

## **The North Alabama Region: A Globally Competitive Community**

Globalization has brought monumental changes in the ways we do business. The world is becoming dramatically more interconnected and competitive. Globalization occurs when people, firms, and nations seek economic opportunity in a world opened up by technology, trade negotiations, and the spread of free market and democratic principles. In response to this global phenomenon, the Council on Competitiveness stresses that innovation is the single most important factor in determining America's future success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our ability to innovate will drive productivity, standard of living, and leadership in global markets. We face an unprecedented acceleration of global change and fierce competition from countries that seek an innovation-driven future. To thrive in this new world, a globally competitive community must be globally educated and engaged. The actions that we, as a global community, take will determine our future. Our challenge lies in finding innovative solutions to the market realities posed by globalization.

*The North Alabama Region: A Globally Competitive Community* is a regional, nonpartisan initiative and a catalyst to build and maintain a sustainable region that competes globally. The purpose of this initiative is to develop a long-term strategic regional partnership to enhance our global competitiveness. With Huntsville/Madison County as its economic core, this region extends into the North Alabama counties of Cherokee, Colbert, Cullman, Dekalb, Franklin, Jackson, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Marshall, Morgan, Winston, and Lincoln County, Tennessee.

This initiative follows a series of Global Community Forums held in Huntsville and across the Southeast. Last spring, the Madison County Commission and the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) – in conjunction with NASA Marshall Space Flight Center, BizTech, the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County, and the North Alabama International Trade Association (NAITA) – joined forces with the Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB) to discuss the issues of *Globally Positioning the South*. Three forums were held at UAH discussing three primary focus areas: strengthening the workforce, strengthening business, and strengthening civic relationships. Discussion focused on possible approaches, including making sure that businesses have access to information about global markets and new technologies, that workforce has the skills needed in today's global marketplace, and that communities are making civic connections that will help them build stronger communities and businesses. The results of our forums, as well as many others held throughout the Southeast, were used in Southern Growth's 2004 Report on the Future of the South – *The Globally Competitive South (Under Construction)*.

Four main focus areas have been identified for this initiative: Education/Workforce Development, Business Development, Civic/Cultural Relationship Development, and Infrastructure Development.

*Education/Workforce Development* will focus on how we prepare our workforce for the jobs of the future in today's global environment. Understanding North Alabama's occupational structure can help the region identify and grow the workforce skills that will drive our global comparative advantage. Educational curricula at all levels (pre-school through post graduate school) must address the needs of the global leaders of tomorrow.

We want to position North Alabama as a world leader in technology and innovation. *Business Development* will review current services available to businesses and help us determine the next steps to address the continuing economic restructuring. Strengthening business throughout the region and providing resources to facilitate competitiveness will make our community more attractive to talent and investors outside the region. Growing existing industry clusters is another important aspect of this focus area.

Export development is a significant element of business development that helps companies learn, innovate, and stay competitive. Exporting requires global competitiveness, and research shows that exporting companies stay in business longer and increase jobs at a faster rate. In fact, any international activity increases the odds for business survival and growth. Carol Conway, Deputy Director of the Southern Growth Policies Board, stresses "We sometimes forget trade built America. As time went by, changing economic circumstances allowed us to grow through our rapidly expanding internal markets. But circumstances have changed once again. Trade is no longer a marginal business activity. It is central to future business growth and economic stability."

Developing *Civic and Cultural Relationships* between residents, business people, elected officials, and foreign businesses – both overseas and within our own communities – can create valuable exchanges. These relationships are essential to a global community and can help our residents think globally, share responsibility, and take action on behalf of our region's future. Arts and cultural activities reach, link and celebrate the diverse communities of our region.

*Infrastructure Development* is critical to connecting communities to the world. Cities of international character, led by private and public sector leaders, act as a gateway to the region. An internationally connected community is shaped by investing in airports, seaports, and efficient ground transportation; developing the financial and legal infrastructure; and facilitating the flow of products and services.

Many continue to ask the question: *Are we global victims or global competitors?* According to the SGPB, the cumulative impacts of terrorist attacks, the recession, the loss of manufacturing jobs to other nations, and the recent focus on outsourcing of professional-level work, have resulted in many seeing themselves as victims of globalization. Our mindset must change. We must transcend any perceptions that we are global victims.

*The Economist* reports, “More jobs are outsourced to America than the other way around. American workers . . . are net beneficiaries of outsourcing (it goes without saying that consumers always were). And in the cross-border trade of white-collar services, a chief concern, America’s surplus with the rest of the world is not shrinking; it is growing.”

We are already global competitors and we must devote time, attention, and resources to becoming the best competitors we can possibly be. We must be relentless in our pursuit of innovative, global economic opportunities for our region and our nation.

The North Alabama International Trade Association’s (NAITA) Annual Meeting will focus on this initiative to enhance our region’s global competitiveness. NAITA is a business-driven organization that promotes trade education, provides a networking forum, and offers current information on trade issues. For further information on this initiative or to attend NAITA’s Annual Meeting scheduled for late April, contact NAITA at 256.532.3505 or [naita@naita.org](mailto:naita@naita.org). Links to sources cited and additional reading on related topics are available at [www.naita.org/globalcommunity.htm](http://www.naita.org/globalcommunity.htm).

*Sources:*

*Innovate America*, National Innovation Initiative Report, Council on Competitiveness, December 2004

*Fast Forward: Mobilizing the South for Prosperity in a Global Economy*, Southern Global Strategies Council, February 2004

*Industry Clusters and Economic Performance in Alabama*, an excerpt from reports prepared by William R. Killingsworth, PhD. and Jeff Thompson, Center for Management & Economic Research and the Office for Economic Development, University of Alabama in Huntsville, December 2004

*The Globally Competitive South (Under Construction)*, Southern Growth Policies Board, June 2004