

Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC)
August 6, 2006
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ALLIANCE FOSTERS REGION'S ECONOMY

Lisa Fleisher The Sun News

For five years, some of the region's top business, academic and legislative leaders have been fundraising and planning, spinning a web around South Carolina's northeastern counties.

Now they're ready to see some action.

The goal of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance, a coalition that spans the Pee Dee and Grand Strand, is regional economic development, which has a profound effect on everyday life.

It means attracting jobs, industrial plants and investment in the region, and improving the area's infrastructure.

The region is playing catch-up to an approach taken a decade or more ago by other areas in the state and country. Members, who include the region's top politicians, say this will bolster the area's historically weak political power.

“What you see across the country is that counties are aligning themselves in groups like this,” said Mark Williams, an NESAs consultant who works with other regions across the state and country. “It's just a very good way to save money and have a higher impact in economic development.”

NESA will take the spotlight at this year's fifth annual Growth Summit Friday at Coastal Carolina University, sponsored by the university and The Sun News.

S.C. Department of Commerce Secretary Joe Taylor will speak about the importance of regional development across the state, his spokeswoman said.

The session will end with a panel featuring Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce President Brad Dean, Georgetown County Economic Development Commission Chairman Jim Jerow and Hugh Owens, president of the Myrtle Beach Regional Economic Development Corp.

Before last year's summit, local leaders had considered setting up their own regional development group, but abandoned those plans when they realized that NESA was starting to pick up speed.

Its board members list the group's top priority as one of its biggest successes so far: progress on Interstate 73. The group also boasts that it helped Santee Cooper choose the Florence County location for its planned coal-fired power plant.

The recent addition of Chesterfield County brings NESAs membership to nine counties, including Horry, Georgetown, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Marlboro, Marion and Williamsburg counties.

A new start

Executive director Jeff McKay joined NESAs in December after 13 years with the Greater Statesville, N.C., Development Corp.

Under McKay's leadership, NESAs shifted its focus away from Columbia and more toward marketing itself to investors, though legislative cooperation is still a major goal.

The group charged McKay with winning over business leaders, decision makers and investors.

McKay meets at least monthly with the counties' economic developers and has "terrifically productive meetings," said Fred Carter, president of Francis Marion University and NESAs executive committee member.

McKay is also trying to market the region's assets to prospective investors: The area is close to highways, ports, rail lines and airports, and is home to the southeast's most productive work force, according to a state study.

The alliance provides businesses with information about available land, labor and population statistics, and tax incentives.

Critics have said the greatest challenge in group planning is getting local groups to work together across party and political lines.

Historically, similar efforts have not fared well here; for example, an Horry group, conceived during a daylong summit in the early '90s called Grass Roots Initiative for Planning and Progress, failed to get off the ground after local leaders could not work together, members said.

Though NESAs bridges some of the historical divides among the counties, board members admit it does not solve every issue of local importance.

Instead, NESAs focuses on major regional goals.

This year the group pushed legislation to make I-73 a toll road, which was important for federal financial support, said state Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Bennettsville.

The interstate has been a divisive issue in the region, with quarrels mostly about the road's route. If it were not for the agenda agreed upon by NESA members, the bill would have "foundered, just from a lack of vision," Jennings said. "You have to have that focused, laser beam approach to get something done. ... It just wouldn't have happened."

NESA's foundation, which solicits private donations that make up roughly a third of the \$400,000 annual budget, has raised more than \$1 million from large companies and is on the verge of passing the hat to smaller businesses, said Doug Wendel, foundation chairman and president of developer Burroughs & Chapin Co. Inc.

Counties contribute based on population and wealth.

NESA asks for funds for three-year periods, pressing the idea that its goals are long term.

"It's a marathon, not a sprint," McKay said. "We can implement a very impactful program this year, but if we don't have the funds to maintain it and continue work on it, the results from it may take us three to five years."

Long-term projects include the possibility of an international airport and an international convention center, which could take decades to come to fruition.

An expanded convention center would fuel the economy well into the winter months, Wendel said, which is when many trade organizations schedule their conventions.

People need a way to get to the convention center, and that's where an expanded airport that can handle heavy weekend traffic comes in, he said.

A mixed bag

Board members say the region's rural-urban, industrial-tourism mix is its greatest asset, easing tensions along political lines because counties are not competing fiercely against each other.

McKay said the group wants to attract investments in areas such as plastics, automotive components and recreational vehicles, building and construction materials, and chemical products.

"We want to be amoebic, in a sense," McKay said.

"If we see an opportunity, we want to be able to shift our efforts to take advantage of that opportunity."

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