

From: Maybank, Burnet R. III <BMaybank@nexsenpruet.com>
To: Maybank, Burnet R. III BMaybank@nexsenpruet.com
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CRDA must keep leading the way to local prosperity

BY WIL RILEY

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David Ginn, President and CEO of the Charleston Regional Development Alliance, discusses the agency's work. (Brad Nettles/File)

Charleston is now a global destination for business. The rankings and awards pouring into our area prove it. Brookings Institute, Forbes Magazine, CNN Money, Under 30 CEO and the Milken Institute are just some of the national and international business publications taking notice of our metro excelling in job creation, talent recruitment and entrepreneurship.

Yet we cannot sit on our success. Our region has to maintain an aggressive, global approach to economic development and the changing needs of job creators. As major investors in the Charleston Regional Development Alliance (CRDA) and one of the contributors of private money, we, the Charleston Trident Association of Realtors (CTAR), like the direction, focus and results our regional economic development organization is providing and believe our organization and region are getting a solid return on investment.

That is not to say there are not changes that could be made, but we believe they should be made from within the existing framework - and not by creating a separate entity. The economic development game has changed

- it's not as simple as jobs and investment. It's about talent retention, workforce skills and cultivating an understanding of Charleston as a global business destination.

The CRDA, like us, is a regional organization that can analyze data, drive strategic initiatives and create narratives that sell the Charleston Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as one strong, unified region instead of a fractured, three-entity piece with limited resources.

The shift toward focusing on bringing more private financial resources to the table with the goal of effectively marketing and enhancing the economic development of our region should be cheered by our county governments.

At the heart of all economic development deals is one key piece - land. Land has to exist in order to bring any jobs to Charleston.

That is the beginning of all commerce - whether it's to manufacture goods, produce a service or run a company from a corporate office.

As representatives of those who own the land geared toward economic development, the Charleston Trident Association of Realtors believes deeply in economic development and, most importantly, that there is a key place for the both the private sector and the public sector in setting the stage for economic growth and encouraging the economic prosperity of our region.

Realtors are firsthand witnesses of the impacts of both economic successes and failures.

Our commercial members work with businesses to find usable space or land - while helping them navigate all the hurdles the government and others may put in their way. Our residential members recall when the Charleston Naval Base closed almost 30 years ago and the devastating impact it had on housing and families.

Today, Charleston is not only leading the state, but the country out of a recession. Our economy is bouncing back, housing sales and prices have stabilized to a sustainable growth rate, and jobs are being created as unemployment has declined.

We can't assume all these things have happened without the ongoing efforts of the CRDA.

As an organization, we invest in and support the CRDA and will continue to do so.

The CTAR believes that the CRDA is the key partner in ensuring the success, stability and economic viability of our region going forward.

Wil Riley is the chief executive officer of the Charleston Trident Association of Realtors.

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CRDA might be flawed, but it's still worth fixing

BY RON BRINSON

Teddie Pryor seems to be coming at the Charleston Regional Development Alliance with a meat-ax public impeachment. To many, his rhetoric seems hyper-officious and extra-statutory.

And maybe it is.

But Pryor is publicly sur-facing a multi-dimensional controversy simmering un-resolved for years — the Alliance's relationships with county and municipal governments have become very problematic.

This is important public business, involving lots of taxpayers' money, and we ought to be paying attention. The CRDA has been our community's "marketing" agent since 1995. Its founding was a message to the world that regional Charleston would toil as one ambitious community to counter the closing of the Charleston naval operations at North Charleston.

In 2014, that message is lost in ugly rancor.

Pryor and other elected leaders argue the Alliance has regressed to a "Chamber of Commerce" type collective. North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey declared Thursday, "This group has become big travel budgets, expensive suits, country club dues and big salaries; they just don't understand the daily roles of county and municipal governments in finalizing economic development deals."

So, Pryor has grabbed center stage to tell the world about problems that threaten a messy CRDA implosion.

Actually, it's already messy and the Alliance's public funding structures are teetering as Charleston County Council prepares for a funding decision meeting Tuesday.

It's a scary thought to many, but Pryor is fairly confident that Charleston County can do its own marketing in league with Berkeley and Dorchester counties and the S.C. Department of Commerce. His bottom line position: Charleston County's \$500,000 annual contribution is a subsidy of an inefficient and ineffective organization.

Dorchester County already has reduced its financial support to \$50,000 from \$170,000 annually — after CRDA acted to increase its assessment to \$215,000. Berkeley County's elected officials are "waiting to see ... keeping all options open ... doing what's best for Berkeley County." That's code for they too are concerned about the Alliance.

Meetings in 2012 snapped to focus CRDA's flawed relationships. The major government agency financial contributors wanted seats on the governance board and executive committee, which then were reserved for private sector "pay to-play" donors. The Alliance's private sector representatives were reluctant to accommodate the elected officials; an acknowledged purpose of the Alliance is to keep industrial and commercial marketing beyond public record discovery and public attention that can quickly spoil prospecting.

The government donors prevailed and gained governance seats, but tensions nonetheless have multiplied. Now the grievance is that the Alliance is in mission creep, not keeping government representatives sufficiently informed and cost ineffective. As a Dorchester County councilman put it, "They need to go back to their role when the Alliance was established 20 years ago — find prospects and get them to the state and counties quickly. This should be about results and team work. It's not anymore."

Most progressive communities have marketing alliances that blend public and private salesmanship. Some are notably low-key, professionally oriented and singularly focused on prospecting for investments that create jobs and add value to lifestyle qualities. Others tend to be higher profile operations seemingly driven by the constructive egos of prominent community leaders.

As one economic development professional put it, "These agencies often get caught up in the glamor of achievement. Keeping the politics of egos and self-interest out of the operation is as big a challenge as finding the next factory."

Some of us remember the formative days of regional Charleston's economic development successes, a half-century ago, when Bill Humphries quietly led the Charleston Development Board in the processing of prospects.

And when regionalism was an article of faith, not a political or ego proposition.

Economic development cooperatives are front-line marketing tools for South Carolina's economic development operation. The S.C. Department of Commerce urges counties to join such alliances.

There are eight scattered throughout our state. The Department of Commerce allocates available state funds to these groups on a matching basis and then depends on them to bring in prospects.

So, how well a regional alliance performs matters greatly to taxpayers, and there's no room for simmering disconnects among private sector and public sector partners.

And there's no room for sophomoric, petty personality-based divisiveness, nor what the professionals warn against — "the creeping politics of egos."

If the CRDA didn't exist, smart leadership would be thoughtfully working to create it — or something like it — just as some leaders did in February 1995.

So why let CRDA 2014 simply implode? Why not fix it once and for all by recalibrating its mission and its communications protocols — and assuring appropriate representation to agencies bringing taxpayers' monies to the table.

Maybe that's the message Teddie Pryor has been carving out with his meat-ax.

Let's hope so.

Ron Brinson, a former associate editor of this newspaper, was president/CEO of the American Association of Port Authorities, 1979-86, and president/CEO of the Port of New Orleans, 1986-2002. A North Charleston city councilman, he can be reached at rbrin1013@gmail.com.

Burnet R. Maybank, III
Nexsen Pruet, LLC
1230 Main Street, Suite 700 (29201)
P.O. Drawer 2426
Columbia, SC 29202
T: 803.540.2048, F: 803.253.8277
Cell: 803.960.3024
bmaybank@nexsenpruet.com
www.nexsenpruet.com

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