

Atlanta and Charlotte, N.C.: From Rivals to Allies

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – In the past, Charlotte spent a lot of time glancing at Atlanta — its neighbor to the south by way of Interstate 85 — with a mix of wariness and envy, wondering if it could measure up without sacrificing its quieter charms. So it was pretty revolutionary to see Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory and Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin sitting side-by-side at a news conference on Wednesday, touting the benefits of a “megaregion” that stretches from Raleigh, N.C., to Alabama.

Megaregion is a term you may be hearing more of as states and cities try anything, even banding together rather than competing, to face economic and environmental challenges and regulate the resources they share.

The Piedmont Atlantic megaregion, as it’s called (with I-20 and I-85 the connecting threads), is planning 25 years ahead. “If we work together we’ll beat our competition in this country and the world for jobs,” McCrory said. “If we do nothing,” he said, the region “will become an area where we will continue to have congestion, not have sufficient water supply, will have energy issues and will have environmental issues.”

An obvious reason for the kumbaya moment was the hope that cooperation across state lines can serve as an advantage in the competition for federal dollars and private investment. “Clearly the long-term goal is a region that is successful economically,” Franklin said. But “the recession that we’re in, whether it’s turned around or whether it’s bottomed out, isn’t the issue.”

What’s important, she said, is “how do you ensure that people can find jobs, that this is a good place to locate, that businesses can operate” in the region? “We have to do things differently to shore ourselves up from economic shifts.” Franklin didn’t rule out looking to the European Union for ideas. “We don’t think old ways will work.”

Looking to Europe? An Atlanta mayor sending the Charlotte mayor flowers after losing out on the NASCAR Hall of Fame? This may indeed be the “historic” moment McCrory touted.

McCrory and Franklin joined Gastonia,



Tony Ranze, AFP/Getty Images

N.C., Mayor Jennie Stultz and Macon, Ga., Mayor Robert Reichert at the close of a two-day meeting that also included representatives of companies such as General Electric, IBM and Duke Energy and several educational institutions. The group hopes partnering with Georgia Tech, Clemson University, UNC Charlotte and possibly other universities for research and scenario planning will help individual cities and states avoid territorial squabbles. McCrory, a Republican, and Franklin, a Democrat, both in their last terms, say they may continue to work on the megaregion initiative when they leave office.

Is this a template for other areas of the country? Catherine Ross, nationally recognized transportation expert and the director of Georgia Tech’s Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development, was a force behind the meeting. The editor of “Megaregions: Planning for Global Competitiveness” said cities and states have to “get beyond this idea that it’s 90 miles away that I have to worry about.” It’s China or Russia or South America, said Ross, who is advising other “megaregion” projects.

The issues in the Piedmont Atlantic in-

clude continued congestion, water supply, energy, the environment, education and transportation. Regional water issues have already landed in the courts, with South Carolina suing North Carolina over use of the Catawba River, and Alabama suing over Atlanta’s use of Lake Lanier. McCrory would prefer out-of-court solutions to such disagreements.

Reichert — imagining the impact of a regional request for high-speed rail funds — said he thought the new model, “a glimpse of the future,” could “build what we need and protect what we love.”

Bob Morgan, president of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, a participant in the Charlotte conference, sees a warning in a book he’s reading about Buffalo, N.Y. Once a top-10 U.S. city, Buffalo has lost half of its population, many to the Southeast. “It was a failure of civic leadership to deal with a changing economy.” Morgan, who’s had to lay off some workers in the chamber office, is optimistic about megaregions.

The next meeting is scheduled for October in the Greenville-Spartanburg area of South Carolina.