

The Birmingham News

Saturday, May 22, 2004

Area wins U.S. award for spirit of cooperation

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A national research group set out to find metropolitan regions that could get along, that could put aside their differences and work together for social, political, economic and environmental change.

And the Birmingham area - long known for its racial, political and social divisions - was recognized Friday for the progress it has made.

The Alliance for Regional Stewardship, a Denver nonprofit that promotes cooperation and collaboration among cities, counties and regions, named the Birmingham area its silver award winner in the 2004 Regional Stewardship Awards.

David C. Adkisson, president and CEO of the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, said the award is akin to winning an "All American Region Award," and it shows the strides central Alabama has taken.

"We did a poll a year and a half ago, and 76 percent of the people said cities and counties should work together so our community can advance," he said. "This award says we are making progress toward that goal."

Though the award was given to the entire region, the proposal included the Regional Growth Alliance as the mechanism that will allow the region to prosper.

Judges praised the proposal and the alliance, saying the plan showed greater potential than any they had seen for becoming a sustaining structure of regional growth and cooperation, said Ann Florie, executive director of Region 2020.

The Regional Growth Alliance formed in 2001 as a partnership of the Regional Planning Commission, the Birmingham Regional Chamber and Region 2020. The group, which has evolved into a three-way approach to building regional consensus, has set up task forces to look at transportation alternatives, environmental services, U.S. 280 and other issues facing residents across the Birmingham-Hoover metro area.

Friday's prize comes with \$15,000, which will be used to build the growth alliance, which has no budget of its own.

Salt Lake City won the gold award. Fresno, Calif., won bronze and Long Beach, Calif., earned honorable mention. To qualify, regions were required to show progress in developing livable communities, fostering innovative economies, using collaborative governance and social inclusion.

For the Birmingham area to be lauded in those areas, particularly the latter two, is a sign the region has moved dramatically forward, Florie said.

The award also helps show that the Birmingham area is not as tumultuous as many residents believe, Adkisson said.

"We sometimes think we're uniquely divided, but there are other regions who have similar political situations and this alliance feels that Birmingham is on the cutting edge for finding a way to overcome that," he said.

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