

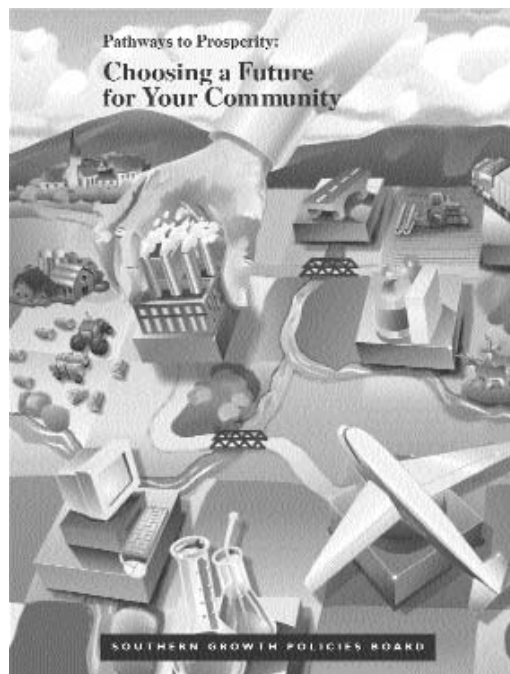
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southern growth policies board

Pathways to Prosperity:

Choosing a Future for Your Community

June, 2003



A Report on Public Forums in the South

Introduction

Change has become a constant for Southern communities. Rapid growth transformed the South from the poorest region in the nation to the world's third largest economy in the span of a single lifetime, transforming many of the small towns that once defined the region. Rapid advances in technology and the globalization of the economy continue to present challenges as well as opportunities.

Faced with all the changes that are taking place around us, what is the best pathway to prosperity for our communities? To help answer this question, the Southern Growth Policies Board developed a community discussion guide, entitled *Pathways to Prosperity: Choosing a Future for Your Community*. With this guide, the Southern Growth Policies Board embarked on a new process to engage Southerners in dialogue about important regional and community issues. The guide has its foundation in the National Issues Forum process — a process that has been used for nearly 20 years by thousands of groups throughout the country to deliberate about national issues ranging from Social Security to childcare. The goal of the guidebook was not to suggest a single correct path for all communities, but to encourage communities to hold public forums in which to explore many pathways to the future, each with its own trade-offs and consequences.

To spur conversation, deliberation, and action, three possible pathways to the future were outlined in the *Pathways to Prosperity* guidebook. Each of these represented different viewpoints that citizens might have about future directions for their community. These options and the guide itself were intended to serve as the beginning points for a community's discussion about what is important as it pursues sound, informed decisions about its future.

Approach 1: Create Jobs

In this view, jobs are the best way to create prosperity for all. If we create jobs, everything else will follow. With money in their pockets, people can afford to maintain nice homes, support good schools, and improve the quality of life in their communities. This approach calls for providing incentives to attract businesses, easing government regulations that tend to stifle the development of business and industry, and investing in infrastructure to support existing businesses and attract new ones.

Approach 2: Invest in Human and Community Resources

Although considerable progress has been made, many Southerners lack the education and skills needed to keep up in today's changing workplace. Other factors such as poverty, poor health, and crumbling family structures also put children at risk of failure. Proponents of Approach Two maintain that these and other social problems are the true roadblocks against prosperity. Remedies, they say, include building community and individual self-sufficiency by spending more money on education and worker training, ensuring easy access to health care, creating programs to help bridge racial and cultural divides, and developing community leadership skills.

Approach 3: Manage Growth

Supporters of this approach are not opposed to growth. But, they fear that if we don't do a better job of managing growth, we will destroy the quality of life that makes our communities attractive to citizens and businesses. Planning is the answer, in this view. Both professionals and citizens should be involved in making deliberate and rational choices about whether, where, and how a community should grow. Leaving those choices to larger economic forces is a poor way to build the future.

To date, more than 780 people have participated in *Pathways to Prosperity* forums in 42 communities across the South. As noted below, the forums have drawn people from a variety of perspectives.

- Males and females have been almost equally represented.
- Participants have ranged from students to seniors, with the largest group in the 50-64 age category.
- Forums have tended to attract a highly educated population, with more than two-thirds of participants holding at least a college degree.
- The racial-ethnic make-up of the groups has fairly closely mirrored the population of the region, with minorities only slightly underrepresented.
- A mix of occupations has been represented, including government, business, education, and non-profits.
- Nearly two-thirds of participants have been from rural areas, with the remainder divided fairly equally between urban and suburban communities.

