Advancing Prosperity
Through Regional Development
Focus Group Findings & Recommendations

A Report to the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities
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Prepared by

ActionMedia

Contents

Introduction

This report represents the culmination of focus group research conducted throughout 2007 by ActionMedia on behalf of the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities (accordingly, "we" in this document refers to ActionMedia). The research was undertaken to learn what language, values, associations, and concepts voters apply to relationships between different parts of metropolitan regions and to the region as a whole, and what language will support efforts for public investment and land use and transportation decisions that address the needs of low-income communities.

Ten focus groups were conducted in Baltimore, Atlanta, Miami, Minneapolis, Detroit, Houston, and Salt Lake City. All respondents were engaged citizens (voters who follow the news), with a mix in each group of race, political party, income, and location relative to the metropolitan region. The emphasis was on finding shared perspectives and commonly applied values across these diverse groups.

With important exceptions discussed in this report, respondents do not accept arguments for policy change based on a regional analysis. They do not reason about public policy from a regional perspective, even though they all believe that what happens in one place within the region might and sometimes does affect other places. Even respondents who support the specific policy under discussion, base their support in making things better or improving communities, not in connection to the region. When they think about improving communities they do not start from a regional perspective, and even when cued will not apply a regional perspective.

Respondents are most positive and open to arguments for development policy that addresses economic and physical disparities when the statement is based in the values of public participation and government of, by, and for the people. Whatever their economic circumstances, and across political orientations, all respondents agree that groups or neighborhoods should not be left out of decisions that will affect their communities.

We recommend that communication about development policy that decreases regional disparities and improves opportunity should not be structured around the concept of the region, but rather on using development to make things better in communities. Regional analyses, and national analysis, are vital tools for setting strategies and identifying needs, opportunities, and leverage points. But regional analysis must not be the foundation or thrust for communication intended to mobilize support or neutralize opposition.

All public communication about policy change to address economic, social, and physical disparities should be based in the core values of democratic, citizen-led decision making. We recommend that

communication and other program resources be applied to increasing public participation in growth and development decisions.

The Region

Respondents' personal identification with their region varies widely. In most groups, at least one respondent was familiar with a regional planning body or commission, and defined "this region" as the territory encompassed by it. A similar minority had little familiarity or concern with parts of their region other than their immediate community, and didn't think of outlying suburbs, or the city itself, as part of where they live.

For most respondents, *the region* is an indefinite, highly fluid concept, not closely related to their self identification as members of a community or as voters. They recognize and can apply terms like "Greater Atlanta" or "tri-county area," but it remains an abstract idea, a view detached from their ground level experiences. It is not a category they use in thinking about their own experience or situation.

Salt Lake City and Minneapolis were selected as research sites in part to gauge the concept of *the region* where geographic factors (the Wasatch Front), cultural factors ("The Twin Cities"), and a history of regional planning (Envision Utah, Metropolitan Council) might increase regional identification.

Yet, in Salt Lake City, respondents explicitly denied a regional identity, naming cities north and south along the Wasatch Front as "completely different places." In Minneapolis, "the Twin Cities" was limited to Minneapolis and St. Paul, and "the metro area" was described as formerly limited to area inside the Interstate beltway, and now, "I don't know what you'd call it."

In spite of this weak concept of a metropolitan region, respondents do recognize that demographic and physical changes in one place *sometimes* affect other places. Respondents report, from their own local experience, about some negative change that has had a ripple effect on surrounding areas. But this is viewed as a specific experience, not as a rule. And in most locations, respondents do not agree that improvement in one place has an impact on them personally, or on surrounding communities, with the exception of regional destinations such as a major shopping complex or sports stadium.

In Maryland, respondents were in agreement that development, or its absence, in the City of Baltimore does not significantly affect the surrounding counties. In Atlanta, Houston, and Detroit, respondents volunteered the perception that the region is mutually interdependent, and that the success of the region as a whole depends to some extent on the success of the city. But that belief did not lead respondents in those cities to define problems as regional, or to support regional approaches to decision making, any more than they did in Maryland.

