

# Austin American-Statesman

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## Couple's message of cooperation comes to Austin

At conference, Morgans preach regionalism and recount California experience

By Stephen Scheibal

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

For most governments, planning as a region is something like resolving to exercise.

Of course it's healthy. It may be necessary to survive, at least in the long run. But it's hard work, in some cases requiring a new way of life, and there are any number of distractions that can plop the best intentions into a bureaucratic La-Z-Boy.

For more than a decade, former California state Senator Becky Morgan and her husband, Jim – chairman and former CEO of Applied Materials – have preached regionalism the way an athlete preaches fitness.

Both worked on Joint Venture: Silicon Valley, a nonprofit group of business, government, education and community leaders from the San Jose area who took on economic development in their region. Becky Morgan went on to help found the Alliance for Regional Stewardship, a national network designed to help leaders learn to cooperate. And their Morgan Family Foundation has been a major supporter of the alliance, which held its semiannual conference in Austin this week.

Becky Morgan said regional planning has become more important as cities and suburbs have grown toward each other.

"I became increasingly convinced that the original, traditional political and geographic boundaries no longer made sense," she said.

Almost every major growth issue, from transportation to land use to education to tax policy, is better addressed as a region, she said. The problems start when local officials get caught up in local concerns.

"Collaboration means dropping the ego and working together," she said. "That's not easy."

Jim Morgan started focusing on regional cooperation in the early 1990s, when the aerospace industry got hammered and unemployment rose in the San Jose area while other regions – particularly Central Texas, he said – marshaled their strengths to attract employers.

"Every region has an opportunity to be successful if it can figure out what its strengths are and how it builds on those in a collective way and a collaborative way," he said.

He recounted the Silicon Valley effort during a Friday morning panel on the "creative class," a term describing inventive workers and entrepreneurs who start new businesses, bring innovations to older ones and provide a foundation for new economies. The panel showed that while the focus of economic development efforts may have changed in recent years, the need for broad-based collaboration has not.

He was followed by speakers from Oklahoma City, Florida and Long Island, N.Y. All three said the advent of the creative class means regions must work on quality-of-life issues, such as arts facilities, affordable housing and racial tolerance—anything that might make a region attractive to creative, talented workers.

Jim Morgan, who stepped down from the Joint Venture board in 1996, said the group has not been as active in recent years and it may be time for Silicon Valley to take another collaborative look at its future.

"The time is ripe now," he said. "They've got a lot of tough problems."

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COMMENTARY

## Yes, Central Texas can take a regional approach to its problems

By **Arnold García, Jr.**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR

When the Lower Colorado River Authority board decided to hold up temporarily on a water line project proposed for Hamilton Pool Road, it made a tangible bow to the intangible – not to mention slippery – concept of regionalism.

The decision is also an example of what a balancing act true regionalism really is. The LCRA has a duty to provide water and electricity throughout its 58-county jurisdiction, but the patchwork of local governments within that area have competing notions about property rights and environmental protection. All of which gives birth to incoherence and inaction.

Not everyone is going to like the LCRA's solution, but enough of the competing interests should be satisfied with it—because if Comanche arrows didn't deter newcomers from discovering the Hill Country's natural charms, then half-baked no-growth policies won't either. Obstacles to growth can be circumvented in the courts or the Legislature or both, and developers now have growing options for attaining water, roads and other necessities.

The river authority board decided to wait until December before beginning the \$5 million Hamilton Pool Road project. In recommending the action, Joe Beal, LCRA's general manager, marked a change in the way business is done. Inside the Barton Springs watershed, Beal announced, developers would be required to comply with U.S. Fish and Wildlife water quality restrictions as a condition of getting river authority water service. In areas outside the watershed, residents would have a chance to comment on all water service projects proposed in the future, just as there has been a long period of comment on the Hamilton Pool Road work.

That we got to a point where a utility factors environmental protection and transportation issues into its decisions has been a long time coming, and it was aided along the way by people who saw the potential of regional cooperation and the consequences of squandering it. The late Neal Kocurek was one of those. Honored posthumously at a regionalism conference here in Austin, Kocurek showed he can still bring people together.

Kocurek navigated regionalism around the obstacles found in Texas law and politics. He is not alone, but he was a national leader in the promotion of regional cooperation and decision-making. From the East Coast to the West and everywhere in between, believers in the environmental and economic benefits of regionalism are spreading the gospel. More are realizing that regional planning, like a good golf swing, produces effortless power rather than powerless effort.

Las Vegas is in the middle of a desert, and the demand for living space there has grown despite five years of drought. If denying water service would work anywhere, you'd think, it would work there. You would be wrong. Steps to curtail home construction, a study commissioned by the city's water authority concluded, would be a useless – if not negative – effort, the Las Vegas Sun reported last month:

"The study, which the water authority board asked for in response to critics who said water shortages could be eliminated by ending home construction, found deep negative economic impacts would come from shutting off new growth.

"In one scenario, which the analysts described as 'moderate,' the region would lose \$53.6 billion in labor income, about 12 percent of total income, over 13 years by a government block to new growth—or potentially any other sudden move to stop growth."

Though a hair-shirt approach to public policy and a love of discourse just for the sake of discourse have a large constituency here in Central Texas, realistic solutions will have to come from an emerging class of "civic entrepreneurs"—people with the vision and patience to make that vision reality.

Last week, people from around the country gathered in Austin to talk about how economic and demographic factors demand the rise of more leaders like Kocurek, described in one book as a prototype of the "civic entrepreneur." His death left a void, but the river authority's decision is one in a growing number of examples illustrating that forward, regional thinking survived him.

To be sure, Central Texas' approach to regionalism is still ad hoc. The Legislature could help by streamlining county government – long overdue – but also by providing financial and political incentives for local governments to cooperate regionally to snag economic development opportunities rather than fight over them.

It can happen if we let it.

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