Turn on any television or radio news program, open any newspaper, or go to any internet or social media news outlet, and you’re likely to see a story about how divided the U.S. is politically at every governmental level. The result too often is stalemate, as we saw when the federal government shut down for three days in January.

The divide is inherent in the deliberately decentralized nature of the country’s political system, which favors state and local rule over federal control. Tom Murphy, the former mayor of Pittsburgh and now a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, underscores this point in multiple pieces he has written for the ULI on the future of U.S. cities. According to Murphy, there are over 74,000 local governments in the U.S., all of which have a say in their governance.

This fragmentation puts the onus squarely on our leaders to get along. “You can make a choice,” he explains, “You can either not talk to each other or figure out how to do it. And that’s unfortunately become a lost art in American politics.”

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But not entirely lost, according to Murphy, who is a leading figure in a burgeoning movement in the U.S. — regionalism. Regionalism is where municipalities, counties, and even states in a common geographic area work together to advance their interests. In the age of the global economy, these stakeholders recognize that their future rests on collaboration rather than competing against each other when corporate giants come calling.

A relative newcomer and beneficiary of joining forces regionally is the greater Memphis metropolitan area or Mid-South region, a tri-state area covering western Tennessee, eastern Arkansas, and northern Mississippi. The communities there first came together in May 2013, when ULI Memphis brought in 11 mayors and other leaders (including Murphy) with an eye on developing a regional structure.

One of the principal organizers of that event was Anna Holtzclaw of ULI Memphis, who notes that the physical and political landscape of the Mid-South poses obstacles in joining forces. "Our biggest challenge is all these political and geographical boundaries. The Mississippi River is just an enormous geographic, psychological, and political boundary. It's what divides Tennessee from Arkansas."

Yet, the economic survival of the area is contingent upon collaboration, according to Holtzclaw, who stresses that the municipalities there can’t afford to compete against each other. Otherwise, they risk losing out both to other U.S. metropolises and overseas behemoths like Beijing. That competition can be as painfully close as your backyard, as Memphis learned when neighboring Nashville was chosen as a finalist for Amazon’s second North American headquarters while Memphis was not.

The 2013 conference was intended precisely to position Memphis for such opportunities, says Holtzclaw. "We believed that if everybody is in the same room and knows each other that good things will come from that. It’s the relationships that are the start of that."

This conference and the RegionSmart conference in 2016 established a framework for regional cooperation that quite literally is transforming the landscape of the area. Although Memphis missed out on Amazon, area leaders were able to band together seamlessly to develop a cohesive regional proposal because of the relationships engendered by the Council and RegionSmart, according to Paul A. Young, a veteran community leader and current director of the Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development.

Young is somewhat circumspect when describing the overall accomplishments of the Council, commenting that large-scale change hasn’t occurred as a result, yet notes that there have been small steps and wins that have come about. The most notable of these has been a $60 million planning grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for a vast network of interconnected greenspace — an award

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that wouldn’t have been possible had the application not been submitted as a regional initiative, says former HUD administrator Naomi Friedman. Part of the success of that application was due to the greenspace plan developed as part of the area’s regional planning efforts.

Greenspace has been an important catalyst for enhancing the vibrancy and economy of municipalities. Murphy, the former three-term mayor of Pittsburgh largely credited with its emergence from the ashes of the steel industry, cites universities like Carnegie Mellon as being a key driver in the city’s turnaround, but the re-development of the riverfront into a lush ribbon of park space fueled billions of dollars of economic activity for the city as well. The architect of the greenspace plan or “greenprint” for the Mid-South is John Zeanah, who this January became the head of the Memphis and Shelby County Division of Planning and Development but previously worked for Young at the Office of Sustainability where he led the greenprint planning process. Both Young and Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell laud his efforts in laying the groundwork for securing the HUD grant and in navigating through tricky political currents.

Says Luttrell, “I think the greenprint is probably our crowning achievement with what we’ve been able to accomplish and everything that has worked from that greenprint. I think the beauty of the greenprint is that it did give us a plan for all the communities to rally around. And there were 22 communities that had a play in this across the tri-state region. And John Zeanah and his team just did a tremendous job of coordinating among all those governmental entities.”

The RegionSmart conference, which brings together thought leaders for a one-day summit each April to share knowledge and network, has played a vital role too, adds thought leaders for a one-day summit each April to share knowledge and network, has played a vital role too, adds Young, while Murphy explains that according to ULI research, the prevailing sentiment that communities aren’t willing to tax themselves for needed investments is not true. The trick is in the messaging: link the investments to a specific use, package the pitch that way, make the promise out to the public. All the good work being done by the Mid-South Mayors’ Council does four to six times a year, and holding events such as the annual RegionSmart conference. It’s much easier to persuade people that their interests are aligned if they know each other first.

Take-aways for other regions

The Mid-South isn’t the only region looking to regional collaboration as its ticket to the future. Other metropolitan areas are as well, but not all have achieved the same level of success. So, what does it take? Several lessons can be gleaned from the Mid-South model.

1. Do your homework: According to Holtclaw, ULI Memphis hosted visits and calls with other regions with a successful model of regionalism to study what works, potential impediments to initial and sustained success, and different governance structures.