"Detroit is not the suburbs' problem."
— Nicole (African American, Democrat)

"When they built that Metrorail, the people of Miami Beach said, 'Not here.' They did not want that Metrorail to go into Miami Beach."
— John (African American, Democrat)

"The counties haven't been working together on transportation, because they didn't want African Americans. MARTA stands for Move Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta."
— Majid (African American, Democrat)

"They're building too close. They're pushing the Everglades to non-existence and that's our whole Florida water supply is the filter through the Everglades and they've made so many mistakes with that and the pollution in our water because of the overbuilding as well."
— Carol (Caucasian, Republican)

There is no consensus that development in a suburban community, or in different parts of the city, necessarily impacts those outside that place. In all locations, respondents find it difficult or inappropriate to think about growth and development decisions from a regional perspective, with two important exceptions: transportation and water.

Transportation and Water

Transportation and transit represent the most direct path to getting a group to think in regional terms, or about cooperation between jurisdictions. Discussions about opportunity for jobs, housing, and economic prosperity are quickly tied by respondents to transportation as a vital—and currently inadequate—component. High support for transit is coupled by dissatisfaction with limited routes and schedules.

A race flag is sometimes raised, which attributes suburban opposition to transit projects as an agenda to keep minority or low-income populations where they are. Such stories are second hand, expressed as why other people are opposed. No participants were direct in expressing that as their own concern.

Most agree with the statement that investments in transit should be equal to or greater than investments in roads. But, they are not hopeful that transportation problems will addressed in a satisfactory or timely manner. Respondents clearly know that transportation policy requires intergovernmental cooperation and higher levels of state and federal government responsibility. Although examples of lack of cooperation are sometimes described as problems, the major obstacles to solving transportation problems are cited as insufficient investment, poor planning, and too long a time from plan to action and completion.

Water is perceived as a vital shared resource, and as a "necessity to life," in a category of its own. In areas that experience shortages or tight supply, such as Atlanta, Miami, and Salt Lake City, water is seen as a critical issue, but not in the other locations. However, respondents in every group agree that water, as a shared resource, requires shared management and fair allocation—that local decisions which take away water, or diminish some other shared natural resource such as the Chesapeake Bay or Everglades, are unacceptable and should not be permitted. Air pollution was also mentioned as a problem in Salt Lake City.

Regional Solutions

The regional thinking respondents apply to transportation or shared resources does not extend to other issues. When asked if analogous thinking should be applied to investment in infrastructure, housing, or economic development within the region, not a single respondent expressed agreement with the premise. Many respondents explicitly rejected the idea. This rejection has several elements to it.

"You're still going to have some communities doing better than other communities. You're still going to have the schools, the parks, the libraries, better streets, all of that. You're always going to have that but it should not hold up what the people down in Homestead is trying to do either, because they do have a right to build it up."
— John (African American, Democrat, Libertyville, Fla.)

"The people in the suburbs think, you're in Detroit, you are on your own. That's your problem, you guys figure it out. People care, but when you're in the suburbs and you don't have to drive 30 miles to get a washer and dryer, and you don't have to send your kids to another city to go to school, you're just not thinking about that stuff."
— Michael (Caucasian, Independent, Bloomfield Village, Mich.)

Moderator: "Decisions should be considered in terms of their impacts on surrounding communities..."

"Sounds like a dream."
— Nicole (African American, Democrat)

"It doesn't have much content to it. What politician said that?"
— Bill (Caucasian, Independent)

"They should think about it, though. It doesn't have to be a stadium to help Detroit."
— Nicole (African American, Democrat)

Respondents from low-income neighborhoods, who are most likely to support increased investment and services to such neighborhoods, do not believe that improvement of outlying areas is the source of problems in poor areas. They disagree with arguments for leveling the playing field, or giving greater attention to communities in greater need and reduced attention to more affluent communities.

The idea of making decisions in one place based on their impact in other places also raises the objection that impacts can't always be known or accurately predicted. Respondents bring up examples, from their own experience, of failed development projects, such as a new retail center, intended to create a result that doesn't materialize or perform as predicted.

