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South Carolina's cities and towns power economic growth

Now that our company is publishing statewide as well as local business news, we're making a concerted effort to get connected with key organizations around the state that have an impact on economic growth.



Bill
Settlemyer

One such group is the Municipal Association of South Carolina. At first blush, many business people might not view the association and its member cities and towns as being central to the efforts to grow the state's economy. The leadership and staff of the association would beg to differ, and they're out to make the case for the central role played by the state's 269 cities and towns.

Last month, I attended the association's annual Legislative Action Day meeting in Columbia as well as a smaller breakfast meeting with the mayors of the state's largest cities. The key economic development message was this: For most people in our state, their local city or town is "where they live," representing their personal lifestyle and quality of life in ways that can't be matched by any other geographic entity.

Even if you or I live in a county beyond the limits of a city or town, we look to our nearest municipality for entertainment, medical care, education, cultural events and the "town square" experience of gathering together with others. When cities and towns flourish, the regions in which they are located also tend to flourish, and when they wither, so do their surrounding unincorporated areas.

That is not to say that areas outside towns and cities are unimportant; they are. However, without a flourishing town or city nearby, the opportunities for regional identity and public pride are diminished, as is the capacity to work together to improve the quality of life of those living in the area.

Do we need cities?

At one of the meeting sessions I attended, Joel A. Smith III, dean of the Moore School of Business, asked the rhetorical question: "Do we need cities?" He answered by asserting that profound demographic shifts all point to the importance of cities to our state.

First, the state's population continues to grow, and that trend in itself heightens the interest in the quality of life and services that only cities can offer. A second and related trend is immigration. As our state's diversity grows, so does the need for urban areas that are equipped to assimilate newcomers and put their skills and abilities to the best use possible.

And thirdly, the structure of the American family continues to change, with more young unmarried singles becoming the norm. People fitting this demographic profile are critical to sustaining economic growth and they want to experience the energy and variety that only urban areas can offer.

Happily for us, the revitalization taking place in major cities like Greenville and Columbia are adding to the state's inventory of "cool places" that can attract and keep younger knowledge workers in our state's work force. But don't forget our smaller cities and towns either—talk to Aiken Mayor Fred Cavanaugh about his community's passion for building on the traditions and strengths of his city as newcomers flock to this well-known mecca for all things equestrian.

When home rule isn't the rule

Browse the Municipal Association's Web site, www.masc.sc, and you'll find that much of the work of the association is related to legislative issues that go to the heart of the ability of our cities and towns to have more control over their destinies.

South Carolina is still a state where the Legislature often acts as a "super-government" that just can't bear to allow the political leaders and citizens of our cities and towns to make decisions as to what's best for their communities. That tradition of limiting local power has hurt the ability of municipal-

ities to serve their citizens, who are also citizens of the state and the constituents of the people we elect to the General Assembly.

Take the spreading trend among the state's cities and towns to enact smoke-free ordinances as an example. Nearly a dozen cities have now acted to protect workers and the public in their communities from the well-established harm caused by second-hand smoke.

Two circuit courts have reached opposite conclusions as to whether current state law prevents the enactment of local ordinances. But shouldn't it be crystal clear under state law that cities and towns can make these decisions on their own? Shouldn't we trust our local governments, who are closer to their citizens than anyone else, to make such decisions for the benefit of their communities?

For the municipal association, many other "home rule" issues loom large. Local town and city maps look like Swiss cheese because state law makes it hard to annex unincorporated "donut holes" that are completely surrounded by municipal boundaries. And the Legislature's shotgun approach to property tax reform threatens to hamstring the ability of rapidly growing cities and towns to fund the services needed to sustain the economic viability and livability of their communities. A host of other hot button issues are simmering in the General Assembly's legislative stew for this session.

In his remarks at the association's breakfast for mayors from the state's largest cities, S.C. House Speaker Bobby Harrell said economic development will be the state's key issue for years to come.

That's good news. And in the context of economic development, it's important that members of the General Assembly become enthusiastic advocates for the success of South Carolina's cities and towns, rather than treating them as political adversaries.

The leadership and overall performance of our state Legislature has been on the upswing in recent years. That's a trend we need to encourage while we also stand up for the rights of our cities and towns and the citizens they serve. ■