

SAPORTAREPORT



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Time to unify Georgia for our common good

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For as long as I can remember, there's always been tension between Atlanta and the rest of the state.

Some call it the two Georgias. Others say there are three, four or five Georgias. Whatever the number, it's become increasingly apparent that these great divides are pulling our state apart — creating a disjointed and acrimonious environment that hurts every corner of Georgia.

Those divides were even more glaring in this past legislative session when different political agendas resulted in little getting done for either metro Atlanta or the rest of Georgia.

As a result several key business and civic leaders are strategizing about a big idea to unify the state through a multimillion dollar, multi-year initiative.

Last week, at a joint meeting of the boards of Central Atlanta Progress and the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District, about 40 leaders brainstormed on how to change the divisive dynamics that have plagued our state for decades.

CAP President A.J. Robinson saw the potential for a unified state when his organization championed the campaign to get a statewide referendum passed to help local communities to fully implement tax allocation districts.

The referendum passed, thanks largely to support that came from several other cities and towns throughout the state.

“There needs to be much more connectivity between Atlanta, the region and the rest of Georgia,” Robinson said. “The challenge is going to be to find areas of commonality and how we can find prosperity for the whole state.”

Otis White, founder of Civic Strategies, an Atlanta-based firm that analyzes trends among cities and states throughout the country, was particularly fascinated with this concept.

“To the best of my knowledge, nothing like this has ever been done,” White said. “I’m intrigued by the fact that it’s never been tried and Georgia could be the first. It could be something that’s successful and exciting.”

White said many states face similar tensions with their major cities, and few have recognized how economically interdependent they are.

“There are places where cities do get along better with their state,” White said, but most of those are states without a dominant urban area. “Where you have big cultural differences between a big city and the rest of the state, you have conflict. And that conflict tends to make it difficult for people to come together.”

That’s exactly what’s been happening in Georgia.

“You are going to have to change the scenario and lower the conflict between the big city and the rest of the state,” White said. He added that a logical place to begin is for urban Atlanta to reach out to suburban communities.

Then the Atlanta region can also seek to build bridges with the other cities in the state — such as Augusta, Columbus, Savannah, Macon, Gainesville, Rome, Valdosta, Athens, Albany, Brunswick among others.

“Somebody needs to go out and meet the leadership in these other cities,” White said. “It’s a matter of seeking understanding before you seek to be understood. It can’t be arrogant Atlanta telling the rest of the state what to do.”

Myles Smith, director of the Regional Atlanta Civic League who participated in last week’s meeting, said one idea would be to have “LINK” trips within Georgia. For the last 13 years, about 100 metro Atlanta leaders have been going to other cities in North America to gain insights on how other communities address their challenges.

Smith said there could be LINK trips to Savannah, Macon, Columbus and Augusta so metro Atlanta leaders could get to know their counterparts across the state.

“You would have a real campaign here to knit the state together,” Smith said.

Another proposal would be for the coalition for one Georgia to get pledges from people running for state offices that they will not pit one part of the state against the other. More importantly, before receiving financial support from top business leaders, people running for office would have to pledge to try to unify the state.

“It is about quality of life and thinking as a healthy state for the betterment of everybody,” Smith said. “We have to change the culture that exists.”

Joe Bankoff, president of the Woodruff Arts Center, recently brought up the need for a statewide initiative to get the state working together on quality of life issues, such as the environment,

water, education and the arts. Bankoff got inspired to launch such an initiative during the last LINK trip to Minneapolis-St. Paul. The state passed a sales tax for water, parks and the arts.

Other organizations interested in a One Georgia initiative include the Georgia Municipal Association and the Association of County Commissioners Georgia.

Both organizations work with local governments from across the state.

“The legislature has declared war against localities in the state of Georgia with property taxes,” White said. “It’s not about getting things that cities want; it’s now about getting things that cities need. They are all struggling with some of the same issues.”

But White also isn’t sure that the divide is as deep as many think.

“I’m not convinced that there’s as much hostility outside the Atlanta area among the general population,” White said. “But there are a lot of angry people inside the legislature. I don’t think it’s gotten worst with people. I think it’s gotten worse with the legislature.”

Robinson said over the next 90 days, the plan will be to reach out to other organizations and business leaders to see if they want to participate in creating a One Georgia initiative.

“It might take a decade for there to be a cultural change,” Robinson said. “But we have to start somewhere. It may end up being a coalition, a campaign or an organization. We also are working on a priority list.”

At the end of the meeting, White said he was optimistic about the possibilities.

“The message was very clear from the people in that room that they wanted to try to make this work,” White said. “They were enthusiastic.”

What we do know is that the status quo is not working because Georgia is as divided as ever.

So let’s try a different approach — create a strategy that unifies our state, once and for all.