expected to be at least \$2 million or \$3 million.

Chicago Metropolis 2020, led by that city's business community, has benefited from several retired executives working nearly full time for free to implement the recommendations in a 1999 report. The effort has not had the full cooperation of local governments, which have embarked on their own process. But it has improved area transportation and land use planning and helped build support for a big increase in early childhood education spending, said its director, Frank H. Beal.

Beal, a retired steel executive, said the key to successful planning is a willingness to risk ruffling feathers.

"In the desire to be collaborative, don't forget leadership. Don't be embarrassed to lead," he said. "There are too many efforts where it's all about 'getting everyone to the table.' Everyone goes away feeling good, but no one's doing anything."