An important line of reasoning consistent with this is that *individual decisions* about where to live drive development in different parts of a region, therefore planning will always be limited in what it can accomplish. Respondents believe that consumers respond to choices in the marketplace, and assume that means there will always be different parts of a region with different demographics. The alternative is sometimes stated as "government telling you where to live," which is unacceptable to all.

Most respondents also question the practicality of regional approaches to growth and development decisions. They believe local elected officials have a primary responsibility to their local constituencies and local problems. Respondents from affluent suburbs and inner-city neighborhoods alike share the belief that it's not the responsibility of officials from one place to fix problems elsewhere, or to limit the opportunities in their own community to help improve other locations.

Respondents believe competition among jurisdictions is the rule, and cooperation is the exception. When offered the statement, "Decisions in one location should be considered in terms of their impacts on surrounding communities," respondents are mixed in their reactions. Respondents agree with the general premise that elected officials should work together with their neighboring counterparts, but question how much of a part that should play in decisions. They agree that road congestion and transit require inter-jurisdictional cooperation, but see schools and revitalizing neighborhoods as local, not regional concerns. All agree the statement generally describes an ideal circumstance, but for some it's dismissed or raises doubt as unrealistic.

Although awareness of regional commissions and planning bodies is low, most respondents understand the idea, and presume there must be such bodies. Respondents think of them as mediators between competing interests, rather than setting an agenda for the common interest. Respondents agree that cooperation is preferable and negotiation is often necessary. But they still define most issues relating to development as local problems that should be addressed locally.

Government and Democracy

Moderator: "So are you saying there is quite a divide between Detroit and the rest of the area?"

"It's more like a divide between the government and the people."
— Bill (Caucasian, Independent)

"Exactly. They're supposed to work together."
— Nicole (African American, Democrat)

"That was perfect; it's a divide between government and the people."
— Mark (Caucasian, Republican)

Houston: "When some resident area has a problem, then we have to come together and almost protest or call a meeting."
— Jeniece (African American, Democrat)

Baltimore: "There are a lot of community organizations where people do get out to regular meetings and do get a say in some things. And if they don't like things, they can protest or get in touch with the city council and give them hell in a lady-like way."
— Jean (Caucasian, Republican)

All respondents voted in the most recent election, and regularly use one or more news sources. They express a deep belief in the citizen obligation to participate in voting and to some extent in community life. When considering growth and development decisions, they most often see local government—not developers—as the problem. They believe development driven by the marketplace can be done in ways that improves their own and other communities. They believe that government often creates more problems or doesn't adequately meet needs. This perceived failure of government to meet community needs occurs as participants also experience the diminishment of some neighborhoods through loss of institutions such as employers, churches, and schools.

Respondents widely describe government as incompetent, inefficient, inflexible, and unaccountable. Most of these voters believe that decisions are regularly made through good-old-boy networks, back-room deals, and outright corruption.

Respondents in all locations describe local politicians that act in their own self-interest rather than the public interest. Many believe, and some claim to know, that elected officials receive favors and payoffs. All agree that "money talks." They know government can accomplish things that benefit the community. But respondents point to examples when an influential individual wants something done it, it gets done, while the needs of regular citizens are often ignored or over-ridden. Most respondents state that politicians make decisions based on their calculation of benefit to themselves, whether for personal gain or political power.

In spite of this deep cynicism about elected officials, respondents say they continue to vote in the hope that a good person will be elected and might accomplish something before being corrupted or compromised. At the same time, respondents speak with conviction about the ideal of democratic process, and the potential for government to be held more accountable.

Respondents believe engaged citizens and a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, can and should create better communities. Respondents strongly agree that increased public participation leads to better decisions.

The importance of public participation comes up spontaneously in all the focus groups. When asked what would lead to better decisions, respondents are quick and direct, "More meetings like this one," "Involve more people," or, "Ask the people."

