



Community Leadership Visit

Charlotte, North Carolina

May 31-June 2, 2001

background

For each of the past eight years, the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce has organized and led a community leadership visit to another city to study its approach to economic development and other community issues. On May 31 – June 2, a delegation of 41 Springfield area leaders visited Charlotte, N.C. as part of the Chamber's 2001 Community Leadership Visit.



Typically, our intercity exchanges are with communities similar in size to Springfield. Even though Charlotte is much larger than Springfield, we chose it as our destination this year because of some unique community connections and Charlotte's reputation of success in the key areas we wanted to review.

Springfield City Manager Tom Finnie is a former deputy city manager of Charlotte. He has said the Charlotte of the 1970s and '80s is very comparable to the Springfield of today, so our goal was to focus on the history and evolution of Charlotte's success in community development.

We tried to not only observe the progressive city Charlotte is today, but also understand the planning and decision-making processes they used to get there. Our program agenda focused on four areas: regional economic development, business-education partnerships, center city revitalization and local government cooperation.

Members of the Springfield delegation

Penni Adams, Daniel, Clappett, Powell & Cunningham

David Agee, The Law Firm of Neale & Newman

Jim Anderson, Chamber of Commerce

Rob Baird, Concrete Company of Springfield

Jim Baker, Southwest Missouri State University

Brad Bodenhausen, Chamber of Commerce

Steve Burch, Bank of America

Tom Carlson, Springfield City Council

Bob Chancellor, Springfield City Council

Phyllis Chase, Springfield Public Schools

Dave Coonrod, Greene County Commission

Mary Collette, Springfield City Council

Bill Compere, Urban Districts Alliance

Gary Deaver, CU Citizens' Advisory Council

Charlie Denison, CU Citizens' Advisory Council

Tom Finnie, City of Springfield

Brian Fogle, Ozarks Technical Community College

Rob Fulp, Springfield-Branson Regional Airport Board

Curtis Graff, Board of Public Utilities

Teri Hacker, Springfield City Council

Bill Hobbs, Springfield-Greene County Parks Department

Mike Hoeman, M.D., The Diagnostic Clinic

Bob Horton, Urban Districts Alliance

Doug Jackson, Butler, Rosenbury & Partners

Tracy Kimberlin, Convention & Visitors Bureau

Allen Kunkel, Chamber of Commerce

Dave Kunze, Signature Bank

Ralph Manley, Springfield City Council

Lisa Nally, Chamber of Commerce

Richard Ollis, Ollis and Company

Todd Parnell, THE BANK

Karl Plumpe, City Utilities

John Rush, United Way of the Ozarks

Mary Lilly Smith, City of Springfield

Robert Spence, Evangel University

Marc Thornsberry, City of Springfield

John Twitty, City Utilities

Denny Whayne, Springfield City Council

John Whittington, Board of Public Utilities

Shelia Wright, Springfield City Council

John Wylie, Springfield City Council

regional economic development

Like many of the places we've visited during eight years of community leadership visits, the Charlotte area has adopted a regional approach to promoting economic development and quality of life. The two basic premises that form the foundation of regional cooperation are:

- Many of the issues that challenge a region (like transportation, environmental quality and education) cross the lines of various political subdivisions.
- The best way to address these issues is by working together. Put another way, the regional whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

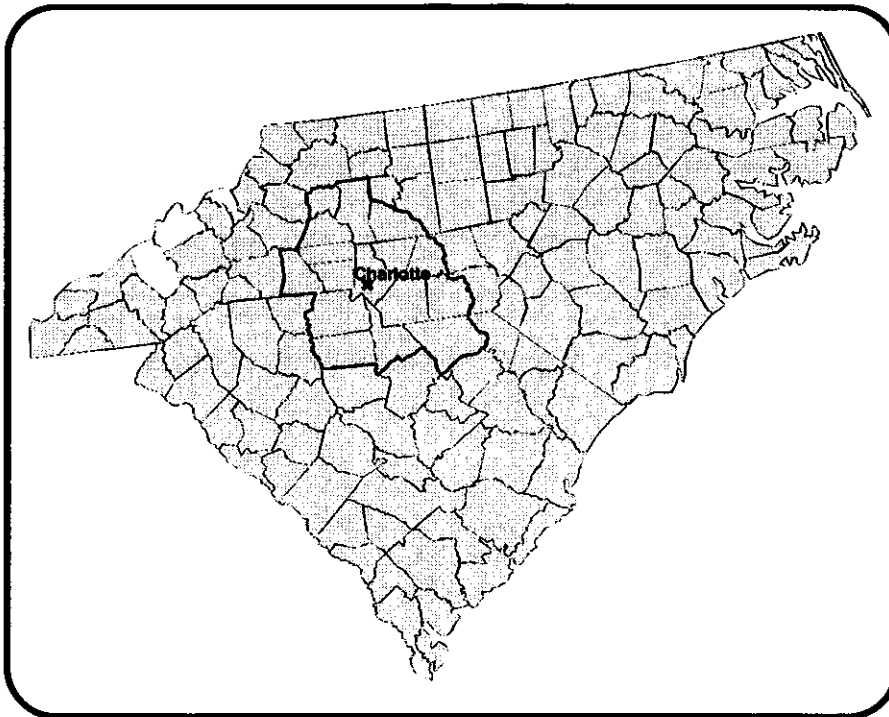
"Ten years ago we weren't even talking to each other [as a region]. Now, we do face some tough issues but at least we keep talking."-- Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory

