
TODAY'S SUMMIT COULD HELP METRO AREA'S NEXT BIG LEAP

Today's summit could help metro area's next big leap

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By U.S. Rep Jim Cooper

We all love living in Middle Tennessee and want to keep our quality of life. As more and more people move here, however, we face lots of growth issues. We can solve these problems if we just work together. Nashville must always be "better than Atlanta."

People commute to work in Nashville from miles away, and Nashvillians return the favor. Everyone depends on Nashville's wonderful airport, sports, cultural, and educational institutions. We are a world-class city that still retains its small-town charm.

Some of the biggest obstacles we face in our regional economy are the invisible county and city lines that can sometimes get in the way of progress. These lines were drawn almost 200 years ago to please politicians, not citizens. No one dreamed back then that Nashville would be Music City, a publishing, health and automobile capital, or home of the Titans, Predators and Sounds.

Brilliant Nashville leaders like George Cate and Cecil Branstetter had the vision in the 1950s to see that Nashville had already outgrown its limits. These men helped erase the invisible line between city and county when they persuaded voters to merge Nashville with Davidson County. Instead of paying two sets of government employees to provide electric, water, sewer, fire and police service, we cut government with "Metro." We take this reform for granted today, but it set Nashville apart as one of the most farsighted, dynamic cities in America.

What should we be doing now to keep ahead of the curve? This is for local people to decide, with the advice of local planning agencies. We have a wide range of choices that we can make to maintain our quality of life while sharing it with more and more outsiders who have "discovered" Nashville and its surroundings. Local groups like Cumberland Region Tomorrow, and the Nashville MPO, are working with Mayor Karl Dean's office, Gov. Phil Bredesen's office and the Tennessee Department of Transportation to explore new ideas to ease our growth problems.

These are decisions that you cannot delegate to "experts" because you are the expert when it comes to your commute, your family, and your lifestyle. Do you want to spend 27 minutes in your car twice a day to get to work, or is there a better way? Should skyscrapers be built near your subdivision? How much are you willing to pay for eight-lane highways, smart buses, or commuter rail? If we build it, will you come?

These are just some of the issues that Nashville and other top U.S. cities are dealing with. We can learn from them and they can learn from us. The key will be to find Nashville solutions because we are different (and, I think, better) than other cities. What works in Portland, Ore., or Austin, Texas, won't necessarily work here.

We have a forward-looking Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce and other civic groups that are helping us think about our growth options. Today's regional summit on transportation options will focus our attention on lots of issues regarding cars. This will be a great chance to get your seat at the table so that all the good ideas are presented, and no one is overlooked.

Government should work for you, not against you. In America, and especially in Middle Tennessee, the people rule.

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