

Headline: Regional focus will help strengthen the economy, speaker says
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By Jaquetta White, The Times-Picayune

The national economy can rebuild and strengthen itself by promoting regional economic development and by supporting the emergence of high growth, high potential companies, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development said Tuesday.

Brian McGowan, in acknowledging the challenges the nation faces in digging out from an economic recession, said a key to that process will be focusing on "gazelles," those often obscure companies in the science and technology fields that have the ability to reinvent an industry. It will also be important to pursue an approach to economic development that is not bound by city and state jurisdictions, McGowan said.

McGowan was the keynote speaker for the annual meeting of GNO, Inc., a regional economic development group. The meeting, at the Sheraton Hotel, drew about 1,000 guests according to GNO Inc.

"Our nearest competition isn't down the road," McGowan said. Instead, it's in other countries. "So if the city next door creates 1,000 jobs, it doesn't mean you lost, it means the region won."

In the longterm, McGowan said, even the city that did not win the jobs would benefit because the area would have become more attractive to investment.

That sentiment was echoed by other speakers at the meeting including Mayor elect Mitch Landrieu.

"If you want to compete globally, you have to think regionally," Landrieu said. "The enemy is not the parish next to you, that is your partner."

Regional economic development has been a priority for GNO Inc. under the leadership of Michael Hecht. The agency represents a 10-parish area.

Martin Mayer, the outgoing chairman of GNO Inc. and the president and CEO of Stirling Properties, said the New Orleans area has been "starved" for regional economic development for years but is now on track to sate its hunger.

Mayer pointed to the creation of the Southeast Super Region Committee, in partnership with the Baton Rouge Area Chamber as an example of that effort. The committee is currently tackling three main issues: higher education reform, proposals for an intercity rail and the renovation of Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport.

"This is kind of like France and Germany working together," Hecht said jokingly, referring to the new burgeoning relationship between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. "Together we can compete nationally and globally."

New Orleans also has, as is McGowan's suggestion, worked to foster the growth of high technology companies. In his address Hecht pointed to the IP Building in New Orleans as an example of a business hub where such companies were thriving.

McGowan said he was heartened to learn about this area's regionalism and efforts to bolster business and "blown away" by the advancements made in New Orleans since Katrina.

"If we could bottle this up and take it to Washington, DC, I'd do it in a heartbeat," McGowan said.

The Economic Development office, which has not historically encouraged a regional strategy but is now developing a model to sustain regional clusters, could look to the city for best practices, McGowan said.

"The federal government can facilitate and help regions work together," McGowan said. "As we move out of this recession and into this innovation driven economy we need to make sure everyone has a stake in it."

Although there were no other major announcements to come out of the annual meeting, Hecht did suggest that an announcement about increased air service to Mexico was on the horizon. Hecht said he had hoped to have the announcement ready in time for the meeting.

"The FAA is being a little slow," Hecht said. "But my advice to you is you can start packing your bags."

Jaquetta White can be reached at jwhite@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3494.

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