Salt Lake City: "Accessibility for most people is remote unless you write a letter and it's election year. That sounds facetious, I know. But unfortunately, a lot of politicians don't do anything, don't show a concern until they're running for office or up for reelection."
— Lews (Caucasian, Republican)

Miami: "Everything in a community. The people are the people. They have to get together. It's obvious that it's not just what you build or whatever. It has to do with the people that actually live there."
— Loren (Hispanic, Independent)

Minneapolis: "I met some people in New Orleans, there were some very active citizens that said we're not gonna wait for FEMA, we're not gonna wait for the mayor. Something needs to be done now. So there was an example of citizen responsibility. They said we're not gonna wait for the elected officials. And they saved some of their homes. So that spoke very loudly to me saying don't sit and watch your TV. There are things to be done in your community."
— Jack (Caucasian, Democrat)

Respondents believe public involvement in decisions is usually, and often intentionally, limited by inadequate notice, impractical meeting locations and timing. Many say decision makers have their minds made up before the public meetings.

Respondents are realistic. When an individual emphasizes the importance of public participation to an extreme—urging citizen oversight committees and watchdog actions at a micromanagement level—others challenge that as impractical: "You want everyone to go to every meeting? That won't work."

Participants across political perspectives and socio-demographics firmly believe that increased public participation in planning, increased efforts to inform the public early in the process, and increased efforts to fully engage the local community will be the best and most certain avenue to better decisions. The only push-back to this position is an occasional "it won't happen" or "people won't bother."

Respondents are idealistic. When a respondent complains about government over-reach or incompetence, another respondent—twice it was the youngest participant—will remind the group that, "We are the government." All acknowledge this premise, but they aren't seeing it practiced. All the groups express a shared feeling that the government, as they know it, has slipped out of the hands of the people, and into the hands of career politicians and special interests.

Voters across the political and economic range view *The Government* as a problem. At the same time, they strongly believe in a democratic government in which ordinary people have a say and can be heard. They want political leadership that is responsive to the voices of the people, and that works to deliver benefit to the community as a whole. *The Government* of self-interested politicians and bureaucracy cannot be trusted. They put their trust and their hope in the people, through their own government, working to improve society.

Opportunity and Poverty

Baltimore: "Once a neighborhood gets infected with it [section 8] it's like a cancer. It destroys an area. Once an apartment owner gives into it, and starts to bring all these people in, you can just see the place go down hill."
— Gerald (Caucasian, Republican)

Minneapolis: "Honestly, even I don't want no one sitting next to me or living next to me that's getting free living and I'm paying for everything I get."
— James (African American, Independent)

Houston: "People say, I'll move to this neighborhood because I'm now in that school district. So that kind of gives you little pockets of decay in other areas where it may die a little bit or have to combine campuses because the population goes down and two high schools become one."
— Richard (Caucasian, Republican)

Respondents are very aware of physical and economic disparities between places in the region. All agree that these places can and should be improved to develop the material conditions of the people there. To different degrees, they all agree that government has some role to play in dealing with these problems. Respondents with a liberal political orientation also express the belief that improving these communities will have a positive impact on neighboring communities or other places in the region.

All respondents in all locations reason that development patterns are primarily driven by cumulative consumer choices and business investment decisions. In all groups, respondents cite **crime** and **schools** as the key issues that must be addressed to improve neglected neighborhoods. Respondents of all political orientations reason that businesses will not invest in unsafe places.

Class bias is denied, but clearly at work: Section 8 is referred to as being "like a cancer", but such statements are always accompanied by assurance that the speaker knows not all poor people are criminals or free-loaders. African Americans, in these groups as in other focus groups ActionMedia has conducted, are more explicit than whites in referring to criminals as "bad people" or lacking good morals.

Respondents believe that the quality of local schools in particular drives consumer choices and neighborhood vitality. They are in agreement in all locations, that in order to have stable neighborhoods with strong families, there must be good schools to attract and keep them there. They also believe impacts on schools—or on parks, sidewalks and other amenities—are not considered when making decisions about growth. There is a broadly held concern that officials do not look ahead at infrastructure needs and should fully consider the consequences when making development decisions.

Respondents believe that development decisions often do not improve the community or benefit the community as a whole, because of economic power: money talks, and money goes to money. This applies both to private development and to government decision-making. But most private developers are perceived as doing what's expected of them – seeking to make a legitimate profit. Respondents believe that government has a fundamental responsibility to pursue benefits to the community as a whole, through fair and open public participation. They believe government officials largely fail to do so.