2. Start small: It’s no accident that Mid-South leaders chose greenspace as one of their first joint efforts. For a comparably modest investment, greening can have a huge multiplier effect, serving as the anchor for neighborhood renewal, attracting tourists and their dollars, and ensuring ecological sustainability and resiliency. One of the key drivers for the Mid-South greenprint is to protect against devastating flooding that has hit the area in recent years.

3. Build and sustain relationships: Breaking down barriers by simply bringing people together is the most important step, agree all the leaders interviewed for this piece. Next is sustaining the relationships by meeting regularly, as the Mid-South Mayors’ Council does four to six times a year, and holding events such as the annual RegionSmart conference. It’s much easier to persuade people that their interests are aligned if they know each other first.

4. Spread the word: Murphy and Young both stressed the importance of being transparent and clear when getting the message out to the public. All the good work being done by the Mid-South Mayors’ Council could go for naught without telling the broader community, says Young, while Murphy explains that according to ULI research, the prevailing sentiment that communities aren’t willing to tax themselves for needed investments is not true. The trick is in the messaging: link the taxes to a specific use, package the pitch that way, make the promise out to the public. Let the public know. It worked in Pittsburgh in the depths of the steel-industry depression when voters approved a sales tax increase in 1993.

5. Manage electoral turnover: With term limits, political transitions are inevitable and pose one of the biggest challenges to maintaining momentum. Mayor Luttrell has been a vibrant and energetic chair of the Mid-South Mayors’ Council, but cannot run for reelection with his term ending this year. The transition to new leadership represents the first true test of the Council’s staying power.
how we can nuance that from a political standpoint and really build that type of collaboration within our communities to move those issues forward.”

According to Young, it’s also a way of engaging the public and spreading the message that regional progress is being made. Doing so is particularly important, he says, to help ensure leaders gain and keep the support of their constituents for much-needed investments.

The investment of political capital, and specifically in the greenspace initiative, is already paying off handsomely, according to Zeanah. In addition to the HUD grant, the greater Memphis region landed a $15 million Tiger grant in 2012 that leaders packaged with other funding to convert a rail-only bridge linking West Memphis and Arkansas into a pedestrian and bicycle crossing as well. Added to the mix, says Zeanah, was the build out of ecologically sensitive greenspace on the more rural Arkansas side, which in turn has drawn residents and tourists to West Memphis and spurred a neighborhood renaissance.

While Young notes that none of this activity is necessarily world-changing, incremental steps are better than none and one day could lead to more dramatic and region-turning economic activity such as winning the next Amazon. Lessons from Pittsburgh are being applied to the Mid-South effort. Pittsburgh today consistently ranks as one of the best places to live in America — an outcome that would have seemed improbable just a quarter century ago. Former Mayor Murphy credits regional collaboration as one of the top five factors behind the city’s rebirth and leaders in the Mid-South foresee in regionalism the seeds of their own vibrant economic future.

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Web Resources: censusreporter.org

by Corey Proctor, Planning Director, Forrest County, MS

The field of economic development is dependent upon information. This information ranges from average age to commuting patterns to workforce-related data. At numerous times, data has to be collected during a condensed period. However, in order to meet quick deadlines, an economic development professional must be aware of sources available which will strengthen reports. There is a robust amount of information available, either free or at a cost.

One information source widely used by economic development professionals and those from allied fields is the United States Census Bureau. The Census is mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution and takes place every 10 years. The data collected determines the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives and is also used to distribute billions in federal funds to local communities (www.census.gov/2010census/about). The lack of user-friendly pages and the density of the data, however, makes navigating the Census website to conduct research a challenge.

Therefore, a team of developers came together in 2014 to create “Census Reporter.” Originally designed for journalists, this website was part of a contest from the Knight Foundation to redesign Census.IRE.org. According to their website (www.knightfoundation.org), the Knight Foundation invests in journalism, the arts, and the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. The goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, essential for a healthy democracy. It was this aim that led journalists and developers to design the user-friendly CensusReporter.org. Since its development, the site has become utilized by not just journalists, but also by economic developers, planners, non-profits, and elected officials. Here is a quick guide to using the site:

Type your location name in the “Profile” or if you know what table you are looking for specifically, type it in the “Explore” box.

The total population and area size will appear. Then scroll down to see several selected demographics, including: Age, Sex, Income, Poverty, Transportation to Work, Households, Marital Status, Fertility, Units & Occupancy, Value of Housing Units, Geographical Mobility, Educational Attainment, Language, Place of Birth, and Veteran Status.

While the data is displayed in graphical (chart) format, it can also be embedded or viewed in table format by clicking “Show Data/Embed.” If you click Show Data, you can then dig down further by selecting “View Table.” From Table View, you can even “Download Data” (in CSV, Excel, GeoJson, KML, or shapfile formats).

Searches can be done for cities, as well as for a specific address, which will display Census track, block, block group, Congressional district, school districts and so forth. The area will highlight on the map as you navigate over each topic or zoom in to display totals for that selection.

CensusReporter.org makes it easy and engaging to find information vital for those conducting demographic research. Be sure to revisit the site for updates.

San Antonio, TX

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