

Collaboration remains key to tackling region's toughest issues

by By Ellen Krohne and Joe Reagan
February 24 2015 1:11 PM



Without question, the latter part of 2014 proved to be a challenging time for the St. Louis region as events in and related to Ferguson unfolded. In the wake of the turmoil, however, regional leaders are more attuned to the problems that must be addressed, and to the need for a collaborative approach. One only has to look to some of the region's recent successes to understand just how much can be accomplished when passionate people work together toward a common goal, whether we're joining forces to tackle challenges or to embrace new opportunities.

While examples abound across the metro area, the spirit of cooperation that exists both within Southwestern Illinois and between economic development and civic leaders in the Metro East and their counterparts in St. Louis is worthy of note.

One of the most visible examples is the new Stan Musial Veterans Memorial Bridge. While the decades-long effort to create a new Mississippi River crossing had some bumps along the way, bi-state leaders ultimately found middle ground, paving the way for the magnificent new bridge that today facilitates easier traffic flow between Missouri and Illinois and will be a catalyst for future growth.

Less visible but equally important is the Metro East levee improvement initiative. Thanks to early action by Senator Bill Haine, the Illinois congressional delegation, and Southwestern Illinois' County Board Chairmen, the region has the funding to get the \$100 million job done so the levees can be reaccredited by FEMA and the residents and businesses behind them can avoid skyrocketing flood insurance costs.

Jobs are another critical issue behind which we can unite, so it should be no surprise that protecting and growing the 13,000 jobs at Scott Air Force Base remains a regional effort. The Task Force leading that effort is being guided by representatives of St. Clair and Madison counties and the Leadership Council. The Council's recent investment campaign, which raised funds to support the Task Force's ongoing work, received overwhelming support, with businesses, organizations and communities on both sides of the river contributing \$1.5 million, including many in Southwestern Illinois, along with the St. Louis Regional Chamber, Regional Business Council and Civic Progress.



The forming St. Louis Regional Freight District also is focused on job creation and aims to capture some of the jobs generated as freight shipments mushroom by an estimated 60 percent across the United States by 2040. Launched by East West Gateway Council of Governments, the St. Louis Regional Chamber, the Leadership Council and Bi-State Development Agency, the new Freight District will be tasked with promoting the region as a premier multimodal freight center in the Midwest. Even as work continues to firm up the District, the Leadership Council and Regional Chamber have begun work to

create a new brand identity for the region as *St. Louis GatewayTM*. A new website, www.stlgateway.com, highlights the bi-state St. Louis region's strategic location and seamlessly integrated transportation infrastructure and touts the region's bi-state composition as a strength, providing twice the leverage on major infrastructure projects.

We also know that no factor is more critical to our region's competitive position than increasing educational attainment to meet current and future workforce needs. Regional leaders are collaborating to help strengthen and develop a competitive workforce.



Over the longer term, continued job growth across the region will be dependent on our ability to learn from Ferguson, and to apply those lessons. Some may see the situation in Ferguson as a St. Louis issue, but the reality is that it impacts our region at large, because we are perceived as one. That's why the Leadership Council and the St. Louis Regional Chamber are working with regional leaders on rebuilding efforts, determining the best ways to move forward and collaborating on ways to regain positive mindshare for St. Louis on the regional, national and international stages.

Yes, it will take some time; but given our shared passion to make the St. Louis region a better place to live, work and invest, we have every confidence that if we continue to work together, we will prevail.

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