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Progress Board would think about broader scope of region

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A group tasked with defining emerging issues is about ready to propose a regional Progress Board so our counties and municipalities can work toward common goals.

The Safe Communities initiative is kind of an umbrella for 13 action groups. One is the Emerging Issues and Funding Group, chaired by Ric Kolenda, executive director of the Cape Fear Hospitality Association.

In its six months of meetings, the group has decided you can't work on a city or county level without considering the broader region.

Here's an example I made up: Sooner or later U.S. 74-76 will become an interstate, hopefully sooner. That will probably spark the kind of growth we saw along the Interstate 40 corridor, with economic hubs like Burgaw's Stag Park Industrial Park springing up.

It will pose potential problems and create wonderful opportunities.

"Have they considered a high-speed rapid transit down the center of that?" asked Dr. Milan Dluhy, chairman of the Political Science department at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Good question. Who would consider that?

Dr. Dluhy, a member of the Emerging Issues group, helped put together the regional Quality of Life Conference in May. The keynote speaker was Tom Covington, executive director of the N.C. Progress Board.

Dr. Dluhy says he'll bring Mr. Covington back next month to talk about a Progress Board for our region.

The Emerging Issues people would model the regional board on the state one (www.theprogressboard.com), which aims to create a broad vision for the state and outline goals for achieving it.

It sets measurable targets and reports results.

At Thursday's meeting, John Ranalli, the county's community services specialist, asked about the rationale for a regional board.

Dewey Harris, the city's community services director, said municipalities would benefit from an overall direction.

"The city and its council does its own thing. The county and its commissioners do

another. The Chamber does its own thing," he said. "The Progress Board would say, 'Here's where we want to be in 10 or 20 years.' Then each of the groups would know where they fit into that."

The Emerging Issues folks want the first regional Progress Board meeting to coincide with the next Quality of Life Conference, set for May 9.

But the idea is still very much in the exploration stage.

The first question is: Just what is the region? Is it the three counties - New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender - that will probably make up the new metropolitan statistical area whenever the U.S. Census people get around to creating it? Or a four-county region including Columbus?

Or should it be the eight counties included in the Quality of Life Conference?

Those at Thursday's City Hall meeting were leaning toward the more compact three- or four-county region.

Mr. Harris saw a Progress Board at work when he worked in Oregon.

The Portland-Multnomah (County) Progress Board established in 1993 uses research to stimulate change.

It monitors 75 indicators of community health, said research director Scott Stewart.

Per capita income is a measure of economic health, the number of adults with bachelor's degrees is an indicator of educational success, and the poverty rate is a measure of health and family well-being.

He said monthly board meetings of people from the government, business and civic sectors help promote a shared vision.

With just two staffers, data collection and analysis seem to be the Portland group's focus.

It's unclear exactly what form our area's Progress Board might take, but it's an intriguing idea.

Mr. Kolenda is spearheading the effort. You can contact him at 251-7909.

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