

Article published Jul 20, 2007

## **Big Bend bond Needed: commitment, cooperation, creativity**

For years, the qualities that have drawn people to Florida's Panhandle - its natural beauty and a community character that's more easily felt than described - have been both our asset and our albatross.

Without them, the Big Bend might be called the Big Bore.

By the same token, these qualities, combined with our history as a government nerve center, have produced an underlying sense of complacency.

A region that's good, at times even very good, but not great. An economy that's stable, but not booming.

And a future that is increasingly *less* predictable economically inasmuch as we've been able until now to rely on slow, steady growth.

New political, demographic and economic realities face all U.S. communities and regions in the 21st century. Talent and the creative application of knowledge are what drive the most successful economies, and the most innovative people in all fields are rarely rooted to specific locales.

They go where the opportunities are greatest - where they perceive they will have the most freedom to originate, be it in software development, "green" building design and construction, the performing arts or any of a wide range of technological, commercial and artistic pursuits.

They don't necessarily go for a job alone. To innovators, the quality of a place is just as important - maybe more so.

The most prosperous regions in the future will be the sociological equivalent of Wayne Gretzky, the hockey legend who famously described his success: "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not to where it has been."

Each successful region will differ in important ways, but they all will have one thing in common: shared goals and effective strategies for accomplishing them. It won't be the result of happenstance, but rather the product of commitment, cooperation and creativity.

The three C's are a synonym for regionalism, the theme of the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce's retreat this weekend in Ponte Vedra Beach.

Just as Britain correctly anticipated that radar technology would be crucial to its survival in the event of war, Big Bend political and business leaders must look not just to what works for our regional economy this year and next, but years down the road.

Britain's investment in what was still a fledgling field of science in the 1930s paid dividends that couldn't be measured in monetary terms. Without radar and cooperation among Britain's political, academic and military establishments, the legendary Battle of Britain almost certainly would have had a very different outcome; so, too, perhaps, the war itself.

Our region isn't faced with literal annihilation if we fail to make the right choices. In that respect, no one is losing any sleep.

However entrepreneurially unimaginative Tallahassee and the surrounding communities of the Big Bend might continue to be, most will continue to live their lives and on some level figure out how this region is "special" to them.

But absent the three C's, regional prosperity will be elusive.

Regionalism is hardly a new concept, but so far the Big Bend has been bigger on talk than action. Governments have been at odds at least as often as they've been partners in meaningful ways, making it more difficult for commerce to thrive.

As Bob Rohrlack, Enterprise Florida's senior vice president for business retention and recruitment, told the *Tallahassee Democrat* for a special section in Saturday's newspaper: "If (a business) picks up that a community is squabbling, they're not going to move there. They don't want to get into someone else's fight."

It's obviously easier said than done, but the Big Bend's formula for success will be to preserve the qualities that distinguish us from Anytown USA and develop new plans to retain and attract the creative enterprises that spawn prosperity.

Failing regionalism, however, it's all just a pipe dream.