Forum Findings

Across a variety of settings, from urban to rural, from students to seniors, a number of common themes emerged from the forums. These included:

- 1) A desire to include more voices from the community in planning for the future;
- 2) Community pride and a belief that quality of life issues are key in defining prosperity;
- 3) An awareness of the importance of education to future community prosperity; and
- 4) Recognition that the kinds of jobs created matters.

Each of these themes is explored in greater detail below.

Involved Citizens

“The community should work together in every aspect of building community. We have so many people that can make things happen. We need to tap into every available resource.”

—Forum participant in Laurel, MS

Participants in nearly every forum expressed the need to include more voices in community planning and decision making. Many were concerned that decisions seemed to be made by only a select few. A woman in Lexington, Kentucky observed that inner-city residents are rarely invited to participate in task forces or planning groups. “It seems like, when the committees and such are being formed, if you don’t have a certain bank balance, and your skin’s not a certain color, you’re not going to get a seat at the table,” she said. This was echoed by forum participants in other communities around the region, including one who stated, “Stop allowing the wealthy and powerful to make all decisions.”

While many appeared to agree with the observation that, “Everyone should have a voice,” not everyone held this view. In one forum in South Carolina, the moderator observed that views about public involvement were markedly different between economic development professionals and the general public. The professionals did not think that the public had the knowledge needed to provide valuable input, while the public thought that their input was vital to the direction that economic development should take in their community. Lack of regular communication between the professionals and the public seemed to be at the root of some of this disconnect. The moderator concluded that the forum was a positive step in bringing these groups closer together “by opening channels of communication.”

In addition to the attitudes of some in the current leadership circle, participants recognized a number of other barriers to greater citizen involvement. Chief among them was what a participant in Charleston, West Virginia described as “overwhelming citizen apathy.” A participant in Athens, Georgia questioned whether it was realistic to presume that people would be more involved, even if given the opportunity. “It’s very hard for people to be active in all the things they need to,” the participant explained. “Somehow there has to be something that empowers people to feel like they can make a difference,” added another participant. Still others focused on the need to create role models and promote activism within both families and communities.

“The complete distrust people have in one another creates a huge barrier for proper communication,” observed a participant in Waycross, Georgia. In some cases, communication was seen as being particularly problematic between racial groups. “I looked around the cafeteria at lunch yesterday and ours was the only table with both black and white people at it,” observed a student in North Carolina. In thinking about the impact that various actions could have on their community’s economic future, participants in Earle, Arkansas rated improving race relations over other actions, including improving education.

Turf issues were also seen as an obstacle to planning in many communities. Some found this to be especially true with respect to regional planning issues. Participants in communities from Earle, Arkansas to Rayville, Louisiana saw a need for more communication, cooperation, and partnerships among communities. In Wetumpka, Alabama, participants discussed a number of ideas to promote cooperation between governments as well as local chambers and even leadership programs. As participants in Winchester, Kentucky discussed, many Southerners live in one community, but commute to other communities to work or for shopping and entertainment.

They are concerned about the future of their region, not just the limits of their “home” community. “Living in one place and working in another makes this hard for me,” commented a participant from Winchester. “I know what I’d like to see for my home county, but I also know what I think needs to happen to make Lexington better. It’s hard to focus.” There appeared to be particular concern around the region that economic development entities did not have a habit of cooperation.

Quality of Life is Key

I am concerned about “losing the town that I have seen my whole life at the expense of economic prosperity.”

—Forum participant in Pauls Valley, OK

Pride of place and a concern with quality of life issues was a common thread throughout many of the forum discussions. “Don’t destroy our natural beauty and small town feel to find short term job opportunities,” said a participant in West Virginia. Participants in Maryville, Tennessee and several other communities expressed concern about the loss of farmland. We have lost “why Reston is Reston,” commented a participant in Virginia.

There was concern that a focus on job creation, without sufficient attention to quality of life issues, would result in communities where no one wanted to live. As one participant put it, “You create jobs and what happens is a place becomes a great place to work but I wouldn’t want to live there.” A post-forum questionnaire revealed that less than 40 percent of participants were willing to make trade-offs on quality of life issues such as traffic and pollution for job growth. On the other hand, 83 percent were in favor of working with planners to control whether, when, and how growth should occur, even if it restricted where people could live or what they could do with their property.