In Charlotte, the vehicle for regional collaboration is the Charlotte Regional Partnership. Founded in 1992, the partnership is a union of business and governmental leaders in 16 counties (12 in North Carolina and four in South Carolina). Formerly known as the "Carolinas Partnership," the coalition changed to its current name to establish an identity connected to its

location. Given the fact that their members represent two states, the partnership has chosen to use "Charlotte USA" as the branding name for its promotional efforts.

The panelists who spoke to us emphasized the importance of having the largest city in the region be used as the "identifier" and assume a lead role in the regional partnership efforts. At the same time, they added it was equally important for the smaller communities in the region to maintain their own local identities.

York County, S.C. for example, has embraced its location by calling itself the "Brighter Side of Charlotte." They are able to promote their "small town" quality of life and the nearby "big city" amenities of Charlotte.



The Charlotte-Douglas International Airport is considered the central point of the region and a major economic development resource on both sides of the state line. The airport serves more than 160 cities with non-stop service and has 500 flights daily. It is the 23rd most active airport in the U.S. However, it took the South Carolina members of the regional partnership some time to persuade their state Department of Commerce to promote a North Carolina airport as a “selling point” for business and industry attraction in Upstate South Carolina.

Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory said the essential elements of a successful regional economic development program are to: think regionally, not locally; listen to your business clusters; and be inclusive. The key to pulling it off, however, is communication. “Ten years ago we weren’t even talking to each other [as a region]. Now, we do face some tough issues but at least we keep talking,” said McCrory.

The Charlotte Regional Partnership is funded by a variety of public and private sources. The organization’s \$2.5 million annual budget includes \$500,000 in state funding, city and county funding (with each participating county paying 30 cents per capita), and private business investors.

business-education partnerships

Public education is the top community issue facing Charlotte, according to the local business and education leaders who met with our delegation. They told us that quality education is directly connected to economic viability in their region. They also said that business involvement (especially the support of top-level business leaders) is critical to the success of the schools.

The public school district in Charlotte is countywide. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (CMS) serves 105,000 students. They have 14 high schools, 28 middle schools and 86 elementary schools. As a point of comparison, Springfield Public Schools is less than one-fourth the size of CMS with 25,000 students at five high schools, nine middle schools and 38 elementary schools.

Teaching elementary and pre-school children to read is the best long-term strategy for dropout prevention. – CMS Superintendent Eric Smith

Another difference is that school districts in North Carolina do not have taxing authority, so the overall budget for CMS is set by the Mecklenburg County Commission. The school board determines how the dollars are distributed to various programs within the budget. CMS uses performance-based compensation for school staff and other incentives like higher pay for teachers in high-poverty schools.

CMS Superintendent Eric Smith said the performance-based compensation for him as well as principals and teachers has led to a goals-oriented approach in the schools. “If I can’t increase third grade reading proficiency, then I shouldn’t be in office,” he said. Dr. Smith also pointed out that the district’s focus on measurable goals is driven by the expectations and support of Charlotte’s business community.

Dr. Smith said the district’s approach to dealing with the dropout issue is one of early intervention through a strong literacy program. Teaching elementary and pre-school children to read is the best long-term strategy for dropout prevention, he said. CMS has developed and



The Sykes Learning Center on the campus of Queens College is home to the McColl School of Business.

implemented a program called Bright Beginnings that focuses on reading preparedness for pre-kindergarten children.

Open communication is another central feature of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Dr. Smith noted that the district's willingness to publicly disclose its goals, achievements *and* failures has been an important part of the equation. The key, he said, is to immediately respond to the shortcomings with recommended solutions and strategies. The result of this level of public communication has been increased confidence in the school district.

The business organization responsible for promoting and coordinating education partnerships in Charlotte is called CMS Partners for School Reform. This group consists of 120 business leaders, with a work plan concentrated on five committees: teacher recruitment/retention; public policy; curriculum; business issues and finance; and partnerships. The CMS Partners coordinate "Charlotte Reads," a community-wide literacy effort that ties directly to the school district's primary goal of helping students read at grade-level.

