

## 2017 GULF COAST BUSINESS COUNCIL MASTERS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM BLUE PRINT GULF COAST INITIATIVE – YEAR 1

Since 2010, the Gulf Coast Business Council’s Masters Leadership Program has been researching key factors that will enable the Coast to become the most livable place in America. The program has published white papers and recommendations in these key areas:

- *Early Childhood Education*
- *Capturing the Creative Class*
- *Smart Growth Policies for the Coast*
- *Leveraging the Scientific and Military Assets of the Coast*
- *Leveraging the Gulf of Mexico for Regional Viability*
- *Broadband for the Coast*
- *Making the Case for Film and Digital Media*

The 2017 Masters Leadership Program launched the “Blue Print Gulf Coast Initiative.” This year’s class was tasked with identifying key economic pillars that could become the foundation for the Coast’s future economic prosperity and viability. To achieve its objective, the class spent 2017 studying the Mississippi Gulf Coast Region as it exists today, thoughtfully considering what our community should look like in the future, and developing recommendations for how we can bridge our reality with our potential.

## OUR CURRENT SITUATION

*We are in last place, in the state that is in last place.*

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has a strong, distinctive culture and is known for its hospitality; however, our region is at a critical juncture in its history. Our community has suffered through multiple disasters, causing significant economic impacts, which we continue to struggle to recover from. The funding from federal relief is exhausted. The region has not realized the same economic momentum as the rest of Mississippi and the nation since 2010. Our median household income has continuously lost ground when

compared to the national average and the gap is projected to continue to widen in the coming years. When compared to other regions within the state, growth in sales tax collection revenue on the Coast is not growing at the rate it is within the rest of the state, and national retail sector trends do not paint a favorable picture for the Coast's retail market mix. Thus far, we have generally failed as a region to take action that will mitigate the effects of these negative trends, and unless our collective energy is redirected to this task, we will soon find ourselves in dire economic circumstances. If there is a bright spot in this bleak outlook, it is that the Mississippi Gulf Coast is not the first region to find itself at this crossroad. To better understand how other communities facing similar trends have transformed themselves, our class visited the city of Nashville, Tennessee.

In the 1990's, Nashville's economic trends were largely in decline, with no promise of improvement. Aside from failing economic indicators, the city had image and branding issues to overcome. The community's business leadership decided that those trends and perceptions were unacceptable, and took ownership of turning the city around. Because of that intentional, strategic action, Nashville is now one of the trendiest and most livable cities in the nation, surpassing most of the nation in many favorable economic indicators. Our class didn't choose Nashville because we believe the Coast can become Nashville, though; we chose Nashville because they have a proven model that we can effectively employ on the Coast to create our own success.

Our class spent three days with Nashville's leaders. Through a great deal of thoughtful discussion, we learned that Nashville transformed itself through dedicated application of three key principals: regionalism, intentionality, and strategic community development. Every successful action taken or characteristic embodied by the business and community leaders in Nashville supports one of those three principals:

## REGIONALISM

- *Strategic, increased use of public-private partnerships.*
- *The Nashville chamber and economic development are under one roof, thus regionalizing and centralizing key business development activities.*

- *Leaders with vision, and a highly engaged, active and involved business community.*
- *A functional Mayor's Caucus, comprised of 41 members of elected officials in the seven-county Nashville region.*
- *Regional clarity of mission.*
- *Regionalized Metro Government Model: Governed by a regional metro council comprised of 40 elected representatives: 35 are elected by district, and five are elected at large.*
- *Effective regional branding – Music City USA.*

## STRATEGIC COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- *Relentless creation of community spaces, with focus on sense of place and quality of life.*
- *Developed policy to attract diverse industries, as well as encourage expansion/retention of existing industries.*
- *Developed and implemented policy to encourage high-growth tech startups around their core industries (as opposed to general small business development).*
- *Prioritized workforce development and education.*
- *Courage to take risks, e.g. built the convention center during the economic recession.*
- *Millennials – migrating to Nashville heavily. Larger part of the population than GenX-ers. Nashville is implementing policy and development to attract incoming millennials.*

## INTENTIONALITY

- *Data driven local decisions with accountability measures.*
- *Nashville became proactive, rather than reactive, with an intentional strategic plan and direction.*
- *Intentional investments in the community.*
- *Nashville learned to be intentional and strategic – they stopped being reactionary. Policy is the tool to direct private investment toward strategic goals.*
- *Strong emphasis on planning.*

After returning from Nashville, the Masters Class researched other successful markets of comparable size, and we had frank and thoughtful conversations with local and national experts on how to identify key pillars of successful communities.

