YOUR VOICE

Reality check a big success for

By Steve Navarro and Irv Welling

What happens when you put 375 people in a room — all of them from different cities with different backgrounds, professions and goals — and ask them to define alternate visions and discuss priorities for the future of an entire region? The word bedlam may come to mind, but in actuality, the spirit of camaraderie and enthusiasm was most prevalent at the Upstate Reality Check regional envisioning event earlier this month.

A joint initiative of Upstate Together and the Urban Land Institute (ULI) South Carolina, Upstate Reality Check brought together, for the first time, elected officials and business, education, conservation, housing and community leaders from all 10 counties of the Upstate to talk openly about how we can transcend county lines to work for the greater good of the Upstate Region as a whole.

Having witnessed and participated in several Reality Check events across the country, we expected the day to be exciting, invigorating and possibly a bit tense at times. But even we were surprised at how well attended the event was, how enthusiastic all of the participants and volunteers were and how much positive feedback we have received.

After spending months reaching out to bring them to the exercise, it was satisfying to see folks seriously discussing their team's guiding principles, standing on chairs to get the "30,000 foot view" of their Lego bricks visions, debating their team's investment in transportation infrastructure, and above all, talking animatedly with their peers, many of whom they had never met.

We not only made significant strides in the awareness of the need and benefits of cooperating and collaborating regionally, but just as importantly, new relationships were forged that reached across county lines as well as across the public, private and nonprofit sectors. And in the process, everyone had fun!

The key to that success was the team that worked tirelessly, not only the day of the event, but for the 10 months leading up to event with countless community outreach meetings and presentations. A huge thank you goes out to the 80 people involved in the planning of the event and the 120 plus volunteers the day of the event.

But we all know that regionalism will take more than enthusiasm and a one-day event. As momentous and successful as we all felt that was, to be truly committed to regionalism, hosting a great Reality Check day is only one-third of the effort.

First we needed to put in place a thoughtful and detailed outreach effort so that the right people came, and in the right frame of mind. Countless hours were spent in presentations to Chambers of Commerce, city and county council meetings, Rotary clubs and in one-on-one meetings to convince each group that their participation is key, that all counties, cities, industries, civic groups, special interests and residents should participate in decisions that affect the region. We all need a voice, and this was the first step in making sure that each voice is heard.

And of course after the Reality Check day, a solid "next steps" plan was essential. After studying similar visioning efforts, we found that communities that brought an early

GUEST COLUMN



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focus to what happens after the visioning exercise had a much better post-Reality Check experience. We decided to run our next steps planning initiative vigorously and to get it started as soon as we began planning Reality Check.

It was important to come out of the Reality Check day with not only a better understanding of our region's common guiding principles and priorities, but with a next steps plan that could put in place immediately.

The top three guiding principles that were identified at the event were to improve education opportunities and job creation; improve regional transportation; and leverage existing infrastructure and promote regional linkage. And the priorities moving forward include working to foster effective regionalism and regional leadership and addressing infrastructure funding shortfalls.

Our next steps plan will be driven by these results, and it has already begun with the formation of a new regional organization called Ten at the Top. The 40-plus members of the original Upstate Together task force will join an expanded board membership of the new organization, and an executive director will be hired to ensure that we have someone dedicated to continuing the efforts of regionalism.

But it doesn't stop there. As a group, we still have work to do, and it's going to take everyone's involvement to ensure that the Upstate grows and thrives in a way that we all can embrace. Thank you to everyone who participated in this experience. We hope you found it as exciting and motivating as we did, and we look forward to working with you for a better Upstate.