This makes the value of fairness the lens through which citizens examine and reason about development decisions affecting poor and neglected neighborhoods. They believe people must be included, and it's unfair when they are left out.

Baltimore: "If you have a say in it. If you have a voice in it, I think something that can be negative can wind up becoming positive if at least your voice is being heard. I think things are done many times in which a community doesn't have a say in it, or it is really not listened to."
— Patricia (Caucasian, Republican)

Salt Lake City: "If you allow more money in a community that didn't have it, they're gonna spend money. It multiplies. And it creates more business and more jobs. And yet businesses would be smart [to negotiate CBA's] instead of getting it tied up in court."
— Lews (Caucasian, Republican)

However, what's fair to individuals is often contested and subject to debate. When respondents from poor neighborhoods or with a liberal political orientation state that it's not fair for renters to be forced out when a new development comes in, respondents with contradictory political views respond that it is equally unfair for a rental property owner to be constrained from selling their investment property. They don't believe that renters' rights extend beyond their rental agreements. Ownership conveys more rights then renting. Respondents across the political spectrum also raise concerns that eminent domain may be unfair to individual property owners.

Fairness, however, is not contested when it comes to allocation of shared resources such as water; or to access to opportunity and services, including transportation; and most of all, to governmental processes.

Respondents believe government has to be fair. All strongly agree that it is unfair when any group of citizens is left out of decisions about growth and development. This is a critical opportunity for advocacy. No one will publicly refute the right of affected groups to have their voices heard, and to participate in decisions. When prompted, respondents believe that using development to improve conditions in neglected neighborhoods is a good idea. They all believe that to do so would require much more governmental accountability in those neighborhoods than there is.

In this sense, respondents are saying that development must be fair and equitable in neglected areas compared to other, more affluent areas. This view is most clearly articulated by respondents from poor neighborhoods or with a liberal political orientation. However, respondents with opposing views and experiences do not express disagreement, and often indicate their agreement.

Because respondents believe that development decisions should be made to benefit the community as a whole, they strongly support the concept of Community Benefits Agreements. It makes sense to them that residents affected by development have some stake in the increased prosperity, jobs, or opportunities development can create. Respondents also view agreements between an informed citizenry and private developers as appropriate to meet both the developer's business objectives and the community's needs—a win-win situation.

Even the most free-market oriented respondents don't disagree with a statement such as, "It's unfair for a senior citizen to be forced out because of development." In fact, across all the groups the most commonly cited example of unfairness is when long-time residents (often seniors) are forced out because of property tax increases resulting from gentrification or development raising property values around them. This is uniformly seen as unfair.

However, the value of fairness is less useful when talking about housing policy issues than when talking about public participation and opportunity. This perspective has been identified in other ActionMedia research specifically about housing. Unlike growth, housing is seen as a collection of individual situations and transactions, rather than a shared resource or infrastructure. The values that respondents use in thinking about housing are different than the values they apply to growth and community change. Housing issues do not evoke fairness, rather they evoke strong free market and consumer choice values. The housing solutions that resonate with engaged voters are most effectively presented in terms of choice and supply, not fairness.

As in other focus groups conducted around the United States, respondents speak strongly and with dismay about housing prices, price escalation, and foreclosures. A call for housing policy that increases the supply and variety of housing choices in more locations was strongly supported in all groups. The link between housing and transportation is obvious to the respondents—you move far away to get more house or better schools, but then have to commute longer. And respondents understand that people don't have opportunity to move if they don't have access to reliable transportation.

Respondents are aware of the phenomenon of displacement. Gentrification is not a universally recognized term for this, although it is in common use in some locations. Regarding displacement, respondents of different financial strata share a concern and question: Where will the people pushed out go? This appears to represent genuine concern for the affected individuals, and concern about negative impacts on surrounding communities. African Americans commonly describe this in racial terms, often veiled as, "the people already in the community," and make reference to policies designed to get "certain people" out and bring "other people" in. Such trends or experiences are not contradicted by white respondents.

