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New D.C. regional business group stirs unease as it pushes for area cooperation

By Robert McCartney

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A new, high-powered business group is ruffling feathers in the local establishment as it pushes the fragmented Washington region to cooperate more to deal with such issues as excessive traffic, inadequate education and imbalanced economic growth.

The 2030 Group, led by wealthy, suburban-based developers, wants to promote debate over whether to build a stronger regionwide governance structure - perhaps one that could find new tax revenue needed for roads, Metro and other purposes.

The group, created in April, hosted a workshop Monday where those ideas were kicked around by 36 elite business, government and civic leaders at the University of Maryland's College Park campus.

Some of the proposals were fuzzy, and no conclusions were reached. Instead, they achieved "universal agreement for continuing this discussion," said 2030 Group President Robert Buchanan, a commercial developer based in Gaithersburg.

The group deserves applause for prodding the region to talk seriously about putting some muscle into regional cooperation. But its initiative has stirred some unease among existing institutions seeking to chart the area's future, including the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, the Greater Washington Board of Trade and the Coalition for Smarter Growth. They all sent top representatives to the workshop but don't necessarily agree with the 2030 Group's approach or goals.

Some are irked because they worry the group is duplicating work that's already been done and could be a distraction. In addition, COG and the smart growth coalition have criticized the 2030 Group for being overwhelmingly white and male and thus not reflecting the region's diversity.

There's also a subtle but unmistakable fault line between the 2030 Group and the region's longtime business and civic organizations over the crucial question of how to invest transportation dollars. The tension arises over what overall strategy the area should pursue in coming decades to absorb the estimated 1.7 million new residents expected to come here by the year 2030. (Yes, that's where the group got its name.)

Boiled down, the difference is over how much to rely on building new roads in the outer suburbs to solve the region's traffic problems.

The 2030 Group leans toward more roads. An academic study that it commissioned faults the region for failing to follow through on past plans to build new roads parallel to the Beltway and to add bridges across the Potomac.

"Twenty-five years ago, roads had been put in anticipating growth. In the next 20 years, our growth is going to double again, but we don't have the infrastructure to handle it," Buchanan said.

The group's toughest critics say more roads are just a recipe for endless miles of clogged highways linking ugly strip malls and residential projects. They want to focus instead on transit-oriented development, also known as

smart growth, which means building dense, walkable communities clustered around Metro stations. That's the model recommended overall in COG's blueprint for the area's future, called Region Forward.

"Our council of governments, like other regions, has recognized that . . . land use, urban design and the jobs-housing balance play the greatest role in addressing our travel congestion. It's not just about building projects," said Stewart Schwartz, executive director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. He participated in the Monday workshop but stressed that "shouldn't be seen as my endorsement of the 2030 Group."

Buchanan said he'd like the region to raise more money for Metro as well as roads. But he said current plans don't provide for anywhere near enough density around Metro stations to absorb all the new residents. Plus, he said, more money is needed to improve transportation in outer suburbs and other areas not served by transit.

"Nobody's advocating more uncontrolled sprawl, but you're going to get it if you can't provide more density where people are going to be working and shopping," he said.

I favor having as much smart growth as we can reasonably achieve, but I recognize we need to pour some asphalt, too. New roads and bridges are fine with me if it's proved they'll reduce traffic or are the most effective way to deal with the swelling population.

In any case, it's about more than transportation. Stronger regional economic planning would help narrow the gap between the western half of the area and the less prosperous eastern one. The 2030 Group also wants the region to do more to set common education standards so businesses get better-qualified workers.

It's too early to say what form stronger regional governance should take.

One proposal is just to give COG more authority. The workshop also considered creating a "regional charter council," with "predictable funding streams for implementing critical action." But practical details were sketchy about how such councils would be selected, raise money and function relative to existing local governments.

Jacques Gansler, a University of Maryland public policy professor who advises the 2030 Group, said the primary goal was to achieve a cultural change. "We're really trying to get people to think more regionally," he said.

We could all benefit from that.