Higher education in Charlotte includes 23 colleges and universities, with more than 70,000 students. In comparison, Springfield has 14 colleges and universities with more than 34,000 students. During our program in Charlotte, we heard from three of the local institutions: the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (regional university with 17,000 students); Queens College (private liberal arts college with 800 full-time and 800 evening students); and Central Piedmont Community College (a five-campus community college with a workforce development focus).

The common theme among the presenters again involved being responsive to the needs of the business community, especially concentrating on the major "business clusters" that drive the local economy. In Charlotte, those economic engines include financial services, information technology, transportation, travel and tourism, high-growth manufacturing and professional services.

Each speaker outlined how the local colleges and universities work together to fill the educational gaps for the fast-growing Charlotte region:

- UNC Charlotte emphasized the importance of having a research component at the University. In 1992, the University had no Ph.D. programs. Today, UNC Charlotte offers seven doctoral programs and is striving to attain research status with the Carnegie Foundation. The Charlotte Chamber and the business community strongly support the establishment of a research university as a major component of future regional economic expansion.
- Queens College, in cooperation with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and UNC Charlotte, has developed the Financial Services Exchange – a forum for

leadership, training and research on subjects relevant to the banking and finance industry. The program has a special focus on how advanced technology can be used to create competitive advantages for businesses in the region (which is the nation's second largest banking center, after New York City).

- Sixty percent of Central Piedmont Community College's students are pursuing continuing education as they work for local corporations. The Information Technology program is the most popular area of coursework at CPCC. The college also has a strong community literacy program in response to the challenge posed by having 60,000 illiterate residents in the Charlotte area.

center city development

Martin Cramton, planning director for Charlotte/Mecklenburg County, said Charlotte is really three cities: green fields on the edge of town; a midtown area; and the center city. The focus of our program was Charlotte's center city, although we weren't too sure what to call it. During the course of our three days in Charlotte, we heard the terms "downtown," "uptown," and "center city" used almost interchangeably. Whatever they called it, Charlotte's center city is a success story from which others can learn.

Cramton cited vision as the key ingredient to "city building." He said it is important to understand how your local community fits into the national economy and then identify the niche you will fill. "We knew Charlotte was going to grow, we just had to figure out how," Cramton said. With the input of more than 3,000 citizens, the 2010 Plan was the process that produced a community vision for the growth and development of center city. Cramton added that vision also means avoiding the temptation to simply be "project oriented," but to have a plan for how all the projects fit together.

Sometimes good plans just collect dust, but the Charlotte leaders were quick to emphasize the importance of putting their plans into action. John Goff of Cousins Properties said it is essential to have private development carry the vision and implement it in a market-driven environment. Uptown Charlotte's catalyst for action was Hugh McColl, the former CEO of



A view of "Uptown Charlotte" from the 60th floor of Bank of America Corporate Center, headquarters of the nation's largest bank.

Bank of America. McColl embraced the community's vision for center city development (adding no small dose of his own foresight as well) and led his corporation's effort to revitalize Charlotte's center city.

Other tips gleaned from the presenters:

- Center city has to be a place to “live, work and recreate.” The importance of residential development in a center city cannot be overlooked. Charlotte's Fourth Ward, developed in the 1970s, and the more recent First Ward are great examples of “building a neighborhood, not just a housing development,” as Cramton noted.
- Calling neighborhoods the “gateway to center city,” Cramton also emphasized the particular importance of neighborhoods surrounding downtown. Charlotte has worked aggressively to identify and revitalize fragile neighborhoods, even passing a bond issue to address neighborhood redevelopment.
- Having a strong umbrella organization to facilitate public and private development is crucial. In 1979, business leaders, center city residents and city government came together to form Charlotte Center City Partners. The group is funded by a municipal service tax applied to property owners in the center city.
- Consolidated city and county planning, along with monthly meetings with school district officials has smoothed the urban planning process in Charlotte.
- Having a high concentration of arts and cultural facilities, as well as a year-round focus on special events, has acted as a magnet to draw people to the center city.
- A focus on uniform standards, while allowing wide latitude for unique architectural styles, has improved the design quality of center city buildings.
- When asked about shortcomings, the Charlotte officials said their biggest center city mistakes were failing to preserve older buildings, and the development of elevated walkways that minimized street-level pedestrian traffic. They also pointed out that it was important to not allow egos and pride of authorship to get in the way of fixing bad ideas.

local government cooperation

Like Springfield, the City of Charlotte uses a Council-Manager form of government. Charlotte is governed by a Mayor and an 11-member City Council; administered by a City Manager. Mecklenburg County is governed by a nine-member County Commission; administered by a County Manager.