Respondents are receptive to the statement that people should not be pushed out, or shut out. This is particularly persuasive to respondents from low-income communities and African Americans, but it resonates with all respondents because of the shared value of opportunity. Other attitudinal research has repeatedly shown that Americans across the economic and political spectrum believe in equality of opportunity, but that does not necessarily imply equality of result.

Moderator: "Developers and public officials should plan what, where and how to build in ways that make sure the people in the neighborhood are not pushed out, or shut out of new opportunity and prosperity."

Salt Lake City: "This is all very true. And the point about the public officials, they're our representatives and we need to get in there and make sure that's happening. I mean this is absolutely true."
— Becky (Caucasian, Republican)

Recommendations

Based on the research conducted for this report, the following recommendations were developed. These recommendations are based on an analysis of the commonly held beliefs and values that were expressed by respondents in each of the focus groups.

- Make public participation in decision-making a central part of every story and every policy discussion. Evoke the values of democracy, self-government, and fair governmental process.

- Draw the connections between specific development decisions and their consequences for people's lives. Talk about development—what, where, and how we build—as a way of improving communities, or, specifically, making this a better place. Talk about impacts and consequences in specific terms. Development decisions must be made with attention to consequences for people down the road, and in the future.

- Public discussions of development decisions should start with how people affected by the decision have been, or will be, engaged in helping to make the decision. Define the issue in terms of who's included and who's left out.

- Apply communication resources to mobilize increased participation. Additional program resources should strengthen community organizing, to leverage fair participation and a public call for equitable benefits.

- Talk about public participation in public decisions, and getting decisions that meet shared goals. DO NOT promote "Government" as the solution.

- Talk about using development to benefit the community as a whole. Be inclusive. Mobilize target populations with aspirational language: what can be done to make this a better place.

- Talk about development and investment that is fair to residents of neglected neighborhoods and communities.

- Talk about engaging citizens in improving their communities and reducing disparities through development decisions that help solve local and regional problems.

- Talk about engaging citizens in preventing development decisions that will create additional problems or fail to address existing problems, such as displacement of residents as a result of development.

- Talk about inadequate schools and other public services, including policing, retail and recreation. Specify connections between these problems and development decisions or opportunities.

- Talk about opportunity—access to transportation and services, opportunity for jobs, opportunity for education, opportunity to live in safer neighborhoods, opportunity for prosperity. Mobilize public participation for more opportunity to be heard, and to raise the fundamental questions: who's included, who benefits, who's left out?

- Talk about choice. Choices in housing, transportation, education, employment. Talk about people having more choices, in terms of the supply of places to live and the ways people can get where they need to be

- Talk about transportation, and apply program resources to transportation policy work. Specify connections between the transportation system and other development decisions. Transportation can be used to cue a perspective of regional interdependence, even when it is not the topic at hand, because it establishes mutual interest within a region.

- Talk about the region when the issue is related to water and other shared natural resources, including air and regional geographic features. DO NOT talk about the region as an abstraction.

- Talk about development that will affect more than one place within a region in the context of specific places in relation to each other. This applies particularly to major development with an undisputed regional impact. Emphasize the public return on investment, and apply the question, "Who benefits and who doesn't?".

- Talk about neighboring political entities cooperating and working together where they have mutual interests.

o DO NOT promote "Government" as the solution.

o DO NOT characterize local government as having a responsibility to the region as a whole, or to neighboring jurisdictions.

o DO NOT talk about leveling the playing field, or equity.

o DO NOT talk about the region as an abstraction.

Appendices

Respondent Demographics

Focus groups were conducted in two sets. In October 2007, two groups each were held in Baltimore, Atlanta, and Miami. After analysis, one group each was held in Minneapolis, Detroit, Houston, and Salt Lake City in February 2008. All respondents were engaged citizens (voters who follow the news), with a mix in each group of age, race, political party, income, and location relative to the metropolitan region (different parts of city, inner- and outer-ring suburban.)

