

Grant puts regional planning in the spotlight

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By



Talk about regionalism with Sandy Stimpson, and a couple of key concepts emerge.

- 1) Education is important.
- 2) Being motivated is nice, but it takes both motive and means to make a real difference.

The chief financial officer at Scotch & Gulf Lumber LLC, Stimpson has served a number of organizations that foster a "regional" perspective -- from past stints as board chairman for the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce and the Business Council of Alabama to work with Envision Coastal Alabama and the state's Coastal Recovery Commission.

He remains involved with the latter group as it transitions to the Coastal Alabama Leadership Council.

"When I think about where we are as a region, we're at a crossroads," Stimpson said recently. "We have a huge opportunity to make something good out of the tragedy of the BP oil spill ... to develop a long-range, regional plan as a result of a collaborative effort that we could then all work together to accomplish."

Regional planning is not a new idea along the Alabama coast. But what makes this moment critical, Stimpson said, is the recent award of a major grant that will drive the planning process.

The Economic Development Partnership of Alabama will spearhead use of more than \$1 million in federal and private money to create economic development strategies for eight southwest Alabama counties affected by the spill. As reported recently in the Press-Register, EDPA will "partner with state universities and two-year schools to identify industrial targets for each of the eight counties and assess their transportation, work force and health care needs."

"The intent to collaborate and the actual collaboration have been there," Stimpson said, "but we've never had the funding to be able to develop the regional plan."

Even motive and means don't assure a positive result, he added, so the Leadership Council will work to ensure that it is carried out.

"We've got to have a mechanism in place to provide a scorecard," Stimpson said.

Which leads into the other key concept Stimpson values where regionalism is concerned -- knowledge is powerful.

"We all have perceptions," he said. "Until you get involved, you can be ignorant of what's really going on."

Being involved, he added, "gives you the opportunity to learn what happened in the past and to formulate what happens in the future." It also helps everyone understand the big picture.

"The education that comes out of collaboration is that we all become aware that our specific industry is not the single, key driver that makes our community thrive," he said. In the end, he added, knowing more about one another helps people have the "guts and the character to do the right thing for the community as a whole."

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