Through “functional consolidation” many City and County departments have merged. The Police Department and the Parks & Recreation Department are two examples of consolidation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg County. In addition, City and County administrative offices are housed jointly in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Government Center.

Charlotte City Manager Pam Syfert said the expectations of the business community were a driving force in the push for functional consolidation. “Businesses expect efficiency, customer service and a business-like government operation,” she said. Although the cost savings associated with consolidation are important, the improved focus on customer service has been the biggest gain for the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

Ruth McNeil of the Mecklenburg County Budget Office summarized the basic premise that leads to the customer service benefits. She said most people don’t know, and don’t care, whether they are in a City park or a County park; they just want it to work for them. But with consolidated services, if constituents have a problem, they don’t have to figure out which office to call to find a solution.

After the consolidations of service are agreed upon, the ongoing challenge facing elected officials and staff is making everything work smoothly. All of the panelists agreed that frequent and open communications is the key to that process. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, the mayor, city manager, presiding commissioner and Chamber president meet monthly in an informal setting. City and County officials also meet with the school board every two months to discuss local issues.

A significant feature of the city-county relationship in Charlotte is a liberal annexation law. This policy allows the City of Charlotte to annex land within Mecklenburg County, without a vote of the people, once the area reaches a certain density. The strategic use of this annexation law has been a key factor in helping the community manage its growth and development.

Another successful strategy used by Charlotte-Mecklenburg County was a “land banking” proposal to preserve open space, protect the watershed and provide land for future public development. In 1999, Mecklenburg County voters approved (with 80 percent of the vote) a \$220 million bond issue to purchase available land for future use as parks, green space, schools and libraries.

“Businesses expect efficiency, customer service and a business-like government operation,” – Charlotte City Manager Pam Syfert on the City/County consolidation of certain services.

conclusion

Looking at Charlotte's achievements in each of the four areas we studied, a few common themes emerged as the foundation for their success:

- **Vision.** Community leaders in the Charlotte region systematically and inclusively developed a vision for their future, whether it related to center city or education. They have focused on finding their niche and establishing goals to support and enhance the key business sectors that drive the local economy.
- **Action.** They didn't let their vision statements and blueprints remain on the shelf, they put their plans into action. And when they made a mistake or realized a flaw in their plan, they fixed it and moved on.
- **Business leadership.** The Charlotte area business community makes things happen. They are involved in all aspects of community betterment. It is important to note that this level of involvement is welcomed and encouraged by the school district, local government and the area's higher education institutions.
- **Communication.** Partnership and collaboration works in the Charlotte region because they place a premium on open and ongoing dialogue. Even when they disagree about the best way to approach a certain issue, they keep talking and working together.



Members of the Springfield delegation discuss Charlotte's approach to business-education partnerships.

recommendations

The community leadership visit to Charlotte reinforced many things we are already doing well in the Springfield area. The visit also exposed a few areas where we could stand to make improvements. But most importantly, our time in Charlotte reminded us that through vision, planning and collaborative action we can shape the way our region grows in the coming years. In no particular order, the following points are areas we should focus on:

- **Stay on top of growth management issues.** Despite their many outstanding accomplishments, the Charlotte region still appears to be playing “catch-up” on some of the key issues associated with community growth. Transportation needs and stormwater control are two of Charlotte’s most pressing problems, just as they are challenges facing Springfield/Greene County. We must continue to place a high priority on investments in our transportation system and strive to address environmental issues in a balanced way.
- **Working together as a region.** The Ozarks Regional Economic Partnership is only two years old, but it has already grown to 59 members. The partnership’s long-term future relies on solid communication among members, an increased regional outlook throughout the area, a strong combination of private and public investment, and the ability to provide measurable benefits to partners.
- **Support for Springfield-Branson Regional Airport.** Just as the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport has become the center of Charlotte’s region, our airport is a regional business resource that must be emphasized and expanded.
- **Let’s find our niche.** Charlotte’s focus on the key business clusters that drive their economy is impressive. One such effort currently underway in Springfield is the Chamber’s Higher Education/Health Care Economic Development Task Force, which is studying the potential of greater collaboration between these two engines of our local economy.
- **Increased business support of public education.** Quality education is directly connected to economic viability, so businesses must get even more involved as partners in education (especially in regard to strategic planning). The schools should welcome this level of business involvement. In Charlotte, it has made a huge difference.
- **Keep it up downtown.** As we begin to see aspects of Springfield-Greene County’s Vision 20/20 plan become reality, we need to focus on continued private and public investments in center city. It is easy to dismiss Charlotte’s center city revival as not relevant to Springfield because of the huge investments made by Bank of America and other businesses. But we must remember that it is all a matter of scale. The same types of private sector commitments are possible here and we should pursue those opportunities.