82 respondents:
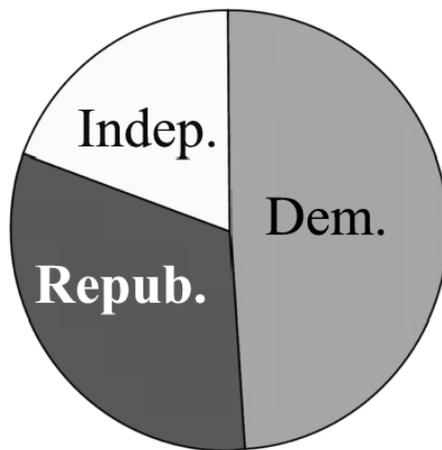
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>   40 Democratic, 26 Republican, 16 independent
>   37 Caucasian, 30 African American, 15 Hispanic
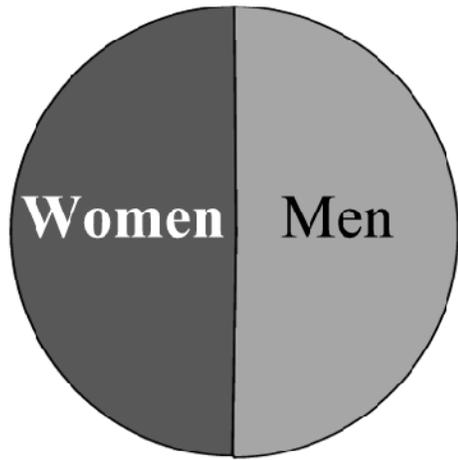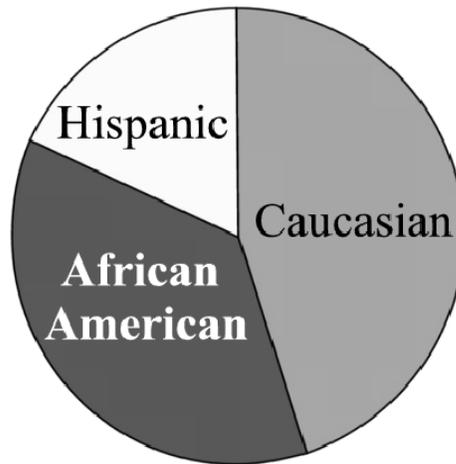
Women | Men

Gender

Hispanic

African American | Caucasian

Race

Indep.

Repub. | Dem.

Political

Discussion Statements

The following statements were developed by the researchers to evoke targeted discussion. Different combinations of the statements were used in at least two or more locations, with local variants. All statements were handed out to respondents and read aloud by the moderator, followed by group discussion.

"Elected officials should work for greater regional cooperation to deal with road congestion, improving public transit, revitalizing neighborhoods and keeping our housing market affordable. Decisions in one location should be considered in terms of their impacts on surrounding communities. Our public officials must make sure that vital issues such as good schools and safe neighborhoods are part of every development decision."

Community Benefits Agreements Gaining Ground - Edited from the Wall Street Journal

In New York, a group of neighborhood, civic and business leaders are pressing Columbia University to help create low-income housing in the West Harlem area where the University has proposed to expand.

In Seattle, a public-interest coalition is negotiating with city officials and representatives of Vulcan Inc billionaire Paul Allen's company, which is seeking to develop an area north of downtown into a biotechnology hub, to address affordable housing transportation job and environmental issues.

At least a dozen such agreements, known as Community Benefits Agreements, are in the works in the U.S., according to Madeline Janis-Aparicio, who leads a non-profit group in Los Angeles. The key to working out such agreements, she says, "is keeping communities, residents, and organizations informed, to be able to participate in a serious way in the process. They need to understand how decisions are made, how land use and economic development works in the area, and they need to know about these projects in advance. Once the shovels hit the ground, it's too late."

The overall competitiveness and future prosperity of this region will depend on looking at the big picture as we make decisions about growth and development. Resources like water and air must be protected. Issues such as transportation, transit, housing choice, and affordability should be taken into account. When public resources, public property, and public money are used to support or subsidize development, public participation is vital to making fair decisions that will deliver broad benefits to the region as a whole.

