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## Regional officials see signs of unity

**JOHN ARCHIBALD**  
News staff writer

If anybody knows the frustration of trying to forge alliances and unity among the many governments in the metropolitan area, it is Larry Watts, executive director of the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham.

For years he has pushed for ways to unite the region in efforts to build better transportation systems, clear the skies and the waters and build coalitions to push for smart growth.

With more than 40 cities, towns and census-designated places in Jefferson County alone - not to mention the county governments and dozens of cities in the new seven-county Birmingham-Hoover metropolitan area - Watts has seen the difficulty of defining a united vision.

But Watts is not discouraged, even as the city of Birmingham's population continues to decline and suburban sprawl eats away at the region's edges. On the contrary, he is optimistic.

He's seen a new attitude in recent years, especially since Region 2020 began in the late 1990s to establish regional goals and build trust between the governments. He's seen suburban mayors recognize the symbiotic relationship Birmingham and its bedroom communities share. He's seen them sit down and talk with civility to one another on issues such as the Cahaba Watershed, Corridor X and transportation. And he sees change.

"They're all moving toward the middle," he said. "There's been a huge shift in attitude."

A key effort to encourage that shift has been the Regional Growth Alliance, a group formed in 2001 as a partnership between the Regional Planning Commission, the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce and Region 2020. The group developed to give citizens, government leaders and businesses in the area a forum to discuss and tackle issues of the region.

The group, the brainchild of Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO David C. Adkisson, now has task forces looking at transportation alternatives, environmental services, the U.S. 280 corridor, Corridor X and the Cahaba watershed. It is likely to soon begin a task force to look at the northern beltline issue.

"It's a mechanism for getting business people, government officials and citizen leaders around the same table to work through specific issues facing our region," Adkisson said. "The goal is that within two years this approach to problem solving would become almost instinctive to community leaders as they address a community's challenges."

Though the alliance has no formal government authority, a recommendation from its task forces is significant, he said. The transportation alternatives task force, for instance, includes about 40

government representatives, including mayors, commissioners and council members from across the region.

"If they can reach a consensus, that's very powerful," Adkisson said.

### **A new eye**

The alliance is not the only sign that governments and citizens across the region have begun to look at regionalism with a new eye. For years the mention of regional cooperation brought distrust from city and suburban residents who feared efforts to combine governments in a "one-great-city" plan like the one that failed in the 1970s. Nobody wants that, Watts said.

"This is about regional governance, not regional government," he said.

Now, said Watts and Region 2020 Executive Director Ann Florie, people from across the region have begun to see that the health of all cities in the metro area is in large part dependent on the well-being of Birmingham.

"This is the regional living room," Florie said. "What happens in downtown Birmingham is critical to the region. There are no successful regions without successful town centers."

Stan Batemon, chairman of the St. Clair County Commission, echoed the sentiment at last week's State of the Region breakfast at the Harbert Center.

"The City of Birmingham is so special to all of us," he said. "The City of Birmingham has become the generator for the economy that we're talking about. So many of our people come here for work. We all are very aware that if the City of Birmingham sneezes, the rest of us get a cold."

One need only look to the ongoing Cahaba watershed study to see progress, Watts said. More than 20 governments have gotten together to pay for that study, to together attempt to plot the future of development along the watershed. That wouldn't have happened a decade ago. In fact, it didn't.

"In the early 1990s, several governments did a Cahaba study," he said. "Local governments had a prepared ordinance, and they walked away from it."

The key to the future lies in building relationships, putting leaders in a position where they meet their counterparts on a face-to-face level, Florie said.

"It's all about building relationships," she said. "We just need to be in the same room. We have to have someone or something that brings it together."

*News staff writer Barnett Wright contributed to this report.*

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