Safety, and not just natural beauty, was a concern. Observing that there were now organized gangs in town, a participant in Virginia expressed the opinion that quality of life issues should be *the* top priority in planning for the future. If you do not feel safe, investing in jobs and human services really does not make a difference, the participant said.

“We all know when [quality of life] is gone but it’s hard to keep up with in the process,” cautioned a woman in Athens, Georgia. “For a lot of years I was wrapped up in my family and wasn’t involved,” said another participant. “Until it came to my back door. I [couldn’t] just let this go on. I have to be aware and involved if I want my quality of life maintained.”

Not surprisingly, quality of life means different things to different people. To some, it means green space and a small town way of life. To others, it is more closely tied to their family and family relationships. “My definition of prosperity has very little to do with making lots of money,” said a participant in Lafayette, Louisiana. “I personally feel that having a job that enables me to have a happy family life and stable ties to my community outweighs economic gain.” “Prosperity is not just economic – it’s social,” concurred a participant from Olive Branch, Mississippi. Participants recognized that, in some cases, there might be trade-offs between what is best for your community and what is best for your family.

Education as a Foundation

“Education/knowledge is the foundation for building prosperity.”

—Forum participant in Norco, LA

In a post-forum questionnaire, more than 95 percent of respondents felt that their community should focus on solving deep-seated social problems, even if it took a long time to

show results. Top among the issues discussed was education.

“Without an educated workforce, we cannot attract new businesses,” said a participant in Kansas City. Others observed that outsiders often filled the “good jobs” in their communities. As one participant explained, if we don’t have the skills and knowledge needed for today’s jobs, we will be left behind and “become spectators forever.”

Concerns were expressed about the lack of a good work ethic among today’s young people. One woman stated that, “So many of the kids who could work in a factory or plant won’t because they’ve never been taught what it is to work. They live off the streets. Nine to five means nothing to them.” A participant in another forum felt that a lack of discipline in schools contributed to the problem.

Many participants recognized tensions between growth and education. Participants in Cary, North Carolina were among those who expressed concerns about overcrowded schools due to rapid growth in their area.

Job Quality Matters

“We don’t want just a quick fix, but a lasting, growing, building of prosperity in our community.”

—Forum participant in Charleston, WV

The kind of jobs created matters, was a message heard in many community forums. In Waycross, Georgia, a participant expressed concern about focusing on “quantity, not quality.” Of concern to many was a perceived lack of opportunities for young people, especially in rural areas. Participants in Prestonburg, Kentucky, for example, talked about young people leaving the state for college, never to return—or staying in state for college, but leaving after graduation to pursue better career opportunities. Other participants

commented that job advancement for young people was limited in rural areas by older folks who were less likely to move out or up than their counterparts in metro areas.

Many recognized linkages between education and workforce skills and the ability to attract quality jobs. Participants in Orangeburg, South Carolina, for example, talked about the need to emphasize education first before being able to focus on job creation.

Next Steps

Participants in many forums saw the need to pursue elements of all three approaches—creating jobs, addressing education and human resource issues, and giving attention to the community’s quality of life—in planning for their future. As a participant in Shreveport, Louisiana noted, “[The forum] gave me more insight into how difficult these problems are. [There is] not just one solution—it is very complicated and multi-leveled.”

In numerous locales, the *Pathways to Prosperity* forum represented a first step in talking about economic development issues as a community. The process of coming together to talk about community issues was as important to many as the topic under discussion. Participants in nearly every forum expressed a desire for future meetings. In Gray, Tennessee, for example, a participant suggested setting up quarterly forums to discuss regional issues.

While some participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity just to talk with one another, others clearly wanted to see some movement towards community action. Indeed discussions such as these seem to work best when they are action-oriented, as in part of a process leading to some change. For some communities, the forum generated ideas for specific follow-up projects or activities. Participants in

Rayville, Louisiana, for example, made plans for several follow-up activities, including the creation of a resource map for developing and operating a career center, while participants in Maryville, Tennessee were eager to establish a land bank process to promote land preservation. Nearly one-third of those responding to a post-forum questionnaire indicated that they had a definite opinion about what should be done in their community, up from about one-fifth prior to the forum.

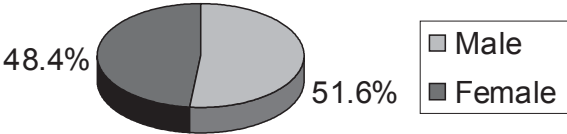
Southern Growth Policies Board hopes to develop other discussion guides and toolkits to help support communities in their efforts to engage citizens in talking about and planning for the future. As a next step to *Pathways to Prosperity*, communities may be interested in *Seeing the Future*, a toolkit that provides citizens with an overview of the forces shaping today’s economy, and what it means for fostering economic development.