Social and economic conditions such as crime, segregation and poverty can be improved by improving the physical environment—access to decent homes, convenience to safe parks and fresh groceries, connection to other parts of the region.

We can't get good development in these neighborhoods without considering how metropolitan decision-making, and decisions made across municipal or county lines, can contribute to the pattern of increasing inequality among places in the region.

By making development decisions that look at the entire region, we can improve the lives of the working poor, and create new opportunity that will benefit the entire region.

Sometimes, new economic activity leads to gentrification. Real estate investment and development often results in forcing out the current residents of the neighborhood. Developers and public officials should plan what, where, and how to build in ways that make sure the people in the neighborhood are not pushed out, or shut out of new opportunity and prosperity.

The success of Atlantic Station demonstrates the importance of community involvement in planning for growth and development, according to one of the developers involved. At dozens of meetings both large and small, residents of the neighborhood and surrounding areas were actively involved in reviewing options and discussing preferences.

The recently adopted plan for re-development of the much larger Fort McPherson site also reflects months of community engagement. During the process, some elected officials complained that planners were ignoring the views of residents, and kept up pressure for greater community influence. "We started with a difference of opinions," said one, "but I think it's been a good, fair process that resulted in a great plan."

Others believe the public process in these ambitious developments ought to be the exception, not the rule. "Too many projects are mired in red tape and endless public process," said one observer. "When we have people ready to build and invest, we should do everything we can to make it possible for them to stop talking and get moving."

Several proposed developments are so large they would affect three counties—Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Broward. One of these developments, The Commons, south of Florida City, would bring up to 6,000 new homes, shops, schools, a movie theater, and a hotel to what is now isolated marsh land.

A top political leader said, "This project would roughly double Florida City's water demand. No municipality can look at the water supply only in terms of their own needs. Municipalities and counties have to be willing to subordinate their local priorities, because they recognize that there are more important regional priorities."

Maryland will benefit from the Federal Base Closure and Realignment Program with as many as 60,000 new jobs. It has been characterized as the largest economic growth activity since World War II, and will likely shape the face of Maryland and its economy for generations.

A top political leader said, "It's important to bring all the stakeholders together and figure out how to maximize the opportunity for all Marylanders." Another said, "If any one county tries to go out and win the day, it's probably not going to work. Counties have to be willing to subordinate their top local priority, because they believe together there are more important regional priorities."

According to the Georgia Regional Transit Authority, mass transit, as well as bike and pedestrian facilities designed to reduce reliance on single-occupancy vehicles, should receive as much or more transportation funding than highway spending in the future, as the key to the region's prosperity. They project that population and employment in the region will continue to grow, while development of new roads and increased capacity to existing roads will be limited.

Citizens who live outside of Atlanta, and away from proposed commuter rail projects, are resisting the idea that their taxes should help subsidize more mass transit. "Atlanta has grown through the automobile, and we're going to be living in an automobile-dominated world for the rest of our lives," said one. "There are things we can do to address transportation problems—like adding more lanes to freeways and having more toll roads, with higher tolls during rush hours to keep congestion down. Where I live, we like our cars. Let's be realistic, instead of wishing for mass transit to do something that is fundamentally impossible."

To The Editor:
According to the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, the health, safety and welfare of residents in Miami-Dade County depends on the availability of a range of housing choices affordable to people of all income levels, in all parts of the County. They also say that a wide array of housing that's affordable "energizes local economies, reduces crime, creates an atmosphere that supports the development of children and improves a community's quality of life... Attainable housing for households at moderate and low income levels means more workers are able to live near their place of employment, saving individuals and the government in transportation costs as well."

So can somebody explain to me why private developers, building homes for the affluent, keep getting subsidized by our taxes—either directly through infrastructure costs or indirectly through zoning and land use permits?

We need to look at where and what we build, and recognize that thousands of families are getting left out of the benefits of the region's economic growth. As the wrangling over the Urban Growth Boundary continues, we ought to focus on making sure there's a supply of homes that the people of this County can afford. It's the job of leadership at every level, to look at the big picture, and use public processes and investments to improve Miami-Dade for all its residents by insuring the benefits are fairly shared.