That research and exposure has led us to the conclusion that we are woefully unprepared to address the essential elements of regional success, unless we undertake dramatic change. We are decades behind

other markets, just in terms of establishing the fundamental, regional leadership, institutions, and organizations that are key ingredients to regional success. We are comprised of vibrant, unique communities that all too often fight each other over resources. Each area works for its own success, while potentially missing the greater opportunity that working together as a region can provide to all Coast communities. Unfortunately, working as individual communities has failed to bring about the desired results.

Coupled with job losses and poor economic growth since Katrina, we are losing community and economic development opportunities to areas that offer more options, more inclusiveness, and greater quality of life. The infrastructure we were lucky enough to get post-Katrina could actually become an economic burden without significant tax-base growth. We have reached the point where hard decisions need to be made. Responsibility needs to be taken and assigned. Leaders need to lead. Accountability needs to be established at all levels, measured, and communicated. It is incumbent upon our community to come together and lead our region into the next generation for the Coast's success—economic growth, population growth, community development, cultural acceptance, and the best quality of life for all. We love the Coast. We need to give the rest of the world reasons to love us too.

## ***What does our Coast look like in 25 years?***

*Grandfather to grandson:*

*When is the best time to plant a tree? 20 years ago*

*When is the next best time to plant a tree? Today*

In 2043, we envision the Mississippi Gulf Coast as one of the most livable communities in the United States. With leadership and vision, we have grown our assets exponentially and have strategically collaborated to reverse the downward trends that were threats to our stability and progress. Our reliably strong and well-performing primary education systems now feed a coast-based four-year university that encourages in-migration and entrepreneurship. The small, vibrant downtown pockets that once dotted our coastlines now thrive as a coast wide community made of distinctive boroughs with a cohesive identity. Our coast wide community boasts extensive mixed-use developments brimming with commerce and

people, and incorporates visually connecting elements to create a singular, captivating sense of place with sustainable, native development and regional development standards. In 2043, our coast's natural landscapes and seascapes are harmoniously utilized for educational, recreational, and commercial purposes, such that our eco-presence is ingrained in our culture.

In 2043, we enjoy a united Mississippi Gulf Coast supported by a strong, functioning metro-government responsible to the community. We boast an economy anchored by a diverse array of industrial sectors: aerospace/space, blue economy, ship building, military, higher education, and tourism/gaming to name a few. Connectivity is important: we enjoy a Mississippi Gulf Coast with ultra-high-speed transportation and waterway transportation alternatives. And, most importantly, we have collaboratively moved beyond a history that has held us back for far too long.

## ***Let's be Bold***

*Make the plan. Work the plan.*

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has many outstanding organizations working for the betterment of their individual cities and the region. One of our greatest assets as a region are the charitable citizens who care and work for the greater good. We are spending a huge amount of time and resources on duplicative half-measures. We need to focus that effort for greater effectiveness and ensure accountability.

At the same time, there is a massive gap in local and regional efforts that can truly have a large impact on most of the main issues we seek to improve—community development. Some individual cities have varying degrees of community development efforts underway; however, the Coast has never had regional community development with long-term vision and goals. This is the single greatest potential action that can drive generational growth—the effective and methodical planning of our Coast community. The Mississippi Gulf Coast has historically relied on zoning laws, elected officials and general commerce growth to dictate what community development would be; in essence, we've just been reactive. We need to move forward in a proactive and intentional way, and other regions' successes can be used for inspiration.

