

Community in Transition

October 2017

It looks like Reno-Sparks is growing up. Like a teenager growing into adulthood, the transition can be a bit clumsy, but like it or not, we will be adults soon and with that will come real adult challenges and real adult responsibility. Growing from the "Biggest Little City" into a city with big city and regional challenges will require us to do things differently. Growing up is not about losing our small town charm or small town feel, no more than it is about a young adult losing their ability to sleep or play X-Box for most of the weekend. Like these young adults, the challenges of life are upon us as a community and growing up is not always fun. As a region we are different now, with our diversified economy, rapid job growth and many challenges associated with this development. So in this transition to adulthood, what should we be doing to keep us on the path to becoming that next great city and one of the more attractive regions in the country to live, work and play?

Think and act strategically: Not that we haven't been thinking strategically, but our breadth of change is swift and unprecedented, we will continue to evolve quickly and be very different in 20 years. So it is more important than ever to envision where we want to be in 20 years and make decisions now that will help us avoid a calamity in the future. We can prevent the many crises we will endure if we develop coalitions, devise solutions and respond to challenges well in advance of the "sky is falling" motivation that has prompted us to action in the past. Doing things before the crisis stage can be challenging, as the naysayers or non-believers are resistant to change, but real leadership will help us move forward solving problems at a fraction of the cost and pain associated with a last minute crisis response.

Cooperate and work together as a team: When I arrived here almost six years ago, the region was in terrible shape with over 35,000 unemployed, thousands of foreclosures and the fear that we were on the verge of becoming the next Detroit. What moved us forward was a willingness by all; local governments, businesses and citizens to work together, participate and financially support a coordinated plan to diversify our economy, with a focus on attraction of advanced manufacturing companies to the region. It didn't matter if we attracted a company to Sparks, Reno, Carson City or the Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center (TRI). What mattered was the mentality that a rising tide would lift all boats. Now that the crisis has passed the, "what's in it for me," question is being asked more, and the "we're in this together" thinking is fading.

The Challenges are many: As we look ahead to the next 20 years, we face an overwhelming number of challenges that include: the total reinvention and revitalization of our downtowns, essential to our transition to a College Town and to the attraction/retention of the talent we need; the requirement for more than 100,000 new housing units, with the infrastructure to support it; one or more new highways from the metro area to TRI (twice as long as the Southeast Connector which took more than 30 years to complete); significant improvement in our education system, which currently has less than 50% of our 3rd graders considered proficient in reading; and preparation for our next great flood, that is overdue and yes, we are still unprepared. I am sure there are many additional challenges, but these are some of the ones we know about and they need our immediate attention.

We can do this! The community coalition that responded to the growing school capital needs crisis demonstrates that we can do this. We can take on a challenge before it is too late and together develop a plan, build a coalition and get it done. It is our choice as to how we will proceed. As a young (adult) community, we may want to acknowledge that it might be time to grow up.