

'Reality Check' strives for consensus on Lowcountry's future

By Tom Hund

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All of us involved in land use and development issues in the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester region can reach into our bookshelves and pull out dusty volumes of various visions and plans. These infamous "reports on shelves" are typically the product of much work and at least some hope by many people — and many haven't seen daylight since their publication. After some experience with these processes, many people tend to regard visioning and planning exercises with some cynicism.

This makes doubly gratifying the excitement being generated by the upcoming Urban Land Institute's (ULI) visioning exercise, Reality Check, geared toward creating a regional dialogue among all stakeholders about how this region should look in 2030.

No one can deny that more regional dialogue and vision would be useful. Last Sunday, The Post and Courier concluded publication of a five-week series analyzing the threat and potential generated by growth in the Lowcountry. This "Citistates Report," written by nationally syndicated columnist Neal Peirce and urban affairs expert Curtis Johnson, pointed to converging regional trends that threaten environmental disaster and stand to undo this region's celebrated quality of life and the economy that it is based on.

The strongest message from the report's authors was this: "Unless the three counties can forge clear agreement on what kind of region they want to be in this century, and then forge a clear and compelling regional strategy ... a backward slide (to an economic slump) seems inevitable."

However optimistic your viewpoint, it is hard to deny this backward slump could be a possibility in the future. The Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester region will gain 265,000 residents and 186,000 jobs over the next 23 years. Assuming current travel patterns, we will see another million vehicle trips on our roads daily.

Will we grow by choice or chance?

This region is riding a tsunami of growth. The question Reality Check asks is: How can we harness that energy and turn it to good account? How we can ensure that each new person and each new job contributes to, rather than detracts from, the quality of life in this region?

Over the past six months, I and other Urban Land Institute members have called on various economic development, conservation and political leaders to talk with them about Reality Check.

This regional visioning exercise, led by the South Carolina district council of ULI, will bring together 150 disparate stakeholders from across the tri-county region. Participants will gather around large-scale regional maps to decide on key principles to guide growth, and then place hundreds of Lego bricks that represent the coming jobs and households. They will also place game pieces representing new green space and transportation improvements.

Many alternate scenarios and strategies will emerge. Participants will choose some for further analysis over coming months. It's a visioning effort, not a planning process — though it will feed into a planning process — and the emphasis is on bringing people from widely disparate backgrounds together in an inspired, facilitated dialogue about how the region can best grow.

Our audiences usually sit up straighter when we point to the numbers of incoming people and jobs. In the context of these sobering realities, the Reality Check concept is generally found compelling and generates interest and excitement, but in just about every discussion, the polite but pointed question eventually emerges from an audience member: "Yes, and what happens then?" What they mean is: How will Reality Check avoid the report-on-a-shelf fate?

In fact, Reality Check is different from other planning and visioning efforts in several important ways. Foremost among these is that it is led by the nonprofit and private sector, not by government. And unlike past visions and plans generated by and directed toward individual towns or counties, Reality Check is regional in scope and will bring together leaders from each of the 30 jurisdictions in the three-county region — from every sector of land use, development and conservation. By tying into the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Government (COG) promise of a new regional planning initiative, Reality Check stands to build collaboration among those working in private enterprise and the public interest.

The COG's staff and a new regional planning committee intend to define a consensus-based growth scenario for the tri-county region. They will use sophisticated new software to analyze growth scenarios emerging from Reality Check to better understand the scenarios' potential impacts on costly new infrastructure, including roads, sewerage and schools.

ULI, for its part, will continue to support the work by sub-regional meetings to educate other audiences on the scenarios, the implications, and the need for regional planning. ULI will continue close collaboration with the COG and other partners brought together through Reality Check.

Ultimately, Reality Check is part of a statewide visioning effort — our work will tie into Reality Check events in the Midlands and the Upstate as part of ULI South Carolina's statewide mission.

The Citistates Report, when speaking to the urgent need for regional visioning and planning, noted that Reality Check might "present a golden opportunity to trigger true regional thinking, engaging both the elected leaders and many of the brightest, most concerned professionals and business leaders in the three counties." That is precisely our intention. To find out more about Reality Check and how you and your organization can participate, please go to RealityCheckBCD.com.

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