The 2017 Masters Leadership Class was tasked with identifying key economic pillars to focus on as the foundation for the Coast's future economic prosperity and viability. Our experiences throughout 2017 have led us to four pillars that are imperative to a successful community; in order for our economy and community to prosper, we must take strategic and intentional action in these areas:

- 1. Community Development**
- 2. Economic Development**
- 3. Public Advocacy**
- 4. Governance**

These are several specific key recommendations we submit for each of the four identified pillars, with the guiding principles of regionalism, strategic community development, and intentionality and accountability embodied throughout:

## **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Create a single, regional community development public-private partnership that will focus on strategic planning for smart community investments and then work to convene the resources necessary to implement the plan. Focus on implementation of mixed use and mixed income commercial and residential developments to revitalize our downtowns, regional and local housing/neighborhood development to fit our workforce profile, quality of life amenities, green space/park locations, and a cohesive identity for the entire Coast.

- *The new organization should champion the implementation of existing development plans and the creation and implementation of new initiatives.*
- *The first goal of the community development organization should be to retain residents who are currently working on the MS Gulf Coast while living in AL/LA – we are losing their economic impact to our neighboring states. We must find a way to keep it at home on the Coast.*

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

- Identify and define what Regional Economic Development growth/success means.
  - *Define specific standards.*
  - *Establish scorecard based on this for ED accountability. Scorecard should include gap identification.*

- *Insist on making data-driven decisions on economic growth with accountability for results.*
  - *Encourage the three current ED organizations to work together toward individual and regional goals.*
  - *The GCBC should publish related data and results.*
  - *Three coast ED agencies are very different agencies with different missions. We believe public-private partnerships are needed with the mission of job growth. The economic development agencies should be wedded to the regional community development agency that focuses on talent acquisition, wealth attraction and quality of life.*
- Push for economic investments that will help drive development of key -infrastructure needs, such as high-speed broadband, enhanced multi-modal transit opportunities and workforce development organizations.

## PUBLIC ADVOCACY

- Advocate for the establishment of a publicly-funded, residential, four-year university center supporting a full range of degree programs on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. A resident of the Coast should have local access to the full range of degree programs offered anywhere else in Mississippi.
- Conduct a systematic comparison of Mississippi laws to those of other best-practices states to determine how Mississippi laws should be modified. Advocate for statutory changes to achieve desired outcomes.
- Pursue a relentless improvement of Mississippi's perception through public policy: advance diversity, collaboration, inclusiveness, beautification, and encourage pride in Mississippi and growth of native companies.
- Emphasize our attributes that make the Coast desirable: the people, the water, the culture, the food, etc.

## GOVERNANCE

- Immediately work to build a system of merged county and municipal services, e.g. fire protection, public safety, waste management, recycling, broadband, etc., to eliminate duplication of services and create cost efficiencies for local governments. Work toward merged governmental systems Coastwide.
- Develop a non-partisan grading system and scorecard for evaluating the decisions and effectiveness of elected officials and candidates for public office. Publish results annually.
- Regularly collect and publish regional data to support a system of informed business and political leaders. The data will enable local elected officials to promote sound policy and decision making.
- Actively engage in recruiting and educating qualified candidates for public office.

## IN CLOSING

If you haven't participated in the Masters Leadership Class, you should. It's a fascinating way to get "behind the curtain" on so many of the very real issues that face our region. If you have, you know that each session typically ends with open group discussion about what we experienced and learned throughout the day's events. If asked to write a single statement to summarize those long, detailed (and sometimes contentious) discussions, we think it might look like this:

***We are getting the results that our systems are designed to create.***

While this is a very general statement, it is applicable to almost any circumstance that our class studied, from our governing structures to our lack of dedicated community development organizations. Our recommendations, while organized by pillars and founded in principles, all center around the idea that we need to change the system in order to change the results. The recommendations are broad and varied; some could be implemented within a few days, others are undertakings that might provide the basis for an entire future Masters Leadership Class. Collectively though, they represent the vision of the 2017 Masters Leadership Class and our belief that – if anyone can incite such change – the thinkers and business leaders of the Mississippi Gulf Coast will be the group to lead the way.