Acknowledgments

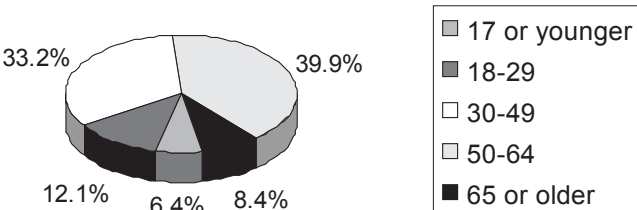
The Southern Growth Policies Board would like to thank the Kettering Foundation for its advice and assistance in developing the *Pathways to Prosperity* guidebook. Members of the project’s advisory committee were also involved in every step of the guidebook’s development. They included Christine Chadwick from Missouri, Fred Sheheen from South Carolina, Susan Taylor from Georgia, and Angela Woodward from Kentucky. Finally, thanks are due to Southern Growth’s Board members, Advisory Council members, and others around the region who organized and conducted public forums in their communities.

Forum Participants

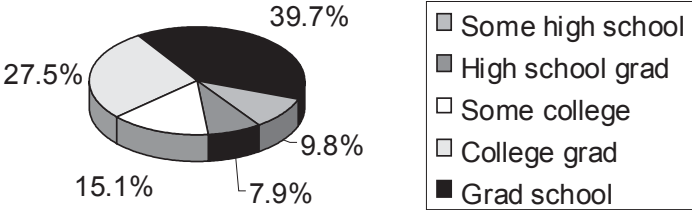
Gender



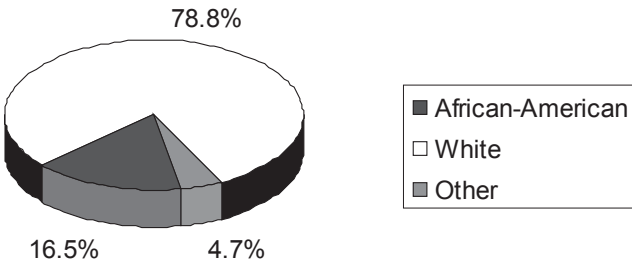
Age



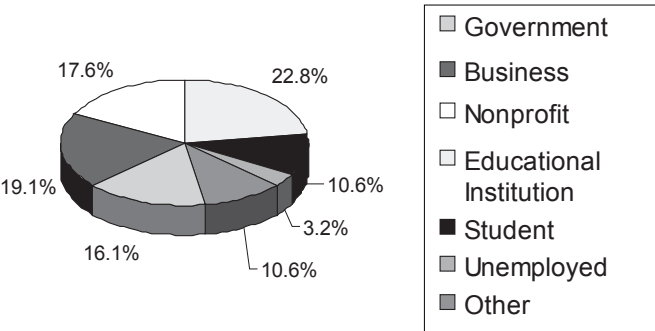
Education Level



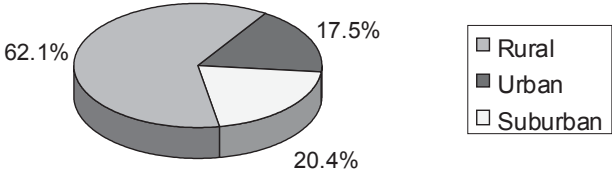
Race-Ethnicity



Occupation



Community



Forum Locations

Pratville, AL
Wetumpka, AL
Earle, AR
Pensacola, FL
Athens, GA
Atlanta, GA (3)
Newton, GA
Waycross, GA
Bowling Green, KY
Campbellsville, KY
Casey County, KY
Leadership East, KY
Lexington, KY
Prestonburg, KY
Winchester, KY
Lafayette, LA
Norco, LA
Rayville, LA
Shreveport, LA
Kansas City, MO
Mt. Vernon, MO
Hattiesburg, MS
Laurel, MS
Olive Branch, MS (2)
Cary, NC
Pauls Valley, OK
Woodward, OK
Allendale, SC
Bamberg, SC
Charleston, SC
Orangeburg, SC
Ridgeland, SC
Winnsboro, SC
Centerville, TN
Gray, TN
Jackson, TN
Maryville, TN
Blackstone, VA
Halifax County, VA
Reston, VA
Charleston, WV
Lewisburg, WV